

A LITTLE CHILD SHALL LEAD THEM BACK
TO COMMUNITY AND COMMUNION

A professional project submitted to the Theological School of
Drew University in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree,
Doctor of Ministry

Advisors: Daniel Kroger, D.Min.
Kathryn Stoner-Lasala, D.Min

Patrick B. Gordy-Stith
Drew University
Madison, New Jersey
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“I thank my God every time I remember you,” Paul writes to the saints gathered in Philippi as he opens his letter to them. These words express my overwhelming sense of gratitude to the saints gathered at *Asbury United Methodist Church* in New Castle, Delaware. I am honored to be your pastor and partner in ministry, and my appreciation for your dedication to God and to our neighbors grows each day we serve together. Throughout this project, the leadership, members, and friends of this congregation invested their hearts, souls, minds, and strength in offering their love to our neighbors for the glory of God. Whatever happens next, I am blessed to be a part of such a community of faith.

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The *Asbury Child Care* family, including staff, children, and their parents and guardians graciously accepted our invitation to share food, conversation, and friendship. I am especially grateful for your continued faith in us, and enthusiastic embrace of our

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And thank you, Jesus, for blessing and breaking the bread. You have opened our eyes. May our hearts never cease burning with your love.

ABSTRACT

A LITTLE CHILD SHALL LEAD THEM BACK TO COMMUNITY AND COMMUNION

Patrick Bowman Gordy-Stith

Asbury United Methodist Church

New Castle, Delaware

The one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church faces a crisis: a postmodern world has taken away our Lord. As seeker-sensitive mega-churches retreat after a desperate bid for relevancy, traditional congregations see their demise as part of a more widespread collapse. Yet, who knows? Perhaps God has called all churches, regardless of worship style, for such a time as this.

The mostly-retired members of *Asbury United Methodist Church* wonder how much longer the congregation will survive on the corner of DuPont Highway and Basin Road. Yet while young families have left the church, the *Asbury Child Care* welcomes fifty children each week. The money the Child Care pays the church for rent keeps the church afloat. We wondered what would happen to the relationship between the congregation and child care family if the church became host instead of landlord.

Since we were gifted at making and serving food (to each other and to our hungry neighbors), we decided to invite our child care family to a series of suppers on Wednesday nights during Lent. We trained our members to serve as Table Hosts. We welcomed children by offering them the freedom of unstructured play after supper as well as an invitation to join in stories, songs, and activities celebrating the special place of children in God's realm.

In the course of the suppers, we discovered Christ's presence in the gap between our congregation and our neighbors. As we celebrate our Seventieth anniversary, we see God's grace as an abundant gift to all, rather than a dwindling resource. Christ's calling to host our neighbors in love invites us to discover the body of Christ in our neighbors. In this new millennium, Jesus Christ calls the one, holy catholic, and apostolic church to a Pentecostal Pilgrimage from our pews to a feast of love and grace with our neighbors. And if we need help, the little children will show us the way.

CONTENTS

Chapter

1	CHRIST OUR LORD INVITES: WELCOME TO <i>ASBURY</i>	1
2	LORD HAVE MERCY: THE QUESTION THAT CALLED US	13
3	ONE HOLY, CATHOLIC, AND APOSTOLIC: THE NATURE, MISSION, AND CONTEXT OF THE CHURCH IN CRISIS	27
4	HOLY, HOLY, HOLY: RESEARCH, RESULTS, AND ROADBLOCKS	52
	Telling (and Hearing) the Story Behind the Story	54
	Graceful (Serendipitous) Accomplishments	58
	Roadblocks On (But Not In) the Way	64
5	BLESSED IS THE ONE WHO COMES: FINDING A HOME IN THE GAP	70
6	LAMB OF GOD: HOW MY PRESENCE INFLUENCED OUR RESULTS	86
7	YOU TAKE AWAY OUR SINS: WHAT CHANGED IN OUR RELATIONSHIPS	97
8	GRANT US PEACE: EVALUATION AND THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION	111
	Experiencing the Gap: Denominational Transformation	113
	Exploring the Gap: Congregational/Contextual Transformation	120
	Reflecting in the Gap: Personal Transformation	126
	Responding in the Gap: Transformation of the Church	131
9	THE LORD BLESS YOU AND KEEP YOU: PASTORAL-THEOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS	136
	Refreshment (In the Wilderness)	138
	Reconciliation (Building Relationships)	140
	Recreation (Play)	142

	A Little Child Shall Lead Them	144
Appendix		
A	PROJECT OVERVIEW-HOSTS AND SUPPERS	147
B	FEBRUARY 19, 2014 LETTER OF INVITATION	149
C	SUPPER SERIES FLYER	150
D	FIRST SUPPER FLYER.....	151
E	TABLE HOST NOTE SHEET FOR MARCH 19, 2014	152
F	NEW LETTERHEAD	154
G	MAY 4, 2014 WORSHIP BULLETIN (FIRST AND LAST PAGES)	155
H	LENT 2014 WORSHIP AND BIBLE STUDY PLAN.....	157
	BIBLIOGRAPHY	158

CHAPTER 1

CHRIST, OUR LORD, INVITES: WELCOME TO *ASBURY*

This is the story of a church that came to the end of its life, and what happened next.¹ It's a story of the ways in which remembering and forgetting can each bring both pain and healing. It's also a story of how each of these ways of living our present lives in relationship to our past is an act of faith. Dying itself is an act of faith, as is living, or giving birth. The characters in this story range in age from the very old to the very young. Some of them are strangers, and some of them have known one another for a long time. For a season, they all shared supper at a table in the wilderness between them, and when they kept faith in this way, they remembered something they had all forgotten: the nourishing power of love.

A lifetime before, a pastor driven by a vision to share the love of Christ in a new way in a rapidly-growing new community gathered fifty people to worship in a skating rink. World War II had just ended and a great baby boom was about to begin. New suburbs were sprouting up around a crossroads near the rink, which was the only space large enough to hold a gathering in the area. Those who gathered that first Sunday knew they were part of a growing movement.

¹ Aubrey Malphurs, *Advanced Strategic Planning: A New Model for Church and Ministry Leaders*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 2005), 10. It would be more accurate to say this church had come to the end of its life *cycle*, according to Malphurs, who advocates consideration of various forms of revitalization and renewal as alternatives to “retirement (disbanding)” (see pages 184-5).

They borrowed hymnals, folding chairs, and a lectern. They came from different denominations, but the fire of the pastor and the excitement of what they were doing created a palpable bond of belonging. The pastor preached about hearing God's call to build a church to "be a center for worship, Christian education, community service, and recreation" in the midst of these growing neighborhoods.² They named their new church after the nearest neighborhood, Wilmington Manor, perhaps because initially, many of the members lived within walking distance of where they gathered for worship.

Within two years, after meeting in homes for worship, study, and fellowship, they built a building for worship across the highway from the rink. On Sundays, there were six choirs in the church: the Celeste Choir (for children four to five years old), the Chime Choir (for children in First and Second grade), the Carol Choir (for children in Third-Fifth grades), the Crusader Choir (for children in Sixth-Eighth grades), the Chapel Choir (for High School youth), and an adult Chancel Choir. The children were everywhere.

Wilmington Manor Methodist Church soon became famous in the area for extravagant Easter and Christmas pageants and concerts that featured live animals, elaborate costumes, and a cast of over 100. Every Easter at sunrise at nearby *Gracelawn Cemetery*, they lifted high a huge cross decorated with flowers by the Girl Scouts as a backdrop for the pageant. The church bought land near a pond and set up the *Red Mill* camp for summer and weekend recreation. They started a kindergarten and child care ministry in a house near the original church building, and named it *Madeley*, for one of their members who loved children. Over the years, several generations of children in

² Brooks E. Reynolds and John N. Link, "Twelve Years for God: 1945-1957," (New Castle, DE: Wilmington Manor Methodist Church, 1957).

many families in the area enrolled in the child care and kindergarten at the church.

In less than ten years, the pastor and the people were faced with a crisis. How could they maintain their rapid growth as a community of faith when their original building would no longer hold them all? They decided to move and build a new building on a larger plot of land at the nearby intersection—a commons owned by the local community. But instead of building a new sanctuary for worship at the start, they decided to worship in their new fellowship hall until they could afford a sanctuary large enough to hold them all. In addition to the fellowship hall and kitchen, they built an education wing of classrooms for the child care and Sunday School ministries. They also bought another property for all of the children in the growing child care and kindergarten ministry.

The children and youth ministries were the heartbeat of the life of this new church. The church members drove buses (owned by the pastor and his wife) around the neighborhoods (Wilmington Manor, Chelsea Manor, Penn Acres, Pennwood, Jefferson Farms, Collins Park, and Garfield Park) to pick up children and youth and bring them to church on Sunday morning and evenings. They baptized 240 babies in 1957, the year they moved to their new church building. The original fifty members had grown to 1500 adults and 1400 children and youth in Sunday School. *Wilmington Manor Methodist Church* grew with the neighborhoods around it. In the ten years since they met in that roller skating rink, the surrounding neighborhoods had mushroomed from 5000 to 20,000 people.³

When *Wilmington Manor* moved to the commons at the crossroads, they needed money to build a church big enough to keep up with this explosive growth. Old *Asbury*

³ Ibid.

Methodist Church in nearby Wilmington came to the end of its life cycle and offered its remaining assets if *Wilmington Manor* would change its name to *Asbury* and take care of their cemetery. So the thriving church named for one of its surrounding neighborhoods became the church named for one of the founders of Methodism in America, nearly 200 years before, Francis Asbury. Old *Asbury* had been the first Methodist Church in Wilmington, and had spawned eight other churches over its life cycle. It had taken two weeks to celebrate their centennial in 1889, but they did not live to see their 200th birthday (too many things had changed around them in the city).

To remind them of their vision, the leaders of the new *Asbury Methodist Church* printed on the worship bulletin every Sunday an artist's rendering of what the new property would look like when the sanctuary was completed on the other end of the education wing from the fellowship hall. They also dreamed of building sports fields, a swimming pool, an amphitheater, and a miniature Holy Land for the people in the surrounding neighborhoods to enjoy in worship, education and recreation.

In the years that followed, not one of these dreams came true.

Perhaps it was because they traded the name of their neighborhood for the name of a dying church. Perhaps it was because the area around them stopped growing so fast. Or perhaps it was because the Christian church in America experienced a reversal of the growth it had enjoyed in the first part of the Twentieth Century, a reversal that began in the turbulent '60s, just as the congregation moved into its new building.⁴ Though their numerical growth continued at a slower pace for another fifteen years, the congregation

⁴ Phyllis Tickle, *The Great Emergence: How Christianity Is Changing and Why* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 2008), Kindle Electronic Edition: Chapter 6, Location 1422.

settled into a kind of middle age. Whatever the reason, the merger of *Wilmington Manor* and “Old” *Asbury Methodist* congregations did not result in continued growth.

By the time their founding pastor was appointed to another church two hours away (after twenty-nine years, much to the consternation of many of the members), the original fellowship hall had become a permanent sanctuary, with a fine new organ. The pastor and his wife took their buses with them. Subsequent pastors oversaw the addition of pews, carpet, and a beautiful stained glass window to what had been the fellowship hall, while worship attendance decreased every passing year.

In 1995, on the Fiftieth Anniversary of that first worship service in a skating rink (now long-since torn down, along with their first church building), the congregation dedicated a new fellowship hall. They built it on the site where the large sanctuary was to have been erected. No one quite knew what this new building (eventually known simply as “the Hall”) was for, other than providing one room where they could all eat together. Many in the congregation were against the project, but the supporters had prevailed. Their argument had been that the church could fund the fellowship hall’s mortgage by renting it out for private parties and functions. In other words, their neighbors would pay for the fellowship hall.

In addition to the neighbors who rented the Hall for private parties, the *Asbury Child Care* Center would help pay the mortgage. The Child Care Center planned to use the Hall as an indoor playground and the kitchen to make lunches. Like the church, the Child Care Center had also changed its name from the member who loved children so much to one of the founders of Methodism. But that wasn’t the only thing that had changed about the Child Care ministry at *Asbury*.

Over time, the public schools had begun to offer kindergarten, and the state had required all child care centers to comply with staffing qualification and training guidelines. As a result, after fifty years, few of *Asbury's* members had anything to do with *Asbury Child Care*. Originally, the child care ministry was staffed entirely with church members and attended by many of their children. By 1995, most of the children who attended *Asbury Child Care* during the week had no connection with the church on Sundays. As the members of *Asbury UMC* aged, they wondered what it would take to get the children who came to *Asbury Child Care* and their families to come to *Asbury Church* on Sundays. They were grateful for the money *Asbury Child Care* contributed to the church budget, and saw themselves more as landlord than partner in ministry.

As the congregation slipped further into decline, pastors and leaders tried new ways of restoring that initial fire and vision that had given birth to the church and fueled its growth. The fourth senior pastor introduced contemporary worship music and hung a projector and screen in the sanctuary. But most people in the congregation, now very much older than they had been at the start, were more comfortable with traditional hymns and forms of worship. The Sunday School classes, children's choirs, and youth groups dwindled steadily with the passing years, as children grew up and moved away. After a hurricane destroyed the pond and buildings at *Camp Red Mill*, the church sold the property.

When I arrived as *Asbury's* sixth pastor, at the start of its sixty-seventh year, the congregation had far more funerals than baptisms, described itself simply as "old," and wondered how much longer the church would survive after most of the present members died. They were nearing their seventieth anniversary, and I was pushing fifty. After a

previous pastor had to take emergency medical leave, *Asbury* was excited to have the Bishop appoint such a young pastor. Previously, I had served for fourteen years as co-pastor (with my wife) of a young, growing, contemporary congregation called *Skyline*.

Seven years into that pastorate, after we moved into a two million dollar addition, including a new sanctuary, many of our members left the church, following a charismatic but disgruntled lay worship leader. The split wounded those of us who remained, but opened the way for us to follow Jesus together with a radical, even reckless kind of faith, no longer fearful of failure. When so many good friends left us, the *Skyline Church* that had been died, but a new church was raised in its ashes. The pastor I had been, so snare of myself as a capable and talented leader and speaker, died as well. And then a miracle happened.

The congregation, along with my wife and I, engaged in a healing and discernment process over the next seven years that culminated in a congregational decision to welcome and affirm Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) persons as people of sacred worth.⁵ As we wandered in that desert land, we learned a new appreciation for all who wandered in the wilderness, especially those who had been marginalized by the church.⁶ After we experienced spiritual and financial failure, the practice of prohibiting LGBT persons from taking their full place at Christ's Table became more repugnant to us than the price of welcoming them there. Through those

⁵ The 2012 Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church affirms that “all persons are individuals of sacred worth” in Paragraph 161.F.

⁶ The play on wondering (curiosity) and wandering (moving without destination or purpose) in the wilderness here is deliberate. For more on this theme, please see Chapter 3.

difficult and miraculous years, I came to appreciate both faith as a gift from God and growth that cannot be measured in numbers.

It became a season of miracles. During those extraordinary wilderness years, my wife and I, with our two children, opened our home to welcome foster children, beginning with two teens who were part of our church youth group. Like leading a church in the wake of a church split, life as a foster family led us to find joy in the midst of shared pain. Our foster children invited us to gather around the dining room table we had rarely used before they joined our family. They taught us a kind of playful hospitality, where we were always ready to lay out another place setting and find another chair if someone dropped in unexpectedly. Somehow there was always enough food for everyone, and our dining room, which had been silent and empty before our foster children arrived (when we ate at the smaller kitchen table), overflowed with conversation and laughter every night at supper.

One of these foster children, whom we later adopted, enjoyed roller skating, and invited me to discover the joy of skating that I had forgotten since my teen years. Skating became for me a moving prayer, an avenue of healing and renewal when words were too impoverished to express my heart and soul. Often, on Tuesdays and Thursdays, I would skate during lunch at the rink with the Coffee Club, a group of skaters in their sixties, seventies and eighties who enjoyed elegant dance skating to organ music. Many of these older strangers became my friends after we skated together for a while. One night, at a rink an hour away where several famous organists had come to play live music for a session, one of my new friends said to me, “Welcome to our world.”

In the middle of my fourteenth year as one of *Skyline's* co-pastors, when I knew it

was time to ask the Bishop for a new appointment, I went on a prayer retreat to seek God's guidance. During that retreat, I sensed God's call to serve an aging congregation. Rather than waiting passively for death, I was to invite them to form a kind of Skaters' Coffee Club of renewal. A few months later, in the summer of 2011, during my first meeting with *Asbury* members, one of them described *Asbury* simply as "old." That's when I sensed a confirmation that God had brought us together.

During my first year as pastor of *Asbury*, I conducted funerals nearly every two weeks. I also learned a healthy respect for the power and persistence of the stifling accumulation of spiritual and administrative habits at *Asbury*. During our first year together, the leadership and I engaged in a visioning discernment process using Aubrey Malphurs' book *Advanced Strategic Planning* in which he counsels congregations in the late stages in their life cycles (such as *Asbury*) to consider carefully whether they want to continue to exist at all. This question was too painful for us to consider at the time, so instead we identified priorities for 2012-14: to take care of our building and visit aging members (which we accomplished) and to attract children and adults and partner in mission with the community (which we did not accomplish).

We needed more help than a strategy book, so the congregation generously approved my involvement in the Doctor of Ministry program at Drew Theological Seminary, even as some of them feared that I would use the degree as a springboard to a better appointment. They knew God had sent them a pastor with a gift for dreaming, but they wondered about the practicality and cost of my dreams for them, particularly after I moved on. With my history of welcoming LGBT persons into fellowship at my previous church, some were worried that I was more liberal than people in the congregation and in

the area. Many felt that my calls for renewal and change were a thinly-veiled insult to the kind of people and congregation they actually were, even as they sensed that we needed to do something to address the steady decline in members and money.

Because most members of *Asbury* were so old, many of them remembered the years when it had taken multiple worship services (and pastors) to fit everyone into worship and fellowship activities. The memories of that glorious past, now lost and perhaps a bit overstated in our present, stalked us in the hallways, classrooms, and sanctuary. At the Strawberry Festival or Lenten Pancake Supper, someone could be counted on to wistfully and disparagingly compare our poor showing with the throngs of people who used to attend the same event years ago. When I asked people in worship to complete the phrase, "I dream of the day when...", most completed it by writing, "...I die and get to meet Jesus in heaven."

Sometimes, at the end of a long day, I would lace up my roller skates and skate in the large, empty fellowship hall after the children at *Asbury Child Care* had been collected by their parents and guardians. The children and child care staff used the space as a playground during inclement or especially hot or cold weather. The church had loaned the space to a rapidly growing congregation of émigrés from Ghana, which had worshipped in the Hall until they split apart and the remaining members had moved to an upper room in a nearby industrial park. As I skated alone around and around the empty Hall, I prayed and wondered how (or if) Christ might be calling this congregation in the latter stages of its life cycle to renewal, and what that renewal might look like in a space more like the one where they started than the one where they dreamed of ending.

What follows is the story of that prayer-on-the-move. We are a community of

faith like so many others experiencing decline in the rapidly changing religious landscape in America where people claim to be spiritual but not religious, and would sooner be found in a skate rink than a church building. Might Christ be calling here? This paper describes the Doctor of Ministry project as part of my studies as a Doctor of Ministry Candidate at Drew Theological Seminary during the Season of Lent, 2014. That project really began the summer before, at *Asbury UMC's* annual Church Conference, when the Day Care Board Chair summarized her report, and I winced.

“We all need to remember that the Day Care keeps this church afloat.” With that statement, the Day Care Board Chair named harsh truths none of us wanted to hear: that *Asbury Church* was sinking, and that we were using what had started out as a ministry and mission of the church to keep our heads above water financially. I winced, and perhaps we all winced, to hear, with such candid clarity, the gap between how we started as a church and what we had become.

Most of the children and their families in what we then called the Day Care were using government assistance (Purchase of Care) to afford the cost of enrollment, which our church had raised to supplement our shrinking budget as we declined in numbers.⁷ They came throughout the week, but because of an ever-widening gap between our congregation and the surrounding neighborhoods, they did not come to worship with us on Sunday. We wondered what it would take to get those children and their families to walk down the long hallway from the Child Care to the Sanctuary, so that we could live again as the church we had once been.

⁷ In the course of this project, we learned that the staff and parents preferred the name *Asbury Child Care* instead of *Asbury Day Care*.

In the course of this project, we learned to do some walking ourselves, and discovered God's ability to create a sanctuary out of any space where two or three people gather in Jesus' name. What we saw originally as a gap between ourselves and potential converts to Christianity became a space to find common ground and the restoration of relationships with ourselves as well as with strangers. And in the midst of our scarcity, we remembered the eye-opening abundance that God prepares at all tables set with a place for the Stranger.

The significance of this project goes beyond our evaluation at *Asbury United Methodist Church*. Christ our Lord has invited us to his Table, and we have been transformed by our experience of his presence precisely in the gap we feared and avoided. Whatever happens in our seventieth year, we know already that the Lamb of God calls us not to close the gap but to make a home there. And to do that, we know we will need help from friends and strangers who may become friends, if we will welcome them. We are also aware that so many congregations across our annual conference (the Peninsula-Delaware Annual Conference, which may have to merge with another annual conference because of its rapidly shrinking membership) and across America experience the same kind of gap between what was and what is, between the congregation and the surrounding neighborhood.

Here, then, is one way an aging congregation in decline walked faithfully (and sometimes fearfully) down the long hallway from the sanctuary to an empty fellowship hall, and set the Table for Supper.

CHAPTER 2

LORD HAVE MERCY: THE QUESTION THAT CALLED US

In the Summer of 2013, I worked with another DMIN classmate to put together a paper entitled “Tiger Tales: Narrative Perspective in *Life of Pi* and Three United Methodist Churches” that served as the foundation of each of our respective research projects. Though I had no idea what my project would involve, I chose three narratives from my experience as *Asbury*’s pastor to illustrate the danger of mistaking the rest stop for the true destination in the cannibalistic island oasis scene from the book and movie, *Life of Pi*. The first involved the Day Care report to our annual Church Conference that I have mentioned in the previous chapter. I titled that story, “*Asbury Day Care: Cash Cow or Lifetime Investment?*” The second story described *Asbury*’s Fellowship Hall, built on our Fiftieth Anniversary for no clear missional reason, which I titled: “If You Build It, Who Will Come?” And the final story related an email exchange one of *Asbury*’s members initiated with me by asking, “How am I supposed to love my neighbor as myself when most of the time I don’t even like people?”

My advisors predicted that our projects would find us, and as the three weeks of summer intensive classes unfolded, I wondered exactly how that would work. At first, I could not see a connection between the stories, and it took me some time to realize that one of the most profound connections involved the possibility inherent in each of these well-rehearsed tales of trouble at *Asbury*. Drew Theological School narrative researchers

Carl Savage and William Presnell identify a well-rehearsed story churches tell about themselves as the “defining, dominant discourse.”¹ This narrative is the air that members and their pastors breathe, defining not what is, but what stakeholders perceive automatically. However, embedded in this dominant discourse, a “latent, more functional, faithful, and hopeful story” waits to be noticed: a “shadow script.”² “Shadow” in this sense involves a “waiting-in-the-wings” notion of hope, rather than any connection with relative darkness and malevolence.

Gathering these narratives of the church I serve is not unlike Moses taking notice of the burning bush in the desert. The very act of taking notice and gathering narratives is a form of “turning aside” (Exodus 3:3). Placing them together in light of a story of a mirage (in *Life of Pi*) provides the power to reinterpret what Savage and Presnell call “problem-saturated” stories in order to discover and to reimagine an emerging “preferred story” of hope.³

But what hope could emerge from a story of a sinking church, an empty fellowship hall, and an inherent dislike of our neighbors? For one thing, there are other ways to tell (and interpret) these stories. In his book about narrative therapy, *Coyote Wisdom: The Power of Story in Healing*, Native-American psychologist Lewis Mehl-Madrona writes, “with every performance of a story, people reauthor [*sic*] their lives and

¹ Carl E. Savage and William B. Presnell, *Narrative Research in Ministry: A Postmodern Research Approach for Faith Communities* (Louisville, KY: Wayne E. Oates Institute, 2008), 79.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., 82-83.

relationships.”⁴ This re-authoring is possible because of the “relative indeterminateness—the ambiguity and uncertainty of all stories” that creates spaces for new interpretations of hope in the midst of dominant, typical narratives and their interpretations.⁵

Re-authoring or reimagining relates to the persistence of a story in capturing and holding our imagination. By summer’s end, I had shifted my gaze to consideration of worship (liturgical, Eucharistic-centered) renewal at *Asbury*, partly as a result of the fear I experienced especially when considering the story of the “sinking” of the church I serve. This Captain wanted to flee from the fate of going down with the ship. My advisors encouraged me (goaded me!) to stay with the “wince” that our Day Care Board Chair’s comment had evoked in me, but I feared that nothing good could come from this haunting dominant narrative. I already knew how the story was going to end. Or I thought that I did.

In the midst of writing my Topic Outline, which served as the foundation of my Doctor of Ministry project at *Asbury*, the story that provoked a wince cried out for my attention. Other, previously unnoticed elements of the story and the reality it conveyed began to emerge. For one thing, our Child Care Board Chair had not actually spoken of sinking, but *floating* together. This metaphor reflected a powerful connection between *Asbury Church* and *Asbury Child Care*. And while many in our congregation were unaware of that connection, our leaders and especially our Board of Trustees nurtured that connection. The Trustees invested time, money and energy in making the Child Care

⁴ Lewis Mehl-Madrona, *Coyote Wisdom: The Power of Story in Healing* (Rochester, Vt.: Bear & Co., 2005), 214.

⁵ Ibid.

spaces safe and comfortable. One of our Trustees enjoyed reading Bible stories to the children, after he and his wife helped prepare and serve their lunch.

As I thought more about this connection between *Asbury Church* and *Asbury Child Care*, I became aware of the ways in which our destinies were linked together. I thought of how the congregation and the child care family clung to each other, even though we were strangers, in those troubling waters of change, nearly seven decades after the church's (and the neighborhood's) founding. The narratives of (fearful, unknown) strangers keeping each other afloat coalesced with the image of our empty fellowship hall, but as a welcoming, open place of possibility, celebration, and feasting, rather than an empty one. And thus, this project found me.

The research question that would guide us was a simple act of re-authoring: **“What would happen if *Asbury* embraced the role of host to our child care family instead of landlord?”** The question represents the change in perception Savage and Presnell discuss in connection with a postmodern affirmation of truth, in the following question: “What does it do to my world if I believe this?”⁶ Curiosity rather than certainty fuels the question and the methodology of this project, which takes its name from the playful Messianic Age image from Isaiah 11. When we encourage little children to take the lead, we cannot know where their adventurous spirits might go, or what dormant, forgotten parts of our spirits they might awaken.

In fact, the little children of *Asbury Child Care* had already led us to the project methodology, during the Season of Lent, in 2013. Each of the six Wednesday evenings leading up to Easter, thirty-thirty-five members of our congregation gathered for a special

⁶ Savage and Presnell, 35.

meal and Lenten Bible study in a large room we called the Friendship Lounge. *Asbury Child Care* used the space as a nap room during the day, so we had to coordinate with the staff to clear the cots from the space on Wednesday afternoons, so we could set up for our weekly supper. We held the series of suppers in the Friendship Lounge because our Fellowship Hall was larger than we needed for the number of church members we expected to attend.

We made no effort to invite the children from our Child Care to come, though we did arrange to entertain any children who came with our members in a separate classroom. In fact, two members of our Child Care staff did attend several of the suppers, and brought some of their children with them. None of the *Asbury* members who attended the suppers had young children at home, and we ushered the children who did come quickly into the separate space after supper so that the adults could enjoy the program prepared for them.

As we gathered for supper, the parents and guardians picked up their children from *Asbury Child Care* at the end of their day, and walked past the entrance to the Friendship Lounge on their way to the parking lot. Several of the children asked their parents or guardians if they could join us, and in every case, the parents would gently tell their children that the supper was a “church” event, and not a Child Care event. The adults assumed they were not invited, even when one of our members assured them they were welcome to join the supper in progress. One parent saw a basket filled with money on one of the tables near the entrance, and made a donation, but no one felt comfortable enough to join us for supper.

When the series of Lenten suppers came to an end at Easter, we talked about

whether we would like to renew the practice the following year. The event had involved a great deal of work for those who organized it, decorating the tables and preparing the food, and though everyone had enjoyed the Wednesday night suppers, the idea of planning and preparing for them again overwhelmed those of us who had been responsible for it. We also talked about the way the child care children had wanted to join us. Though we were intrigued by the notion (how long had it been since that had happened at *Asbury*?), we could not imagine summoning the resources to feed ourselves, much less these strangers.

Yet the memory of these children begging their parents to come to our Table proved stronger than our fears about not being able to provide for them. When, in the Fall of 2013, I introduced to my Local Advisory Committee (LAC) the question of laying aside our role as landlord in order to host a series of Lenten Suppers in 2014 not for ourselves, but for our *Asbury Child Care* family (children, parents/guardians, and staff), it seemed like an idea that God had been nurturing inside us all. That committee included current and former Child Care Board Chairs, the Trustee who enjoyed reading Bible stories to the child care children, the director and assistant director of *Asbury Child Care*, and two visionary leaders of *Asbury Church*. None of them wondered where we would find the energy or the money to host the suppers.

Another aspect of the 2013 Lenten Suppers we had noticed was the way in which the fellowship time and Bible study and reflection time seemed to conflict with each other. The woman in charge of the suppers had prepared table favors that communicated various aspects of the story of God's grace through Jesus Christ throughout Lent. Each one was a kind of object lesson that invited people at the table to consider a common

object in a new light. Over the course of the suppers, these living parables which were a more integral part of supper and table fellowship came to supplant a separate Bible study that I had envisioned leading.

In addition to the suppers, which would involve this more integrated, experiential and parabolic approach to learning, we envisioned a companion Sunday sermon series and several weekly Bible studies for members of our congregation based on the Biblical notion of hospitality. We hoped that this series of sermons and Bible study groups would foster a greater sense of spiritual preparation for our role as host, as well as help us to reflect theologically on our experience as host. This Lenten discipline of scriptural hospitality, a new ministry connection of sharing food with strangers would invite us all to discern connections between our stories and “the story of the Christian community’s past experiences of God,” as theologian and pastor Laurie Green advocates in *Let’s Do Theology: Resources for Contextual Theology*.⁷

While I conceived this project as one of research and renewal, anticipating that exchanging the role of landlord for gracious host would evoke more faithful possibilities in *Asbury’s* congregation and child care family, I entertained no illusions of deterministic cause-and-effect notions of what Savage and Presnell call a “new ministry intervention.”⁸ This project would not use the child care family as a stepping stone to *Asbury’s* financial

⁷ Laurie Green, *Let’s Do Theology: Resources for Contextual Theology*, Completely revised and updated ed. (London ; New York: Mowbray, 2009), 77.

⁸ Ibid., 128. My advisors strongly encouraged me to find a better word than “intervention” which did not seem to honor the subjective mystery of following where living out this new relationship between church and child care might lead. In my Prospectus, I settled on the notion of this project as a new ministry “connection” as a more faithful way to tell the story of how this project would stay open to the possibilities of curiosity rather than pre-conceived certainty.

renewal. That kind of deterministic thinking was the heart of our problem. The way beyond this fatalistic determinism might be found in Mehl-Madronna's relative indeterminateness, the mysterious possibility of staying open to curiosity. Therapist Richard Hester and United Methodist pastor Kelli Walker-Jones write about the possibility of the unknown in *Know Your Story and Lead with It: The Power of Narrative in Clergy Leadership*:

[by] reflecting on the remarkable way the great religions seem to develop an awareness of the unknown keen enough to hold its most ardent followers in a state of wonder, we may begin to acquire the art of seeing the unknown everywhere, especially at the heart of our most emphatic certainties.⁹

These include certainties of grief and loss.

I would gladly trade that kind of certainty for the possibility of curiosity, not only in the telling of our story at *Asbury*, but in the living out of new storylines, roles, and possibilities. So this project methodology would not be what Yale Professor of Pastoral Care and Counseling Mary Clark Moschella describes as a "Causal/Predictive Puzzle" in her book, *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice*.¹⁰ Rather than setting up a "How does this change impact that congregational reality?" linear notion of the Doctor of Ministry project as a ministry "fix," the question itself would lead our congregation and myself into a new way of perceiving and living as a congregation in our relationship with Christ and with our neighbor. This leading question (as opposed to a pre-conceived answer), looks more like the functionalist approach outlined by Savage and Presnell, a

⁹ Richard L. and Kelli Walker-Jones Hester, *Know Your Story and Lead with It: The Power of Narrative in Clergy Leadership* (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2009), Kindle Electronic Edition: Chapter 5, Location 1734.

¹⁰ Mary Clark Moschella, *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice: An Introduction* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Pr, 2008), 77.

“perspective [which] seeks to discern how the combining narratives of the context fit together pre- and post-project.”¹¹

Yet even this functionalist approach to project conception and evaluation fails to honor the indeterminate nature of narrative research involved in living with the question of exchanging the role of landlord for host. Sifting through these modes of evaluation together with my project advisors and Doctor of Ministry cohort at our October, 2013 colloquium, we ultimately decided that Green’s Doing Theology Spiral would serve us best in planning, carrying out, and continuously evaluating the mystery of accepting Christ’s invitation to serve as hosts to strangers for whom we feared we might be unable to provide.

Green’s Spiral looks more like a dancing dialogue between the church and its rich theological resources of scripture, tradition, reason, and experience. Evaluation, in this sense, becomes a practice of discernment on the way rather than some final word that solidifies (and truncates) learning, transformation, and growth in discipleship. Green identifies four phases of this Doing Theology Spiral: Experience, Exploration, Reflection, and Response.¹² He cautions against practicing a gap between action (response and experience) and reflection (explore and reflect), as is the case with members who identify as active doers of ministry or part of the “reflective worshipping community.”¹³

Instead of this conceptual or congregational divide, Green advocates a process

¹¹ Savage and Presnell, 128.

¹² Green, 36-37.

¹³ Ibid., 36.

that encourages intentional action and reflection throughout the discernment spiral. The process constantly and intentionally links action and reflection and typically begins when we ask a theological question about our experience as followers of Christ. Our project question was clear enough: “What would happen if *Asbury* embraced the role of host to our child care family instead of landlord?” The question emerged from our experience in relationship with a group of strangers who made up the *Asbury Child Care* family. As the LAC and I put our Project Prospectus together, we identified practical ways in which we would integrate action-reflection as an ongoing evaluative method, rather than one in which we engaged only after the active phase of the project.

For the purposes of this project paper, I summarize the key learnings of this ongoing theological spiral of evaluation in chapter eight, which I have divided into the four phases Green identifies. But I make this structural accommodation for clarity in communicating, not an answer to the research question, but a collection of action-reflection experiences developed from our question’s invitation to live in a new form of relationship with these strangers in our midst. We did not experience this collection at the conclusion of the project, but all along the way.

As we began to conceive of how this embedded evaluation process might work, the LAC and I envisioned the role of Table Host that some of our members would play. We invited and trained members of *Asbury* to serve as these Hosts and as story recorders. Their role was to offer an intentional welcome to the *Asbury Child Care* families who attended our suppers and also, to observe and record what was happening at each Table, not primarily in our guests, but in ourselves. University of Aberdeen Professor John Swinton and gerontologist Harriet Mowat call this mode of observation “reflexivity,”

which they define as “critical self-reflection carried out by the researcher throughout the research process” in *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*.¹⁴

Swinton and Mowat identify reflexivity as “perhaps *the* [emphasis added] most crucial dimension of the qualitative research process.”¹⁵ It serves as a constant reminder of the embedded, relational nature of the connection between researcher and subject, or, in our case, between host and stranger, or host and guest. In our experience, the practice of reflexivity also became a hallmark of the dance of action-reflection in Green’s theological spiral. We literally learned by (not after) doing. And one of the most important things we learned involved what we came to call the blurring of the boundary we had assumed existed between guest and host.

In previous meals held in *Asbury’s* fellowship hall, we had noticed that our members tended to automatically cluster (and segregate themselves) into comfortable affinity groups defined by family or friendship ties. Our natural inclination was to prevent new relationships from forming in our fellowship. We hoped that the Table Host role would circumvent that natural tendency to avoid strangers in this series of suppers for the *Asbury Child Care* family. In order to observe what transformed when we opened ourselves to share a meal with strangers, we set out clear expectations of Table Hosts, and also of the project, in a series of training events for members of our congregation. The real training happened in the midst of the project, as our Table Hosts shared meals with strangers who became friends each Wednesday evening throughout the Season of

¹⁴ John Swinton and Harriet Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research* (London: SCM Pr, 2006), 59.

¹⁵ Ibid.

Lent.

Many of our Table Hosts attended one of several Lenten Bible study groups on hospitality throughout the project as a way of deepening this action-reflection transformation. All of them participated in a series of worship services each Sunday in Lent, which focused on six key themes of scriptural hospitality. After considering several study books and guides, we settled on a study called *Widening the Welcome of Your Church: Biblical Hospitality and the Vital Congregation*, by Church of the Brethren pastors Fred Bernhard and Steve Clapp. This six-week series explored hospitality as a *sine qua non* of Christian faith, acknowledged our fear of strangers, and explored the practical barriers and bridges as a congregation practiced hospitality especially toward strangers, children, and the overlooked.¹⁶ We published a Project Overview handout that included the themes we identified for each supper, a summary of expectations and schedule for all participants and an outline of the sermon series.¹⁷

Bernhard and Clapp define hospitality as “the attitude and practice of providing the atmosphere and opportunities, however risky, in which strangers are free to become friends.... The relationship thus opens the possibility for eventual communion among the host, the stranger, and God.”¹⁸ When Christians think of the role of host, we naturally think of the Communion Table, and the sacramental miracle of encountering Jesus Christ as we share the bread and wine. The Eucharistic Table blurs lines of separation, as all

¹⁶ Fred Bernhard and Steve Clapp, *Widening the Welcome of Your Church: Biblical Hospitality & the Vital Congregation*, 4th ed. (Elgin, Illinois: Brethren Press, 2004), 3-5.

¹⁷ See Appendix A.

¹⁸ Bernhard and Clapp, 56.

who receive the body of Christ become the Body of Christ, redeemed by his blood.

Christopher Heurtz, an activist-missionary in the New Friar movement, spent twenty years as a partner-minister in Word Made Flesh (WMF), a community “called and committed to serving Jesus among the most vulnerable of the world’s poor.”¹⁹ Reflecting on his experience with WMF, Huertz writes about his action-reflection experience of this kind of shared-Table hospitality with theologian Christine Pohl in their book, *Friendship at the Margins: Discovering Mutuality in Service and Mission*. They ask a question that relates profoundly to the research question that drives this project: “*What if in sharing life together as friends, we all move closer to Jesus’ heart?* [emphasis added]”²⁰ This project began as an exploration of how exchanging the role of landlord for host of *Asbury Child Care* might affect the gap that had grown between *Asbury Church* and its surrounding neighborhoods. As we lived into that question, we encountered the living Jesus Christ, where we shared a communion with strangers who helped us remember and encounter Jesus.

The keys to that discovery involved two important decisions we made from the outset of this project. First, we would journey the long corridor from the sanctuary to the fellowship hall, instead of waiting for the *Asbury Child Care* family to come to traditional worship in our sanctuary. Second, we committed ourselves to learn by asking and listening (rather than to teach by telling), in order to create and experience a

¹⁹ Word Made Flesh. 2015. “About Us.” Accessed January 26, 2015.
<http://www.wordmadeflesh.org/about/>.

²⁰ Christopher L. Heurtz and Christine D. Pohl, *Friendship at the Margins: Discovering Mutuality in Service and Mission*, Resources for Reconciliation (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2010), 19.

sanctuary of relationship for ourselves as well as for our Child Care family.

Questioning our well-rehearsed narratives of decline (the church as sinking ship; the empty fellowship hall; and our fear of others) became an invitation from God to a table prepared for us in the presence of our enemies. But our enemies were not strangers. The real enemy was our fear of strangers—and our fear of the gap between us. Serving as host in this gap felt like a last supper in some ways, which reminded us of another story about an aging mother, her starving child, and a hungry stranger.

CHAPTER 3

ONE, HOLY, CATHOLIC, AND APOSTOLIC: THE NATURE, MISSION, AND CONTEXT OF THE CHURCH IN CRISIS

This is the story of a Church that came to the end of its life, and what happened next. *Asbury's* story profoundly connects to the story of the larger, Christian Church (big “C”) of which it is a part, as a mainline Protestant Christian community of faith. Mainline Protestantism is part of a worldwide Christian tradition that is connected to established social and political institutions. And all of these institutions are experiencing a postmodern revolution that is changing our world and our worldview in ways that resemble the epochal transitions of the Renaissance, the Fall of the Western Roman Empire, and the Alexandrian conquest of the Persian Empire.

It is impossible to fully appreciate the forest for the trees in the midst of the maelstrom that is our experience of this seismic shift. Many pundits, philosophers and theologians point to the transition from twentieth century modernity to twenty-first century postmodernity as the key to understanding the implications of this revolution. In his book, *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism?* philosopher James Smith argues “that postmodernity is often an intensification of modernity, particularly with respect to notions of freedom [and] the use of technology....”¹ Both of these trends represent a kind

¹ James K. A. Smith, *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism? Taking Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault to Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), Kindle Electronic Edition: Chapter 1, Location 182-183.

of unmooring from the “self-evident” foundations human beings took for granted before these profound philosophical and sociological shifts.²

This sense of unmooring and drifting (of being lost in a wilderness) serves as a primary metaphor as this chapter explores the Nature, Mission, and Context of the Church in Crisis. This crisis, or reformation, of our notion of Church was the theological motivation that drove our expectations of this Doctor of Ministry project at *Asbury United Methodist Church*.

These powerful changes (freedom and technology) have contributed (so far) to a tidal wave of people in the United States who identify as “spiritual and not religious.” They revel in spiritual experience unmediated by any church (big or little “C”). They live in a world transformed into a village, particularly by wearable and ubiquitous communications technology, and they choose from a pluralistic smorgasbord of religious and philosophical traditions and expressions.³ If the Renaissance precipitated an Industrial Revolution, postmodernity ushers in the dawn of the Information Age, a globally-networked digital revolution that transcends former boundaries and arbiters of truth. Chief among these guardians of truth and revelation is (or was) the Church.

Many contemporary theologians seek to understand the meaning of this tectonic

² Tickle, Kindle Electronic Edition: Chapter 2, Location 339. Tickle compares the shared worldview that gets irrevocably changes in what she calls “great emergences” to a tether, or mooring line that keeps a boat tied to the shore.

³ Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity after Religion: The End of Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening*, 1st ed. (New York: HarperOne, 2012), 242. Bass argues that “technology is shaping us; we are in the process of internalizing and integrating technology in ways that make us different than we were – even to the point of enhancing human wisdom....” Here, as in other aspects of the present Reformation boundaries that made sense in the old paradigm (between people and machines, for instance, or perhaps between sacred and profane) are not merely transgressed; they are obliterated.

shift for the Church. Postmodern theologian and pundit Brian McLaren's summary catalogue is worth quoting at length for a sense of our pervasive understanding that we live in a time of great change:

So something is happening. Something is afoot. A change is in the wind. Whether we call it the Great Emergence with Tickle or the Age of the Spirit with Cox, whether we call it a Christianity worth believing with Doug Pagitt or the new Christians with Tony Jones, whether we call it generative Christianity with church historian Diana Butler Bass or emerging mission with Marcus Borg, or a generous orthodoxy with Hans Frei or integral mission with René Padilla—whatever we call it, something is trying to be born among those of us who believe and follow Jesus Christ.⁴

In this traffic jam of theories and prognostications, one thing seems clear: the old ways of being church will not survive this season of dramatic change.

In the litany of authors cited above, emerging church movement author and lecturer Phyllis Tickle sees a repeat of a cyclical pattern of change that Jewish and Christian traditions have experienced over millennia. Tickle compares, for instance, the significance of the Internet in our present epoch of change to the Gutenberg Press in the time of the Great Reformation.⁵ Though traditional Christians may take some comfort in the theory that the Church has endured and survived times of great change in the past, this cyclical understanding offers little guidance (or assurance) about the meaning of this change for the very nature of the Church.

For instance, the phenomenon of youth leaving the church in droves as they reach the end of their teen years (and parental enforcement of church attendance) seems to be a

⁴ Brian D. McLaren, *A New Kind of Christianity: Ten Questions That Are Transforming the Faith*, 1st ed. (New York: HarperOne, 2010), 12-13.

⁵ Tickle, Kindle Electronic Edition: Chapter 3, Location 545.

recurring phenomenon, from a generational perspective. What we are realizing about the present generational exodus from the church is that our contemporary youth are not leaving because they are disenchanted with faith in general—they are leaving because they feel that *the Church itself* has become unfaithful. Pollsters David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons argue that these “skeptical age groups” of Mosaics and Busters, born in the wake of the Baby Boom, “say we no longer look like the people Jesus intended.”⁶

In other words, our youth may be leaving the Church *because* they want to be faithful; their leaving stands as a prophetic testimony against the Church.⁷

In his discussion of philosopher Jacques Derrida’s postmodern dictum, “There is nothing outside the text,” James Smith argues that “...postmodernity pushes us to recapture the central role of community not only for biblical interpretation but also for teaching us how to make our way in the world.”⁸ This image of being pushed (away, out,

⁶ David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, *Unchristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity - and Why It Matters* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 2007), 205. Mosaics (Gen Y or Millennials) are the newest generation of Americans, born between 1984 and 2002; Busters (or Gen X) are the generation of Americans born between 1965 and 1983.

⁷ ChurchExecutive.com ebook (accessed online November 19, 2014 at <http://churchexecutive.com/archives/millennials-losing-their-religion-2>) *Engaging Millennials*, Bob Allen writes, “While there’s nothing new about young adults drifting from the faith after they leave home until they marry and have children of their own, pollsters fear current trends signal more than sowing wild oats.” Brian McLaren, in *A New Kind of Christianity*, writes that “younger generations have been choosing the [spiritual but not religious] option lately” (162). This generation of youth and young adults is different from past trends of young adults moving away from church in their 20’s and then returning to the church by their 30’s. They’re leaving for spiritual reasons, not secular ones.

⁸ Smith, Kindle Electronic Edition: Chapter 2, Location 538-539.

or beyond) to a place of rediscovery recalls the pivotal journey of Sarai and Abram, whom God called to pull up stakes and journey to a land God would show them along the way but not before (Genesis 12:1). The image evokes the language of the Exodus from captivity to promise (Exodus 3:7-8), and also of Exile and return (Nehemiah 1:8-9)⁹. Perhaps this heritage of journeying in faith is why the first followers of the risen Jesus Christ were called Followers of the Way (Acts 22:4).

Christians comfortable with the notion of Church that is passing away conflated the word church with the sanctuary where Christians gathered for worship, or more broadly, the buildings where most church gatherings of any kind took place. In other words, in the old paradigm, church was a place and not a people. Taking a cue from our sons and daughters who are prophesying to the Church as God's Spirit gives them visions (Acts 2:17 and Joel 2:28), I imagine one of the most faithful and fruitful notions of Church in a postmodern world is that of Pentecostal Pilgrimage. This notion provides a way of understanding the church's experience of this present postmodern reformation, and of God's call to live into a future that seems disconnected from our recent past.

The notion of Church as pilgrimage is not a new idea. Theologian Geoffrey Wainwright, in his systematic theology, *Doxology*, calls the "historical Church... a

⁹ Walter Brueggemann, "Rethinking Church Models through Scripture," *Theology Today* 48, no. 2 (1991): 138. Brueggemann connects the present postmodern crisis of the Christian Church with God's (not Babylon's) "[termination of] the Temple project." Diana Butler Bass also connects the biblical concepts of pilgrimage and exile, in her discussion of what it means to belong in the church of the twenty-first century: "If we think of belonging only as membership in a club, organization, or church, we miss the point. Belonging is the risk to move beyond the world we know, to venture out on pilgrimage, to accept exile" Bass, 197-198).

pilgrim community on its way to becoming the people of God's final kingdom.¹⁰ Diana Butler Bass traces the continuing sense of Church as journey from Abraham and Sarah, "the first nomads of faith."¹¹ Bass quotes St. Columba (ca. 521-97) to connect these nomads with the ancient Celtic understanding of Christianity as "the practice of sacred journey."

God counseled Abraham... to leave his own country and go on pilgrimage to the land which God has shown him.... Now the good counsel which God enjoined here on the father of all the faithful is incumbent on all the faithful; that is to leave their country and their land ... and go in perfect pilgrimage in imitation of him.¹²

Process theologians John Cobb and David Ray Griffin emphasize how this pilgrimage necessarily involves the work of the Holy Spirit. "If the churches are to participate in *the* [emphasis original] church, they must be creatively transformed through their openness to Christ."¹³

In his 1974 study of ecclesiology, *Models of the Church*, Cardinal Avery Dulles outlined five models or symbols (to which he added a sixth) that "suggest attitudes and courses of action ... intensify confidence and devotion ... [and that] make the Church become what they suggest the Church is."¹⁴ In identifying five models (and adding a

¹⁰ Geoffrey Wainwright, *Doxology: The Praise of God in Worship, Doctrine, and Life : A Systematic Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 121.

¹¹ Bass, 178.

¹² Ibid., 191.

¹³ John B. Cobb and David Ray Griffin, *Process Theology: An Introductory Exposition* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976), 131.

¹⁴ Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church*, Expanded ed. (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1987), 21.

sixth), Dulles recognized that no one model could serve as a faithful expression of the church in every age and cultural context. *Models* stands as a powerful theological achievement not because it defines the perfect model of church, but because it provides a way of examining and evaluating the way models of church give meaning and understanding to any incarnation of church.

Dulles identifies traveling metaphors that structure his second model, “Mystical Communion,” which he calls a “pilgrim church” on the way to the eschaton.¹⁵ Of all of Dulles’ models, “Mystical Communion” best serves as a traditional basis for the notion of church as Pentecostal Pilgrimage. In describing this model, Dulles writes, “Christians commonly experience the Church more as a companionship of fellow travelers on the same journey than as a union of lovers dwelling in the same home.”¹⁶

The Apostle Paul writes of this companionship along the way as a diversity in unity. He uses the metaphor of a human body composed of many parts united by the Holy Spirit who gifts each member/part of the body with identity, purpose, and power (1 Corinthians 12).¹⁷ Dulles also draws on a Pentecostal understanding of the pilgrim church, the Mystical Communion, as it seeks to understand revelation. “The Holy Spirit opens us to look on the world with the eyes of Christ, and to see life as he saw it.”¹⁸

The Jewish Festival of Pentecost celebrates the first harvest and anticipates

¹⁵ Ibid., 111.

¹⁶ Ibid., 61.

¹⁷ In 1 Corinthians 12:12, for instance, Paul writes, “For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ.”

¹⁸ Dulles, 180.

continued blessings—the now and not-yet quality of the Realm of God. The Christian appropriation of this festival celebrates both the presence and the movement of the Holy Spirit among and beyond the people of God, both gathered and dispersed. Methodists have always understood the Christian life as a journey and process, asking not whether one has arrived but whether she is “going on to perfection.”¹⁹ So Christian discipleship may be understood as a lifelong pilgrimage. But that pilgrimage cannot be undertaken alone; we join with other pilgrims on the Way.²⁰

Both of these terms (Pilgrim and Pentecostal) can also be understood as a prophetic witness against the church as it presently understands itself—and as a call to pull up stakes and journey to a land/place that God will not show us before we get there. All journeys require thoughtful choices about what to take and what to leave behind, and even round-trip journeys result in coming home to a place transformed because we are no longer the same. We undertake a pilgrimage seeking transformation, but not obliteration. A Pentecostal Pilgrimage trusts and embraces the guidance of the Holy Spirit to grace

¹⁹ United Methodist Church (U.S.), *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church*, 2012, This is the second of the historic questions for ordinands in Paragraph 236, page 262

²⁰ See, for instance, Exodus 17:12 “But Moses’ hands grew weary; so they took a stone and put it under him, and he sat on it. Aaron and Hur held up his hands, one on one side, and the other on the other side; so his hands were steady until the sun set.”; Ecclesiastes 4:12 “And though one might prevail against another, two will withstand one. A threefold cord is not quickly broken”; Nehemiah 4:16-17 “From that day on, half of my servants worked on construction, and half held the spears, shields, bows, and body-armor; and the leaders posted themselves behind the whole house of Judah, who were building the wall. The burden bearers carried their loads in such a way that each labored on the work with one hand and with the other held a weapon”; Matthew 18:19 “Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven”; and Mark 2:3 “Then some people came, bringing to him a paralyzed man, carried by four of them.”

pilgrims with gifts we need for the journey, gifts that are more than equal to the power of our fear of change and the strangeness of the Way.

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me. He has sent me...” Jesus reads from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah in the synagogue in Nazareth (Luke 4:18a CEV, quoting Isaiah 61:1a). Jesus’ interpretation of Second (post-exilic) Isaiah is indicting: this good news has broken free of the past and of Jewish religious leaders’ hold on it. What happens next foreshadows crucifixion and resurrection, destruction of the Temple, diaspora, and a new way of understanding both church and synagogue. What happens next is a near-lynching, as those gathered to hear the hometown carpenter’s boy made good turn into a mob.

They would have thrown Jesus from a cliff, had it been in their power to do so. These texts (from Isaiah and from Luke) bear a hard but freeing truth for the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church of the twenty-first century.²¹

The age of the “come and see” (John 1:38) church gives way to a “go and make” (Matthew 28:19) nomadic community defined by one who is “the way, and the truth and the life” (John 14:6). The young adults whom pollster David Kinnaman and author Aly Hawkins identify as prodigals will not be coming back to the Church. We wait for their return in vain. These exiles, in their schema, bear prophetic witness (as did Jesus in the Nazareth synagogue) to a new kind of journey of engaging and relevant faith practice beyond the walls of any gathering place. This crisis of faith (for everyone) invites us to move from a place of stagnant faith to a place God will show us along the way. For Kinnaman and Hawkins, the guidance along this pilgrim journey emerges from the

²¹ Four marks of the church in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed of 381.

relationship between young and old members of the faith community, in which each celebrates a kind of mutual apprenticeship—all empowered, gifted and led by the Holy Spirit.²²

Researcher and author Gabe Lyons, Kinnaman’s partner in his groundbreaking study of 16-29 year old unchurched and de-churched youth and young adults, *unChristian*, also wrote a follow-up book to that study, *The Next Christians*. Lyons places even more stress on the leadership of this new generation in the next church and calls the Church in the crisis of an exodus from the pews to live as “small communities of faith, known as the church dispersed, [who] are giving the world a comprehensive view of what it looks like for Jesus to show up in a *Community* [emphasis original] today.”²³ Both Kinnaman and Lyons write about faith as a journey of diverse travelers in different places, all of whom trust God’s Spirit to lead and validate the pilgrims and the pilgrimage.²⁴

The New Testament uses the word ἐκκλησία (*ecclesia*) to refer to the church (see Matthew 16:18 and Romans 16:5), a Greek word combining the verb “to call” and a prefix meaning “from” or “out from.” The word implies movement that Christians have traditionally interpreted as from the secular world to the sacred sanctuary. In *God-The World's Future*, theologian Ted Peters notes, “Avery Dulles [in his *Models of the*

²² David Kinnaman and Aly Hawkins, *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians Are Leaving Church - and Rethinking Faith* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: BakerBooks, 2011), 118, 121, and 126.

²³ Gabe Lyons, *The Next Christians: The Good News About the End of Christian America* (New York: Doubleday, 2010), 163.

²⁴ Kinnaman and Hawkins, *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians Are Leaving Church - and Rethinking Faith*, 187.

Church] interprets *ecclesia* as ‘an assembly or convocation and more specifically the convocation of the saints that will be realized to the full at the eschaton.’”²⁵ Here, the assembly is itself a spiritual pilgrimage from the time in which it gathers (physically) to a time beyond time-God’s τέλος (*telos*).²⁶

Peters writes about the eschatological tension between the now and the not yet relationship between the gathered people of God and the final consummation of time in God. “The tension is caused by the future Kingdom of God challenging the present state of affairs as judge and as lure.”²⁷ Perhaps the greatest gift of the present crisis of postmodernity involves a challenge: the church cannot stand outside of this tension, but must like the world embrace God’s judgment and respond to God’s lure. Postmodernity challenges the church not to a settled assembly of the righteous but to a pilgrimage that bears, shares and discovers faith—“from faith to faith” (Romans 1:17)—following God’s Pentecostal calling. “Like an electric arc between two terminals,” Peters writes, “the church is called to bear the light between Easter and the consummation.”²⁸

The notion of a Christian church on the move and guided by the Spirit agrees well with the data of both first century and twenty-first century cultural and theological contexts, in the assessment of recent theologians and cultural research/analysts. Like the

²⁵ Ted Peters, *God - the World's Future: Systematic Theology for a New Era*, Second ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Pr, 2000), 273. (Quoting Avery Dulles’ “Models of the Church,” 109.)

²⁶ A primitive Greek word for “end,” “fulfillment,” and also “a toll” as in a custom or tax to pay for the journey. See Mark 13:13; Luke 1:33, 18:5 and 22:37.

²⁷ Peters, 274.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 317.

recently freed Hebrew slaves praying in fear on the beach between Pharaoh's army and the sea, God calls the Christian church today to rise from a place of complacency and march (Exodus 14:13-15) into a way God makes out of no way, to use a favorite phrase of the civil rights preacher and prophet, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.²⁹

When Jesus begins his ministry, as Luke records it, by announcing his prophetic role of setting the captives free, what really goads the members of the synagogue in his hometown (who mistakenly think they know all about him) is his inclusion of (and perhaps his implied preference for) the alien and stranger in this edict of freedom. The riot does not begin until Jesus reminds them of an ancient story from the first scroll of the Kings about how the Prophet Elijah created abundance in the midst of a famine: not for an Israelite, but for a foreign widow. The story to which Jesus refers is the tale of the Widow of Zarephath, from 1 Kings 17.

From the start of this project, I have been struck by the parallels between this story and the story of *Asbury United Methodist Church* (and so many aging congregations like it). During a severe drought, a woman comes to the end of her resources, and sets out to gather a few sticks to make a fire for the last supper she will share with her son before they die of starvation. Elijah, whom God has sent to the village with a promise that "a widow there will feed you," interrupts her to ask for a drink of water (1 Kings 17:9). Then he asks for a "morsel of bread in [her] hand" (1 Kings 17:11). The woman stops in the act of getting Elijah a drink, and tells him the story of her

²⁹ Martin Luther King, Jr., *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. James M. Washington (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991). Also Wolfgang Meider, *Making a Way Out of No Way: Martin Luther King's Sermonic Proverbial Rhetoric* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 2010), Chapter 15, 171ff.

hopelessness. Elijah tells her not to be afraid, but to “first make [him] a little cake” before preparing food for herself and her son. And, he promises her, “The jar of meal will not be emptied and the jug of oil will not fail until the day that the Lord sends rain on the earth” (1 Kings 17:14).

There is a delightful irony in interpreting *Asbury*’s present path of faithfulness in the light of a Biblical story about a widow: many of *Asbury*’s oldest and vital members are widows who feel a sense of maternal responsibility for *Asbury* as an institution. Like the widow to whom God sent the prophet Elijah, *Asbury*’s long-time members struggle to provide for the survival of the church in a perceived environment of scarcity. We also feel we must choose between welcoming a stranger and the tenuous survival of our own congregational family. As pastor, I understand this struggle to receive God’s promise to fill us as we give grace away.³⁰

My own sense of call to ordained ministry emerged the summer of 1985 on the fantail of a guided missile destroyer in the vast wilderness of the Indian Ocean. As a midshipman, I enjoyed listening to young enlisted sailors dream and wonder about the meaning of life under a canopy of numberless stars. God did not call me to speak, but to make room for these least in our society, many of whom had little choice but to join the

³⁰ There are many teachings of Jesus on this tension (give away in order to receive), notably Luke 6:37-38 (“the measure you give will be the measure you get back”), which Janny and Bill Grein connected to Ecclesiastes 11:1 (“Cast your bread upon the waters, for after many days, you will get it back”) in a song they wrote called “Bread Upon the Water” which was recorded by the Gaither Vocal Band. I’m also thinking of John 4:13-14 (“The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life”), the parable of the Talents (Matthew 25:14-30 and parallels), and the blessing (or curse) we pronounce on ourselves whenever we pray: “Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors” (Matthew 6:12 and Luke 11:4).

navy and sail far from home into harm's way. My offer was of respectful and curious openness to the wisdom of their stories. In return, I received their welcome (midshipmen, or officers-in-training, are neither enlisted sailors or officers). In giving what little I had, I received the gift of a home and a calling for life.

Midshipmen and sailors wear different uniforms and do not typically eat (or fraternize) together. My offer of friendship in crossing the line in order to listen, and not merely lead, reflects a Methodist tradition of sharing food and song in worship and in fellowship. From the beginnings of the Methodist movement in England, John Wesley (who called the world his parish) preached in the open air as the colliers (coal miners) changed shifts, while his brother Charles Wesley composed a theology of grace in a vast collection of hymns that became an accessible musical theology.

When we sensed that the wine at the Table served as a barrier to our siblings in recovery, one of our own, Dr. Thomas Bramwell Welch, a dentist and Methodist Communion Steward in Vineland, New Jersey (and former Wesleyan pastor), worked tirelessly to pasteurize grape juice so that it remained unfermented for use as sacramental wine in 1869.³¹ For Methodists, people were not made for the liturgy, but the liturgy was created to welcome all people into fellowship with God and with other people.

In addition, United Methodists practice an open Holy Communion (the Lord's Supper, or the Eucharist), welcoming not only all baptized followers of Christ to receive the body and blood of Christ, but also anyone who feels drawn by Christ's invitation to

³¹ William Chazanof, *Welch's Grape Juice: From Corporation to Co-Operative*, 1st ed., A New York State Study (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1977), 6-9.

new life.³² We welcome all people to the Table as a *converting* ordinance—a true *means* of grace that nourishes faith—as we give thanks for God’s extraordinary grace in Jesus Christ, our true host, not only for our sake, but for the sake of the world. In the words of our liturgy: “Christ our Lord invites to his table all who love him, who earnestly repent of their sin and seek to live in peace with one another.”³³

As a pastor, I consider it an honor to invite and to welcome strangers to the communion table in worship. Even so, the abundance of God’s grace became real for me when God called our biological family to extend Christ’s welcome to other children and youth in our home as a Delaware Foster Care family. We discovered that these strangers who became family invited us to our own dining room table. Our foster children taught us how to open our home and our table to so many strangers (who have become our friends) that one of our neighbors complains now that our home has become, in his words, a community center.

We imagined these prophets (the *Asbury Child Care* family, many of whom are strangers to us—the “least of these” in the words of Matthew 25:40) might also invite the *Asbury UMC* family to share what little God seems to have given us and to become a true community center of grace, forgiveness and love. We have a choice between hoarding or sharing what we fear will be our last meal in communion with these strangers (and perhaps with God), in anticipation of a blessing in that sharing. The widow of Zarephath could not have known that her communion with the prophet would lead to the

³² Karen B. Westerfield Tucker, *American Methodist Worship*, Religion in America Series (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 147.

³³ *The United Methodist Hymnal: Book of United Methodist Worship* (Nashville, Tenn.: United Methodist Pub. House, 1989), 7.

resurrection of her child (see 1 Kings 17:17-24). As members of the LAC and I considered this story, we wondered if perhaps *Asbury* could also experience a kind of resurrection and renewal by sharing covenant hospitality with the *Asbury Child Care* family.

Resurrection can only follow death. The widow of Zarephath embraces her death and the death of her son as inevitable. Perhaps she complies with the impertinent request of the prophet Elijah (and God's command) because she no longer worries about hoarding their meager resources. The disciples will do the same when Jesus commands them to feed the multitude.³⁴ The nature of the Church in crisis, a Pentecostal pilgrimage, involves dying to the notion of hunkering down behind comfortable walls of church as institution in order to find new life in the wilderness of both exodus and exile. Christ calls the Church in crisis to spend our energy, resources, and our last hopes on the Way, knowing that "the one who began a good work among [us] will bring it to completion" (Philippians 1:6). We gather only enough manna for each day, knowing God will provide for us (Exodus 16:4).

The crisis calls the Church to embrace Christ's invitation to lose our life in order to keep it (Luke 17:33 and parallels). Jesus also warns us that "those who try to make their life secure will lose it," so the choice for the Church facing the crisis of reformation involves not whether to die or to live, but what kind of death we choose—to die in faith on

³⁴ See Mark 6:37 "But he answered, 'You give them something to eat.' They said to him, 'That would take almost a year's wages! Are we to go and spend that much on bread and give it to them to eat?'; and parallels in Matthew 14:16 and Luke 9:12; and John 6:5-6 "When he looked up and saw a large crowd coming toward him, Jesus said to Philip, "Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?" He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do."

the Way, or to die in fear, grasping our ebbing lives and dwindling resources.³⁵ Like the widow of Zarephath, we know the latter choice is literally a dead end. But we can remain curious about what might happen if we choose to die to our fears of scarcity and loss. Just as the little boy who gave up his barley loaves and fish when the disciples asked for them (a drop in the ocean of need among the hungry crowd—see John 6:9) we can “live and die in holy curiosity about what God will make of us next.”³⁶

I imagined retelling the story of the Widow of Zarephath in my Prospectus.

Once upon a time, the rain forgot to fall so that no food could grow, and the people grew frightened and hungry. Word got out that God stopped the rain in a fight with a King, and when gods and kings fight, the people get wounded. But our God is not like all gods, and our God took notice of the people. God told a woman who lived alone with her son to look out for a prophet, and to make the prophet welcome in her home. The prophet promised her that the three of them would not run out of food until the rain came again. And what happened next? God joined the three of them for dinner. And even though it took the rain a little longer to fall again, they ate together happily ever after. And the woman never again forgot how to dream.

Dreaming, living, and dying “in holy curiosity” describe the mission of the Church in crisis: to encounter Christ in the Other. A common spiritual journey of transformation, undertaken in the power and guidance of the Holy Spirit, encourages all

³⁵ Alice Mann, *Can Our Church Live? Redeveloping Congregations in Decline* (Bethesda, MD: Alban Institute, 1999), 12. Mann quotes Mike Regel’s book, *Death of the Church*. “The Church has a choice: to die as a result of its resistance to change or to die in order to live.”

³⁶ Ibid., 116.

pilgrims in a life of discipleship. Many notions of church emphasize either nurture (growth and discipleship) or outreach (evangelism and mission) at the expense of the other. Pentecostal Pilgrims are nurtured as they engage in the journey outward. Celebrating the Next Christians' focus on the Way beyond any building or program, Gabe Lyons' vision of a "church dispersed" recalls the parable of the Sheep and the Goats in Matthew 25:31ff, where Christ-followers unconsciously and without pretension encounter Christ as they serve the "least."³⁷

Discipleship (following and growing in Christ) as a way of mission beyond the walls of a church building resonates with a growing number of people who crave authentic, relevant spirituality but not the institutional maintenance and practices of religion. The notion of church as Pentecostal Pilgrimage understands the spiritual impulses of people who have grown weary of insular, self-serving religion, and invites them to journey to the past, to a pilgrimage to the now and not yet of an apocalyptic hope in God's Realm, to what theologian Walter Brueggemann calls a "recovery of memory and rootage" (that religion falsely assumes).³⁸

This notion shines in all of the ways the Institutional model (in particular) fails, as it demonstrates Dulles' sixth criterion for any faithful understanding of church: theological fruitfulness. Dulles defines two future trends that must be part of the solution offered by any subsequent conception of church: democracy and decentralization/pluralism.³⁹ The Pentecostal experience opened up the People of the

³⁷ Lyons, 162-3.

³⁸ Brueggemann: 134.

³⁹ Dulles, 199-201.

Way to recognize and to celebrate God's spirit poured out on all flesh (Acts 2:17, quoting Joel 2:28).

The notion of church as Pentecostal Pilgrimage corrects other notions and models of church precisely because it points beyond itself—as few other notions can. This pilgrimage has a destination and a destiny: the *telos* in God, where there will be no need of Temple or Light (Revelation 21:22-23). Along the Way, pilgrims can welcome partners in all walks of faith and non-faith, respecting each individual journeyer and the path each must take to meet God who is coming and has come. Like hikers moving in different directions, or in the same direction at different paces, pilgrims led by the Spirit rejoice in the encouragement and growth that come from encountering strangers on the Way. We hold each other loosely, share bread and stories, give and receive direction, and entrust each other to the Holy Spirit.

Pentecostal Pilgrims share their excitement and passion for the Lord of the Dance in humility borne of many turnings on the Way. We welcome partners for some or all of the Way, but also respecting other paths, other pilgrimages, always trusting the Holy Spirit to guide all pilgrims on the Way. This notion practices evangelism and ecumenism as forms of hospitality, celebration and respect, in the spirit of Jesus who taught his disciples “whoever is not against us is for us” (Mark 9:40). As pilgrims celebrate unity in diversity among those who journey together on the Way of Christ, they recognize a much larger unity in the diversity of human striving. This is the seventh, ultimate criterion of a faithful conception of church, according to Dulles: fruitfulness in enabling members to relate to outsiders.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Ibid., 183.

Evangelization (sometimes called proselytizing) might seem at odds with an ecumenical spirit, as it makes exclusive claims for particular faith practices and beliefs of insiders. Dulles connects these two forms of relating to outsiders in his final criterion—one by invitation and the other by collaboration. Kinnaman and Hawkins note that younger Christians in exile refuse to respect the old boundaries between insider and outsider: they “rethink theology and practice in at least three areas: evangelism, denominations, and the ‘other.’”⁴¹ The Pentecostal Pilgrimage notion of church creates a way of comprehending a church movement with shifting boundaries that move with the people of God on the pilgrim way.

As boundaries move and shift with the movement and calling of the Spirit, they shed the permanence of other models, particularly institutional models and paternalistic notions of church, including Father-Knows-Best mega churches gathered around charismatic pastors whose glow eclipses Christ’s light to mesmerize a faceless flock. Pilgrims on the Way value and respect the transformation the Holy Spirit has in store for each individual. They refuse to define that value for another.

In *The Unlikely Pilgrimage of Harold Fry*, novelist Rachel Joyce describes the mutual evangelism that obliterates lines separating faithful and unfaithful in a unity of deep respect that begins to look like love:

He understood that in walking to atone for the mistakes he had made, it was also his journey to accept the strangeness of others. As a passerby, he was in a place where everything, not only the land, was open. People would feel free to talk, and he was free to listen, to carry a little of them as

⁴¹ Kinnaman and Hawkins, *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians Are Leaving Church - and Rethinking Faith*, 177.

he went.⁴²

Pilgrimage transcends boundaries and discovers God's presence as a gift of relationship rather than a prized possession that can be kept from others or grudgingly shared. The Holy Spirit gives direction to the journey, as pilgrims coalesce along the path of a calling. Both evangelistic and ecumenical impulses compliment each other as we share the joy of encountering God in each other on the Way.

Elijah, the man of God, is hungry and in need of food and water. The unnamed widow, a foreigner (to Elijah, as he was to her), is desperate and in need of hope. At the table they share, they encounter God's presence in each other. Jesus celebrates this kind of encounter in the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats, in Matthew 25:31ff. Those who are blessed by God experience this blessing as they extend hospitality (the Greek φιλοξενία or *philo-xenia* means "love of strangers") to the Other who is least in the human community.

The moral of the parable involves not merely the surprising, curious encounter between the faithful and Christ in the Other, but the unself-conscious nature of their loving service to others. In this parable, Jesus outlines the mission of the Church in crisis and describes what theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer's "religionless Christianity" might look like.⁴³ Bonhoeffer coined the phrase in a letter to Eberhard Bethge from a prison cell at Tegel in April, 1944. Three months later, he returned to the theme and elaborated it. "God lets himself be pushed out of the world on to the cross. He is weak and powerless in

⁴² Rachel Joyce, *The Unlikely Pilgrimage of Harold Fry: A Novel*, 1st ed. (New York: Random House, 2012), 90.

⁴³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Eberhard Bethge, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, Enlarged ed. (London,: SCM Press, 1971), 280.

the world, and that is precisely the way, the only way, in which he is with us...”⁴⁴

Later, he would write, in the outline of a book he planned on Christian faith, that instead of being a “‘religious’ relationship ... our relation to God is a new life in ‘existence for others’, through participation in the being of Jesus.”⁴⁵ Here is the heart of the mission of the Church in crisis, to “let the same mind be in [us] that was in Christ Jesus, who ... emptied himself, taking the form of a slave...” (Philippians 2:5-7). The Church as Pentecostal Pilgrimage seeks and serves the Other on the Way, and in so doing, experiences Emmanuel, God-With-Us.

Bonhoeffer conceived of religionless Christianity as a church for others from a prison cell, the same birthplace of several of the Apostle Paul’s letters. A year later, his captors would execute him for his participation in a plot to assassinate Adolph Hitler. Paul went from house arrest in Rome to execution. They, and so many others like them, were willing to lose their lives to find life in Jesus the Messiah (Nature), who offered his life for the sake of the world (Mission). But this is not merely the story a Church (the Body of Christ) that came to the end of its life; it’s the miraculous story of what happened next. To find our way (as Pentecostal Pilgrims) to that part of the story, we need a healthy sense of what church consultant Alice Mann calls holy curiosity, and playfulness, the Context of the Church in Crisis (Greek: κρίσις or *krisis*—a separating, decision, choice, judgment, or election).

The parable of the sheep and the goats evokes many stories of hidden identity throughout the scriptures, a kind of holy masquerade ball. Perhaps the most important is

⁴⁴ Ibid., 360.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 381.

the holy visitors that enjoy Abraham and Sarah's hospitality in Genesis 18. The theme of guests in disguise happens throughout Genesis. Abraham passes off Sarah as his sister in Genesis 12:10-20; 20:1-16 and 21:22-34; and 26:1-33). Lot hosts holy strangers in his home in Sodom (Genesis 19). Jacob wrestles with "a man" who later blesses Jacob because he has "struggled with God" (Genesis 32:22-32). Joseph chooses not to reveal himself to his brothers at first (Genesis 42). Moses is saved and raised by Pharaoh's household (Exodus 2). David, on the run from Saul, acts like a madman (1 Samuel 21) to escape King Achish of Gath. Nathan, David's advisor, condemns King David by disguising him in a story (2 Samuel 12).

Hebrews 13:1 encourages Christians to "show hospitality to strangers" because by doing so, "some have entertained (Greek: ξενίζω or *xenizo*—to receive a guest, to surprise) angels without knowing it." This passage, like the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats, draws on a long tradition of what begins to look like a game of hide and seek. These elements of the Church on Pentecostal Pilgrimage, holy curiosity, surprise, and the playful spirit of children's games, outline the Context of the Church in Crisis: Child's Play.

When Jesus welcomed and blessed children, he taught his disciples that the Kingdom of God belongs to "such as these" because only those who receive God's kingdom "as a little child" will enter it (Mark 10:14-15 and parallels). In Matthew 18:2-3, Jesus teaches the disciples (who are concerned with rank in the kingdom of heaven) that they must "change and become like children." Perhaps a hint of what this connection between children and God's kingdom involves can be found in a little children's ditty Jesus uses in Matthew 11:17 (and Luke 7:32): "We played the pipe for you, and you did

not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn.”

Commentators note that Jesus refers to children’s games that resembled the weddings and funerals they observed their parents practicing in real life.⁴⁶ Their games simultaneously demystified these larger-than-life events and prepared the children for their adult roles in these rituals. Each round of the game involved interchangeable roles of initiators and those who accepted the invitation to play. Children knew intuitively that to refuse the invitation meant the play would end, something adults have a hard time remembering (perhaps Jesus’ point in this anecdote). In his book, *Generation to Generation*, Rabbi and therapist Edwin Friedman notes that “anxiety’s major tone is seriousness, often an affliction in itself” and that “[i]ts major antidote is playfulness.”⁴⁷

The story of “what happens next” involves this unselfconscious playfulness that makes a game out of death. Hebrews 13:1 connects this playful spirit with the invitation (command) to practice hospitality. Perhaps nowhere in the New Testament is the power of this playful, hospitable spirit more evident than in Luke 24, the story of the Road to Emmaus. On Sunday evening, two grieving disciples met a stranger who walked with them on the way to the village of Emmaus. When, in verse 28, they reached their destination, and the stranger “walked ahead as if he were going on,” they urged him to “stay with them” (Luke 24:28-29). Only then, at a Table together, do they recognize Jesus in the stranger; the Church, a Pentecostal Pilgrimage of the Way, is born.

⁴⁶ M. Eugene Boring. "The Gospel of Matthew." In Abingdon Press., *The New Interpreter's Bible: General Articles & Introduction, Commentary, & Reflections for Each Book of the Bible, Including the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), Vol VIII, 269.

⁴⁷ Edwin H. Friedman, *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue*, The Guilford Family Therapy Series (New York: Guilford Press, 1985), 208.

The context of the Pentecostal Pilgrimage Church in crisis (times of decision from crucifixion to reformation) involves this playful spirit (Spirit?) blowing where it will (John 3:8), turning pilgrims in a dance of μετανοέω (*metanoieo*, see Mark 1:15 and parallels) filled with surprise and delight. The mission of the Church in crisis is to live for others, as ministers of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:16-21). And the nature of the Church in crisis is ecclesia—“called... out of darkness into [God’s] marvelous light,” (1 Peter 2:9). We are God’s people who embrace Christ’s calling to lose life (of limits, prejudices, brokenness and self-centeredness) in order to find life (of love and wholeness in God—Matthew 10:39).⁴⁸

⁴⁸ John Shelby Spong, *A New Christianity for a New World: Why Traditional Faith Is Dying and How a New Faith Is Being Born*, 1st ed. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001), 206-7.

CHAPTER 4

HOLY, HOLY, HOLY: RESEARCH, RESULTS, AND ROADBLOCKS

Frank acknowledgment that the Church (or a church) is experiencing the crisis of death involves a kind of prophetic foolhardiness. Yet the present crisis underscores the dance of *metanoia* (death that makes way for resurrection) that is the heart of the Good News of Jesus the Christ. Hiding from death and new life in Christ does not negate these realities of human experience; it only blinds us to them. As I turn from an explication of the theological motivation and expectations of this project to the story of how the research proceeded, the *Sanctus* movement of The Great Thanksgiving calls us out of darkness into God's marvelous light.

In the midst of praising God for creation, Christians join in a heavenly chorus of praise using the words of Isaiah 6 and Revelation 4. To this ancient and ongoing heavenly praise, we add the words of Psalm 117. The pilgrims at Jerusalem sang them over Jesus as he entered the holy city to be crucified. We remind ourselves that we join not only the heavenly host in our praise, but also countless saints, that great cloud of witnesses of Hebrews 12 who join us beyond the veil of death. We do not merely invoke their memory in our song of praise. In Christ, we participate for a moment in a communion beyond time, mortality, and fear.

The prelude to this timeless, communal song of praise is not only our thanksgiving for God's creation, but our confession that "we turned away" and "our love

failed.”¹ Our Eucharistic prayer celebrates God’s steadfast love in the midst of our sin and death. We do not fear bringing these tragedies of our existence into the light of Christ. Instead, we celebrate his ability to make all things new (Revelation 21:5). The summer before this project began, I experienced death and resurrection during our experience of the Eucharist at *Asbury* in a moment that profoundly shaped the project as well as my perception of our death as a church.

During most Sundays, I welcome the children for a time of story sharing and blessing at the outset of each worship service. I suspend this practice during the summer, because very few children and their families attend worship from Memorial to Labor Day. Perhaps this has a lot to do with the *Asbury UMC*’s practice of suspending groups and activities for children during the summer months. One Sunday in August, as I took my place at the altar rail to serve communion, a three-year-old girl (whom I will call Mary, though that is not her real name) ran down the aisle to share with me her frustration that we had skipped the children’s time. I apologized, and invited her to help me serve communion to the congregation. She did so without hesitation.

I got Mary a chair upon which she stood so that she could be on the same level as the adults who streamed down the aisle to receive the elements of communion, the body and blood of Jesus. I stood just behind her to steady her if necessary and to observe the congregation as they received the bread from her hand. The experience of this little child leading us back to community and communion demonstrates how our research unfolded at *Asbury*, before, during, and after a series of suppers for the *Asbury Child Care* family we hosted the following Lent.

¹ *The United Methodist Hymnal: Book of United Methodist Worship*, 36.

Telling (and Hearing) the Story Behind the Story

Mary is a fourth generation member of *Asbury UMC*. Often, she sits in worship with her great-grandparents, her grandparents, her parents, and her little sister. She enjoys participating in worship, not only during the brief Children's Blessing at the beginning, but also during the songs and prayers, the sermon (especially the stories) and the sharing of the sacrament of communion. While most of the children leave the sanctuary after the Children's Blessing, Mary always returns to sit with her parents and extended family. Since I began serving as pastor at *Asbury* in 2011, several members of the church have complained about Mary's presence in worship. They feel it would be more appropriate for her to participate in Sunday School with most of the other children.

Mary's participation in communion as a child lay server relates powerfully to the larger story of her family's and her involvement in worship at *Asbury*. The first part of this chapter on how the research went relates our exploration, mostly in LAC meetings, of the gap that had grown between the church and the surrounding neighborhoods. Because the LAC included *Asbury Child Care* staff as well as a Child Care Board Chair (a lay member of *Asbury UMC*), we explored a simultaneous gap between the church and Child Care family as a microcosm of the larger gap between congregation and surrounding neighborhoods.

When forming the Local Advisory Committee (LAC), I felt the need to bring Child Care Board Chairs (who were members of *Asbury*) and the Director and Assistant Director of *Asbury Child Care* to a common Table to explore the gap that had grown between the church and child care. I was surprised and apprehensive when our present and a powerful former Child Care Board Chair agreed to serve on the LAC together with

current Child Care staff leaders. Our present Board of lay members served primarily to approve Child Care salary and facilities maintenance requests. When, during my first year at *Asbury*, the Finance Committee requested an increase in *Asbury Child Care's* payment to the church, the Board disapproved the increase.

I knew that this relationship of complete affirmation between the Board and Child Care staff had not always been the case, based on interviews and comments of present and former Board members, and I wondered what the Child Care staff perspective was (both Director and Assistant Director had been involved on staff at *Asbury Child Care* for nearly sixteen years). Our Board of Trustees maintained the classrooms, meeting rooms, and bathrooms the Child Care used with a high degree of responsiveness, particularly during emergencies.

One summer, when the air conditioning in the nursery area failed, the Trustees moved quickly to rearrange a primary meeting room of the church as a temporary nursery, while effecting prompt and expensive repairs. A Trustee and his wife volunteered at *Asbury Child Care* during one summer, making and serving breakfast and lunch, and reading Bible stories to the children, who called him "Pop-Pop." I invited him to be a member of the LAC, and he accepted.

Underneath this apparent goodwill were indications of past trouble (shadow script) in the Church/Child Care relationship. Our Sunday School leaders and volunteers (who shared some classroom spaces with the Child Care) and the Child Care staff did not communicate well with each other. For example, staff and volunteers would often leave messages to complain about the cleanliness of the space rather than communicating directly. Our staff Treasurer (who was related to a former Board Chair) and the Child

Care staff had similar communication issues.

The church congregation seemed to have nothing to do with *Asbury Child Care*. One member whose funeral I conducted in my first year at *Asbury* was notable for his intense involvement in *Asbury Child Care*; he helped them navigate a financial crisis and enjoyed getting to know the children. I wondered why this kind of involvement was the exception rather than the rule, and hoped to explore this history in our LAC conversations.

It did not take long. At our first LAC meeting, on September 10, 2013, one member mentioned that 2007 state requirements for child care teacher certification disqualified many church volunteers from helping out in the classrooms. The Child Care staff spoke of a need for mentors for the children enrolled in child care, one of whom lives in a homeless shelter. We talked about the competing missions at *Asbury*: institutional survival and outreach to children, and how our ability to see these missions as related might help us find new life.

During our second LAC meeting, on October 1, 2013, our Trustee member told the story of his and his wife's involvement with the children at *Asbury Child Care*. "It wasn't for the kids; it was for me." His comment helped us see our involvement in Child Care (which he called "eye-opening") as integral to our continued faithfulness as a congregation and as a good neighbor. Our present Board Chair remembered fondly when most of the staff (including herself) were members of the church. From 1960-70, the church drove a fleet of thirteen buses through surrounding neighborhoods to round up children for Sunday School, Youth Group and Choir rehearsal. The Child Care director, who described her job as a calling, stressed that she would welcome volunteers because

her staff is “close to burnout.”

At our fourth LAC meeting, on November 19, 2014, we reached a point of honesty in our exploration of the gap that may have frightened us from talking about it again. In any event, the *Asbury Child Care* Director and Assistant Director were unable to attend any subsequent evening meetings with the LAC (I met with them separately during the day). The sharing got real when the Child Care Director mentioned that although things have gotten much better in the last two year, “we [the childcare staff] used to hate the church.” She and the assistant director, who are good friends, used to attend *Asbury UMC*. The assistant director attended *Asbury Child Care* as a child and was married at *Asbury*. Several members of the church asked them and their children to “find another church family” after they suggested several changes to help the Sunday School program.

Part of the rift between church and child care stemmed from what the present child care director called a string of bad experiences with previous child care directors, one of whom “left in handcuffs” for neglect, abuse, and financial mismanagement (in the late-1990’s). She also shared that the church’s expectations of the Child Care change as new people are elected to terms on the Child Care Board and Administrative Council. After hiring our present Director, the Staff Parish Relations committee, which had outlined her job description and expectations initially, “fell off the face of the earth,” according to the Director. And in 2007, when the church let its associate pastor go without replacement, “every answer to the problem of [*Asbury Child Care* and Church] meeting budget was to raise tuition arbitrarily, which forced us [*Asbury Child Care*] to lose tons of families.” Before the purge, *Asbury Child Care*’s enrollment was ninety; it is

presently just over half that number, and most of those children's families use the government-subsidized Purchase of Care program.

Though this kind of conversation was uncomfortable for us, I was grateful for the forum that invited us to share many aspects of church and childcare history that created and sustained the gap between the two. I was also grateful for the non-anxious presence we were able to sustain when we began sharing some of the more painful stories of rejection and trouble in the relationship.² Though the Child Care staff directors were unable to attend LAC meetings after our fourth meeting, their willingness to share in such a difficult conversation about the past and the lay leaders' willingness to listen with empathy and without judgment or defensiveness came as a gift of grace for us all.

Graceful (Serendipitous) Accomplishments

When I saw Mary running down the aisle toward me, I knew she was disappointed about my decision to skip the Children's Blessing that morning in worship. What neither of us (nor anyone in the congregation) knew that morning was the extraordinary blessing of Christ's presence that Mary would invite us to experience. Together, we traveled a pilgrim journey through disappointment and exclusion to a miraculous place where the last are indeed first.

Tears streamed down many congregants' faces as they received the body of Christ from Mary. She was very young and they were very old, and both groups of people do not often enjoy a welcome place in our society. Just as Jesus invited us to do when we receive his body and blood in the sacramental miracle of the Eucharist, Mary invited

² Friedman, 27.

everyone to remember Jesus among us, as she stood so solemnly on her chair and held the bread for all to receive.

The second part of this chapter explores the serendipitous accomplishments of our research, most of which were gifts of grace for which we could not be prepared entirely—in spite of our plans and training sessions. We found that instead of defining outcomes, hospitality in the gap involved setting the Table in a spirit of expectation and anticipation. Most of what we accomplished had far less to do with what we intended than it did with what we were open (and attentive) to receive with grace. When children do the leading, you never know where you will end up, but when we guarded a space of possibility in the gap, we discovered God’s Holy Spirit among us in unexpected and miraculous ways.

A month before our first supper, on February 2, 2014, worship attendance blossomed at *Asbury*. Not only were fifty percent more people attending, the service itself was marked by a renewed sense of spiritual energy and enthusiasm. Reflecting on this sustained increased attendance and spiritual energy eight weeks later, as I prepared a summary of project research findings for my cohort, I wrote in my research journal:

Something has happened to the church (in worship) since February 2, 2014. Some of us (in leadership) think the increase in attendance (half at first, and a third sustained over the next 8 weeks) has something to do with a sense of purpose and mission (which is what we’re calling the suppers in the church communications). Our music director has become more energized—he and I are working as a team, and he says he sees more energy in my preaching. [One of my friends who visited from Colorado and attended worship on March 16] noticed a dramatic change in the two years since he visited me and attended worship at *Asbury*.

Our music director texted me the following comment about his sense of renewal on March 9, 2014, the first Sunday in Lent, and the Sunday after our first supper for *Asbury Child Care*:

My wife was at church today for the first time in about a month because she babysits [our three]-year old grandchild. Wow what a difference she said. The service has a lighter unstuffier feel that moves along well. I said is Bo different? And she said yes in a positive way. I have noticed as well. The only way I know how to describe it is probably the same excitement that I have with the service, singing etc. ...Just our observation but my daughter notices as well.³

From the outset of our training events for volunteers and especially for Table Hosts, we emphasized that we wanted to offer the gift of hospitality with no strings attached. If members of the *Asbury Child Care* family asked about *Asbury Church*, worship, or other activities, we would be happy to tell them. But we were not going to push that invitation and potentially feed their fears that the real cost of the meals was a thinly-veiled evangelism/attendance campaign. What none of us could have been prepared for was the experience of renewal in our own congregation. Members of the church repeatedly noted that the experience of hosting the series of suppers had brought *Asbury* together.

Missional Church movement evangelists Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch compare this phenomenon of giving away to receive fresh grace from God to the Israelites who gathered only enough manna for each day in the wilderness, in their book, *ReJesus: A Wild Messiah for a Missional Church*.⁴ They compare the temptation to hoard the manna (which quickly rotted) to the church's "temptation to try to store up and rely on the souvenirs of a past spiritual experience."⁵ At *Asbury*, we used the word "mission" to

³ Text from Gary Hostetler to Bo Gordy-Stith on March 9, 2014.

⁴ Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, *ReJesus: A Wild Messiah for a Missional Church* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 2009), Kindle Electronic Edition: Chapter 3, Location 1434.

⁵ Ibid.

describe what we were doing in hosting the suppers for the *Asbury Child Care* family (See Appendix B). Engaging and expending (offering) ourselves in mission to our neighbors did not spread our resources thin, as we had initially feared; it nourished us.

Of the many stories I could tell here to describe this experience of serendipitous abundance as we expended ourselves in mission, perhaps the most telling is the story of how our first supper turned out. Instead of Wednesday, we invited the *Asbury Child Care* family to join us for Mardi Gras, the Tuesday before Lent began, and our Boy Scout Troop 27 prepared and served the pancake supper. They typically charged for the meal, which they used as an annual fundraiser. *Asbury Church* offered to pay the Troop what they typically raised (\$200) so that we could invite the childcare family to join us for free.

The day before the supper, a snowstorm necessitated the cancellation of *Asbury Child Care*. Because we weren't able to pass out flyers for the supper, few families knew about it. We had posted flyers about the series of suppers earlier (see Appendix C), but felt that handing out a flyer the day before each supper would keep the invitation fresh in everyone's mind (see Appendix D). Because the snowstorm had frustrated our plans, the Child Care director told me on Tuesday, the morning of the first supper, that only one childcare family had expressed interest in coming, and their child was sick that day. What if we threw a party and no one came?

When I preached on Romans 15:7-13 the following Sunday ("Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God."), I answered the question by describing what happened the previous Tuesday: We would still have a party. I showed up at 4:30 p.m. before the 5:00 p.m. start. Many of our sixty volunteers,

who had been there since 4:00 p.m., were milling around, frustrated and without direction. I gathered everyone and told them that if no one from the *Day Care* arrived, we could use the evening to practice hospitality on ourselves. Our Child Care Board director walked up and down the childcare hallway as parents picked up their children and invited them to join us for supper. Three families did.

One of our Table Hosts, who shared a meal with one of the childcare families, commented in her follow-up notes that “everyone was in a ‘tissy’ as to what to do – we needed Pastor Bo to be at the dinners sooner—to make the final decisions.” The following night, just before our Ash Wednesday worship service, she stopped by my office to apologize for being so hard on me in her comments. I had noticed in my three years as *Asbury’s* pastor that the members sometimes treated each other with harshness that seemed to stem from anxiety. In her comments, this Table Host also said, “We need more chiefs—or just one who knows what to do when our leader isn’t here.”

By the end of the supper series, everyone had become a chief—a vital member of the hospitality experience. We had the greatest participation throughout the supper series from *Asbury’s* oldest and newest members, the people typically overlooked in our congregation. At the suppers, they became partners in ministry in an experience that blurred the lines between host and guest. In *Radical Hospitality*, author Lonni Collins Pratt and Benedictine prior Daniel Homan write, “[h]ospitality, rather than being something you achieve, is something you enter. It is an adventure that takes you where you never dreamed of going. It is not something you do, as much as it is someone you

become.”⁶

As we met together for supper, we became a more hospitable people toward each other, even before our guests arrived. Before the series of suppers began, we felt an excitement kindled by the challenge of expending ourselves for love in the name of Jesus. After each supper ended, and we cleared the food and the tables and chairs, we remained standing together in the Hall talking and laughing. No one wanted to leave (one night, a member cycled the lights on and off repeatedly to signal us all that it was time to go home, half an hour after the supper had been scheduled to end).

Another Table Host (and LAC member) commented that he was nervous about what to expect and not wanting to “do it wrong.” Realizing that this endeavor required “many more [members] than usual to participate,” this member observed “[a]ll members must work together as a team or family to successfully host the [childcare] families and no one role is more important than any other towards the ‘success’ of the program.” Pratt and Homan call this realization a “kind of gentle hospitality with the self that most of us fail to practice. ...By learning to value the otherliness of the actual stranger, we honor the mystery within us, too.”⁷

Eventually, over fifty members of the childcare family would attend most of the suppers. But even at the start, we realized that one of our biggest successes came from learning how to welcome ourselves to the Table of God’s love and acceptance. Even and especially when things did not go as we had expected, we discovered a resilience and

⁶ Lonni Collins Pratt and Daniel Homan, *Radical Hospitality: Benedict's Way of Love*, New expanded ed. (Brewster, Mass.: Paraclete Press, 2011), Kindle Electronic Edition: Chapter 3, Location 944-945.

⁷ Ibid., Kindle Electronic Edition: Chapter 3, Location 1057.

creativity that many felt came from God's Spirit among us. That first night, one of the mothers from the childcare family said that for some reason the "pancake meal seemed to taste a lot better this evening."

Her Table Host felt that Christ was leading (guiding?) their conversation. The Host commented that the mother's and other childcare family members' generous responses "provide us an opportunity to serve and [help] us fill our need to be useful." In LAC meetings, we noted often the phenomenon of boundary blurring that occurred between host and guest in the experience of hospitality. This showed up repeatedly in our research.

Roadblocks On (But Not In) the Way

Of course, when things do not go as expected, families and congregations can experience the resulting imbalance as pain, and take steps to rebalance the system and alleviate the pain. In *Generation to Generation*, Edwin Friedman's name for this rebalancing aspect of all emotional systems is homeostasis. Friedman defines homeostasis as "the tendency of any set of relationships to strive perpetually, in self-corrective ways, to preserve the organizing principles of its existence."⁸ When Mary stood on a chair to serve communion, even at my invitation, several members of the *Asbury* congregation were disturbed by this participation in worship that violated their sense of her place as a child.

One of these persons ultimately communicated their dis-ease over Mary's participation in worship as a communion server directly to me. The person bringing the

⁸ Friedman, 23.

complaint to my attention also complained that she felt that I singled out Mary for special treatment (such as inviting her to serve communion, or allowing her often to share a story during the children's blessing), while ignoring or slighting the other children. Perhaps the adult who complained about Mary's participation in worship also felt slighted.

The third part of this chapter explores some of the roadblocks we experienced in the course of our research. As we engaged in this project, we based our series of Lenten sermons and Bible studies on *Widening the Welcome of Your Church*, a book on hospitality whose name implies a kind of stretching. Fred Bernhard and Steve Clapp, who co-wrote the book, frankly acknowledge the risk and fear involved in welcoming a stranger, for the stranger has "the potential for relationship as an enemy or as a friend."⁹ After cataloguing a series of societal fears of strangers, the authors, who present hospitality as a requirement for the life of the church, point out "the most distinct and frightening danger of all is that practicing hospitality may change our lives."¹⁰

As we practiced hospitality at *Asbury*, sometimes we experienced change in our own lives as a threat. Especially in our Bible study conversations, some of our deepest fears and prejudices toward people groups we perceived to be a threat surfaced in ugly and powerful ways. One of my advisors, the Rev. Dr. Kathy Stoner-Lasala, commented during a phone conversation with me near the end of the project, "if you scratch the surface of hospitality, you encounter the isms of society an inch below the surface." In addition to our prejudices and fears of strangers, we also disturbed deep-seated congregational fears of death.

⁹ Bernhard and Clapp, 22.

¹⁰ Ibid., 23.

During our first youth group Bible study on hospitality, which involved both youth and their parents, we met in a room typically used by an Alcoholics Anonymous group. When I commented that the AA group had been hospitable to us in sharing their room, the members of the group not only expressed their anger about an outside group taking precedence over an inside group, but also expressed their fear of these particular outsiders, when they had to walk past them in the parking lot or use the restroom in the hallway adjacent to the room in which the AA group met. Several members of the AA group are members of our church.

In a subsequent Bible study with the youth, we discussed ways in which we could make our church more hospitable and welcoming to people who were not like a typical *Asbury* member racially, economically, or ethnically. The youth began making jokes based on distorted, degrading racial stereotypes, which went on for twenty minutes, in spite of my repeated invitations to think beyond the racial stereotypes that trapped us. None of the youth members were involved in the suppers. Though their frank admission of being trapped in the fear that stems from racism dismayed me, I recognized the value in being able to talk honestly about this fear.

What we realized in this process of research and (often surprising) discovery, some of which unsettled us, was God's graceful presence—especially in these places of roadblock. My advisors gently reminded my cohort and me that “results are results” regardless of whether they matched our predictions or intentions. Paul experiences a roadblock to Asia that eventually leads him to Macedonia—which becomes an indispensable part of his second missionary journey and his apostolic identity and message (Acts 16). Ultimately, these roadblocks, and the hospitable research

environment we created in which they surfaced, enabled us to welcome the stranger in ourselves to which we had initially refused to pay attention.

In her book, *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice*, Mary Clark Moschella describes ethnography as “a form of social research” which leads the researcher “toward becoming a stranger, even in a familiar setting.”¹¹ Attentive ethnographic research can lead to new insights about a community. In addition, as Bernhard and Clapp discuss, the embrace of the stranger in me/us can engender personal transformation. In a chapter on Israel’s liberating storytelling, Kevin M. Bradt, a Jesuit scholar and preacher, notes that Israel’s prophetic stories of liberation “proclaim a strange new God... fiercely incalculable... [who] is dangerous because so free, so uncontrollable, so uncompromised.”¹²

Hospitality, literally “stranger-love,” leads us to a love not only for the Other, but for the strangeness in ourselves, our family/tribe/community, and our God. Throughout our research pilgrimage at *Asbury*, we encountered this strangeness, and learned to be at home with it, in exploring the context, or back story, celebrating our (often surprising) accomplishments, and learning to integrate the road blocks as not merely inevitable, but as integrated parts of the journey.

Near the end of the supper series, during Holy Week, I met with our Administrative Council to discuss plans for Easter Sunday worship. Another worship leader and I had earlier tentatively decided to use an empty casket as a symbol of

¹¹ Moschella, 25, 36.

¹² Kevin M. Bradt, *Story as a Way of Knowing* (Kansas City, MO: Sheed & Ward, 1997), 164.

resurrection in place of a model of an empty tomb, which the worship leader had been unable to locate. I wanted to check with other leaders about this idea, which I had used for Easter worship at a previous congregation I served. When I asked the question during the meeting, a woman who leads our congregational caring ministry rushed from the room in tears, after telling us that the coffin would remind her of her husband's death, and if I used it in worship, she would not attend.

Other leaders around the Table sat in stunned silence, which one of them broke to berate me for asking the question. One said that Easter did not need anything special to highlight the message of resurrection. I felt stunned and abandoned—and spent the following day in prayer and discernment about whether I had the gifts necessary to lead and read the congregation at all. In stumbling on this land mine of fear of death, I saw the congregation as a stranger, and realized my strangeness as their pastor.

Two days after the meeting, we prepared to host one of our final suppers for the *Asbury Child Care* family. I met the woman who had left the meeting in tears in the hallway, and we both apologized to each other. Each of us expressed our fear that we had angered the other. The woman told me that she never knew when her grief would overtake her so strongly. And I told her that I would never have knowingly led her to a place of such fear. We briefly embraced each other. Then, noticing the sheaf of invitations to Easter Sunday in my hand, she asked if she could take them and help me distribute them during the supper. Through forgiveness, as we made our way to host a common Table, we were no longer strangers to each other. Death was swallowed up in victory.

Our story of how the research went at *Asbury* became itself a transforming

experience of hospitality. In *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, John Swinton and Harriet Mowat discuss how “showing hospitality towards the research method... [creates] a context wherein the voice of qualitative research can be heard, respected, and taken seriously....”¹³ Swinton and Mowat connect this notion of hospitality towards the research method (and results) to the experience of conversion. “The practical theologian is converted by being taught something new.”¹⁴ This experience of hospitality and conversion throughout the research process taught us something new about ourselves, our neighbors, and our God. It also taught us to make ourselves at home in the gaps that separate us from each other and from the stories we are afraid of telling.

¹³ Swinton and Mowat, 91.

¹⁴ Ibid., 93.

CHAPTER 5

BLESSED IS THE ONE WHO COMES: FINDING A HOME IN THE GAP

When we conceived this project, we sought to better understand the gap between the *Asbury* congregation and our surrounding neighborhoods. We saw many parallels between this congregation-neighborhood gap and the gap between the *Asbury* congregation and the *Asbury Child Care* family. We hypothesized that if we could foster connections between the Church and Child Care family, we would learn strategies for bridging the gap between the congregation and our surrounding neighborhoods.

Many of us assumed that bridging the gap involved a one-way bridge from the neighborhood (or Child Care family) to the church/congregation. We originally wanted to find the answer to the question, “How do we attract new people to our church?” But the more we thought about hospitality, and the foundation of unconditional love on which hospitality is based, the more we realized that the bridge was not merely a two-way street (and certainly not a one-way street to our place), but a unique setting for new life in Christ to abound—in our lives and in the lives of our neighbors.

In *Dirty Word: The Vulgar, Offensive Language of the Kingdom of God*, United Methodist pastor/pioneer Jim Walker describes naming a new church start in Pittsburgh: “The Hot Metal Bridge Faith Community.” They named the congregation after an old bridge that had originally connected two parts of a steel mill and that had been renovated to become “an important connector in the city” and prayed that God would “make [them]

into a new kind of bridge.”¹ As we joined the *Asbury Child Care* family around supper tables in the Hall, we discovered a new way of perceiving the gap. Where we had once imagined the gap as a gulf between us, in communion, we experienced the gap as a gracious common ground in which Christ nourished and converted all of us.

Our Main Research Finding: **The Gaps between us invite us to a graceful space (sanctuary) for refreshment (in the wilderness), reconciliation (building relationships), and for recreation (non-anxious play).** This discovery challenged many of our assumptions about the Gap as an obstacle to be overcome, as well as our sense of the given-ness of our isolation from our surrounding neighborhoods. The Hall we built on our Fiftieth Anniversary became for us and for the Child Care family a commons, a sanctuary where we all could feel safe and at home. As we enjoyed food and conversation, and the children played, God refreshed us all by building us into a new kind of community.

In his book, *Missional: Joining God in the Neighborhood*, Alan Roxburgh, a leader in the missional church movement, unpacks Jesus’ sending of the seventy in Luke 10 as an invitation to re-envision the identity and mission of the church. Calling the churches to “risk... awakening to their neighborhoods,” Roxburgh reads Luke 10 as locating the church in public space, in Jesus’ time as well as in our own time: “The church will rediscover its life at the [stranger’s/neighbor’s] table, where bread is broken and stories are told.”² Our experience of God’s presence at the stranger’s Table (prepared

¹ Jim Parker Walker, *Dirty Word: The Vulgar, Offensive Language of the Kingdom of God* (Nashville, TN: Discipleship Resources, 2008), 48.

² Alan J. Roxburgh, *Missional: Joining God in the Neighborhood*, Allelon Missional Series (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 2011), 148, 165.

for us in the presence of those we had assumed to be our enemies—see Psalm 23) resonates with Roxburgh’s reading.

In this paper, I have so far described the ministry context at *Asbury UMC* and theological motivation for posing our research question: “What if we were Host instead of Landlord?” The balance of this paper narrates how my presence influenced our results (reflexivity), how our relationships have changed at *Asbury UMC*, and evaluates this finding and process using Laurie Green’s Doing Theology Spiral. This chapter, the heart of this paper, describes our main research finding (Gap as Sacred Space) and the abductive, narrative path that led us to it. Rather than reading or interpreting data, this research project involved experiencing and gathering stories that narrated our reflexive re-imagination of our relationships with each other and with our neighbors.

Telling the story of our journey involves an exploration of abductive reasoning. In the thirteenth chapter of his first letter to the church gathered at Corinth, Paul writes poetically (and eschatologically) about knowing “fully, even as I have been fully known” (1 Corinthians 13:12). As the root implies, abductive reasoning recognizes knowledge and understanding subjectively, rather than objectively—this knowledge captures (abducts) the knower rather than the other way around. Moschella’s description is worth quoting at length:

Most pastoral ethnography involves a combination of inductive and deductive reasoning, which is sometimes called abductive reasoning. Participant observation tends to lend itself to this kind of back and forth: your experience of the social setting *works on you* while you are working to understand it [emphasis mine].³

Abductive reasoning follows intuitive, experimental (and risky) leaps, rather than

³ Moschella, 171.

self-evident deductions, which are always limited by assumed propositions. Abductive reasoning considers a wider range of data than that which buttresses inductive conclusions. Its subjunctive, provisional hypotheses cannot ultimately be proven, but they can lead to fresh insights based on this wider, more diverse field of observation and experience (than that which falls within the narrow gaze of deductive or inductive reasoning).

Leonard Sweet, in his book on homiletics, *Giving Blood*, notes that “in abduction, the seeker of meaning forms a creative but reasonable hypothesis that is later proven in experience and action....”⁴ This “proof” emerges in the pudding of life, and looks more like a scrapbook collection than a paper in a scientific journal. To engage (or to be engaged) in abductive reasoning is to enter into a spiral rather than a closed loop of observation-reflection. Like Green’s Doing Theology Spiral, which we used to evaluate this project, or like the experience of the magi, who “went back to their own country by another route” (Matthew 2:12, CEV), a spiral opens us up to new and transformative learning.

In his explication of homiletical strategies of logic, Sweet tells the story of metaphysical philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce. In Sweet’s telling, Peirce uses the concept of abductive reasoning to bridge the growing divide (in the late nineteenth century) between the scientific method and faith understanding:

The highest level of thought, according to Peirce, is the abductive process: only the “hypothesizing” of the abductive process “most closely imitates the divine Mind, for that Mind is, at its most playful and musing, feeling,

⁴ Leonard I. Sweet, *Giving Blood: A Fresh Paradigm for Preaching* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2014), Kindle Electronic Edition: Chapter 5, Location 1311-1313.

sporting here and there in pure arbitrariness.” Our abductive moments of risk and exploration “put us into direct, imitative contact with this abducting Divine Mind.”⁵

For the purposes of our project at *Asbury*, we engaged in this abductive process by recognizing from the outset that we would be observing ourselves as much or more than we would be observing the members of the Child Care family. The Chair of Drew University’s Institutional Review Board (IRB), after reviewing my Human Participants Research Determination Form, determined that this project was not a study of the children. What we really set out to observe was the quality of interaction between members of the congregation and the congregation and Child Care family throughout the course of the Lenten Supper series.

After reviewing my project Prospectus, my advisors encouraged me to use observation and story collection rather than surveys and reports to measure the results of the project. They pushed me and the members of my LAC to find narrative ways of conceiving and participating in this project. In my early drafts of the Prospectus, I called the project a “new ministry intervention,” a phrase I gleaned from Savage and Presnell.⁶ In conversation with my project advisors (and as I mentioned previously) I settled on the notion of the supper series as a “new ministry *connection*.” This shift honors human relationship as mystery that always invites more (but never full) understanding, rather than as a phenomenon which might be subject to manipulation.

In their discussion on abductive reasoning, Savage and Presnell reference the work of Leonard Sweet, Brian McLaren, and Jerry Haselmayer in their book, “*A*” is for

⁵ Ibid., Kindle Electronic Edition: Chapter 5, Location 1402-1405.

⁶ Savage and Presnell, 124.

Abduction: The Language of the Emerging Church. Savage and Presnell note that these authors describe abduction as “a method of theological communication in which the discourse of the communicator ‘seizes’ the *imagination* of the people and transports them from their current thought and imagined world to another, with transformative results” [emphasis original].⁷ In our experience of this project, abductive logic seized the imagination of us all.

I have already discussed the concept of reflexivity above (see Chapter 2, pages 23-24). The all-encompassing nature of abductive logic leads me to describe the way we read the data as *abductive reflexivity*. We did not read the data; the data read (or re-interpreted) us. For example, we assigned a different member of the church (or a couple) to be responsible for each of the suppers. To meet the challenge of feeding over 100 people, each of our supper leaders recruited a team to help. In some cases, these teams “formed themselves” without leader direction.

After our Boy Scout Troop 27 sponsored the first meal, I was responsible for the second one. The Child Care staff helped me brainstorm a menu they knew the children would like, and suggested I purchase the food at BJ’s wholesale, where they purchased food for the Child Care lunches and snacks. My daughter took time off from college to help me purchase the food, and we had fun making several large trays of Jell-O together the night before the supper. A member of our LAC arranged for a local Chick-fil-A franchise to donate several trays of chicken nuggets, and the manager insisted on delivering the trays himself, to ensure that they would be warm. My wife, a pastor who serves as District Superintendent in a city an hour away, came to the supper to help me

⁷ Ibid., 57.

tell stories and play with the children.

When I arrived early to prepare the supper, our Saturday morning men's group had already set up the tables and chairs, and several members of *Asbury's* United Methodist Women arrived to take care of all of the final preparations and serving set-up. Many people brought desserts, and several members had previously donated napkins, plastic utensils, plates, and cups. The LAC member who arranged for the chicken donation also arranged for Macaroni Grill, another local restaurant, to donate paper table cloths for all of the suppers, so that we could decorate the tables with crayon drawings (like that restaurant encouraged its patrons to do). And another member of the church recruited a dozen other members to prepare table decorations and favors that matched the theme of the evening: the loaves and fishes Jesus used to feed a multitude.

I was not in charge of the supper; we all were. One of our LAC members noted after the second supper was over: "We all have a focus, something to do that gives us hope and renewed energy." I had thought that, like the Widow of Zarephath, if we were faithful to follow God by extending ourselves in hospitality as hosts, God would richly provide, but I had no idea of just how richly God would provide from everyone involved in the project. After only a few child care families attended the first supper, we realized what a gift their acceptance of our invitation was in subsequent weeks. Our Minister of Visitation and I stood together at one point during the supper and enjoyed the din of conversation in the Hall—everyone was talking and laughing together. During many previous church suppers, I had noticed that church members tended to eat and leave. The interaction we observed was a part of God's abundance for which no one needed to be singularly responsible.

That was true, least of all, for me, as pastor and project provocateur. I was surprised at my level of anxiety as I shopped and tried to think of everything we would need for the supper to go smoothly and successfully. So many things were beyond my control. Yet help arrived. Everyone involved found something to do, and I relaxed into God's invitation for me. For each subsequent supper, we learned to depend on God's abundance as we extended ourselves into mission. Other people responsible for the meals invited their extended family or their Bible study group to join them. Other area businesses were happy to contribute pizza, pasta, and bread for the suppers. All we had to do was ask.

Again, our research question was deceptively simple: "What would happen to our relationship with the *Asbury Child Care* family if we were host instead of landlord?" Of course, we hoped we would experience an influx of parents and their children to our church from the child care. As it turned out, no one from the *Asbury Child Care* attended worship at *Asbury* as a result of the suppers. What we did not expect was what would happen to us. The previous spring, when we invited the congregation to come to a series of Lenten suppers, only thirty to thirty-five of us accepted the invitation. Now, when we invited people to come and help host, serve, or set up and clean, more than double the number of members of *Asbury* were involved.

And the change affected more than just those of us involved in hosting the suppers. Throughout the spring of 2014, during the course of the suppers, worship attendance increased substantially (50% at first and then a sustained 35% increase) at *Asbury*. Worship attendance dropped back to normal when the suppers were over, and the summer began. Our Minister of Music, who was not involved in the suppers, noticed

change in worship at *Asbury* that went beyond numbers. In a text to me on March 9, he wrote about the difference his wife had noticed, after a break in her attendance of over a month. A week later, he reported that a choir member, whose child was enrolled at *Asbury Child Care*, and who had started attending worship again in the spring of 2014 after a six-month hiatus, told him that she noticed worship at *Asbury* was marked by “more energy.”⁸

Alan Roxburgh writes that what we experienced at *Asbury* through reflexive abduction is part of God’s calling to the Church to “be converted all over again.”⁹ He describes what I am calling a Pentecostal Pilgrim Church in exile from church facilities going into the surrounding neighborhoods. “Even while there’s still a lot of focus on trying to make our churches work again (making them ‘healthy’ or turning them ‘inside out’), is the Spirit inviting us to reenter the neighborhoods to discover what God is already doing there?”¹⁰ At one LAC meeting, we lamented that people in the Child Care family were not willing to make the long walk down the hallway that connected the child care classrooms and the church sanctuary. Somewhere during this project, we realized that God was calling us to make that walk.

Frost and Hirsch call this process of being converted all over again “a continual re-evangelization of believers.”¹¹ Like other missional and emergent church thinkers, Frost and Hirsch deplore the crass reduction of church growth to quantifiable measures of

⁸ Text from Gary Hostetler to Bo Gordy-Stith on March 16, 2014.

⁹ Roxburgh, 141.

¹⁰ Ibid., 135-136.

¹¹ Frost and Hirsch, Kindle Electronic Edition: Chapter 7, Location 3233-3234.

“butts, bucks, and bricks.”¹²

So much of the Christian church focuses on getting people into the pews on a Sunday morning as its highest goal. It has created its own legalism that defines holiness in terms of attendance instead of as communion with God in every area of their week and life.¹³

In stark contrast to this reductionist understanding of church mission as growth in numbers, we experienced God’s presence in a new way in the space between our congregation and our neighbors. This space became holy ground on which we experienced what Frost and Hirsch call re-evangelization. We had thought the challenge involved bridging this gap, and inducing our neighbors in the child care family to cross over it. As the supper series progressed, the gap invited us all to a graceful space for refreshment, building relationships, and for play.

For all of us, the refreshment we experienced in this gap went well beyond food. From the start, we noticed that the adults remained at the tables talking and visiting long after finishing supper, while the children played all over the Hall. One member commented that, because the children were used to playing in the Hall during inclement weather, the space served for child care as much as for church events. Because the children felt comfortable and at home, their parents relaxed at the tables after finishing supper and enjoyed conversation uninhibited by anxieties about what their children were

¹² This formulation, not original to me, is a staple among pastors who suffocate in this distorted matrix of understanding Church. I found it in a book written by Jeremy Myers, who softens the phrase in his title: *Church is More Than Bodies, Bucks, and Bricks*. Whenever someone asks me about the church I serve, they always want to know how many people attend worship, and not how many missions in which the congregation is involved. This is true whether the person who asks is a stranger or a pastor to whom I am accountable in my judicatory.

¹³ Frost and Hirsch, Kindle Electronic Edition: Chapter 7, Location 3272-3275.

doing. After the third supper, on March 19, one of our LAC members observed: “The kids were having a blast, and the parents seemed to be at ease with it, and not overly concerned when their child was out of sight.”

This sense of refreshing, invigorating peace among child care parents was contagious. Another LAC member, who served as Table Host, noted (after the third supper) several ways in which the child care families were hosting members of *Asbury*. These involved greeting the Table Host from *Asbury* with excitement and warmth, modeling a sense of self-acceptance, sharing their enthusiastic participation in table conversation and appreciation for the meal and giving the members of *Asbury* an opportunity to serve together (“less bickering, more serving”). Another Table Host told the story of being escorted to the table by a member of the child care family who said, “I’m so happy that we are sitting at your table.”

Our Bishop, Peggy Johnson, attended the fifth supper on April 2. My advisors and some cohort members wondered if our Bishop’s presence at the supper would raise my anxiety or the anxiety of church members because of the impression that she might be grading our performance. In fact, our members were happy to welcome our Bishop to join us and the members of our child care family at one of the tables for supper and conversation. After participating in the experience, Bishop Johnson commented that *Asbury* was modeling a new way of telling the Good News of Jesus to children in our neighborhood. Instead of waiting for them to come to our church, we were carrying the Good News to them.

For the final meal, during Holy Week, the child care staff insisted on hiring a person to wear an Easter bunny costume and take pictures with the children. We were

delighted that they wanted to collaborate with us, and the bunny attracted our largest response of all the suppers. Our (take-home) table centerpieces featured a garden with an empty tomb, and we told the children the story of Jesus being lost and found in Jerusalem as a child (from Luke 2:41-52). This was also the only supper we invited everyone to join us for worship—on the following Easter Sunday. Though no one in the child care family accepted that invitation, they had repeatedly accepted our invitation to supper, refreshing us with an experience of the living, resurrected Jesus each week.

The heart of this refreshment involved the relationships the suppers encouraged us to build with each other. In preparing for the Site Visit evaluation, the LAC members commented that our experience and understanding of building relationships—with God, other members of the church, and the child care family—was perhaps the most lasting effect of the supper series. There was a sense that this work and experience would always be ongoing, like John Wesley’s historic question, “Are you going on to perfection?” Though we would never arrive at some mythical place, the experience of growth in understanding strangers helped us build not only our relationships with others, but also a greater sense of ourselves.

LAC members noticed that in the beginning, *Asbury* members “did not want to fail.” In the course of building relationships around the table, we “learned how to take a risk” with and for each other. One Table Host did not feel comfortable in that role at first, as a natural introvert, but accepted being saddled with a family. At first, only the father attended with his daughters, but in the course of the suppers, his wife joined them. When the Table Host noticed that the couple were not expecting him to carry the conversation, but were content to enjoy each other’s company while their children played, he began to

relax into his role. He also noticed “the church grew together in an atmosphere of helping others while working together; no one person or group seemed to feel that they had to do everything.”

My counterpart who assisted me in providing entertainment for the children came up with the idea of a story hunt as we prepared for the fifth supper. Instead of telling the children a story, she hid a series of props throughout the Hall, each of which collectively helped to tell a Bible story that particularly celebrated God’s love for children. The two of us worked throughout the course of the supper series in collaboration with the children, rather than in competition with them. As our relationship grew, we entrusted them with discovering and telling the story of God’s love for us all in their own way.

One family, new to the church, participated in the suppers with their pre-school aged children. The husband brought his guitar to play music for the children one evening. One of my teenaged sons who does not attend church with me normally, also brought his guitar that evening, and the two of them (the man and my son) played together in the center of the Hall. My son wrote me a note thanking me for inviting him: “It’s a lot of fun seeing you at work in this great community you’ve helped grow!”

This refreshment and relationship building revolved around play throughout the series of suppers. When my wife joined us for the first supper, she gathered the children on a carpet we laid out in the center of the Hall and played a raucous game of “Duck-Duck-Goose”. By the end of the series, the children enjoyed circling the Hall while following me (on roller skates) as we danced and sang “The Chicken Dance.” Early in the planning process, we had considered gathering the children in a separate room after supper for age-appropriate activities, so they would not bother the adults after supper.

Instead, the children's playfulness in our midst became a crucial element in God's invitation to us all to enjoy ourselves in the sanctuary of this gap—this holy space.

Some of the members complained about the playfulness—the games and the noise. After the second supper, one Table Host wrote, “I don't know what book of the Bible Jesus roller skated in or what book of the Bible Jesus played duck duck goose. I do not think we showed our faith in Christ in any way.” Another Table Host from the same evening experienced supper on a playground from a different perspective. She wrote, “I am not around small children any more, so this was exciting for me.” The same host also noted that the family at her table was “happy and full of life” in the midst of the mother's struggles to raise four children while holding down two jobs. While reflecting on the uninhibited play of the children, this host wrote: “Some people expect children not to run around after dinner, etc. I feel that [this church hall] is all of those children's home (all day long) and they should feel comfortable there.”

The Table Host who shared concerns about the skating and children's games responded positively to my appreciation of her participation and her candor. I explained my hope that our hospitality would enable us all to “discover Jesus Christ among us in a miraculous way.” Then I playfully invited her to “keep looking in the Bible with me for that elusive, roller-skating disciple! (Maybe [Jesus] was too fast for them to write down.)” She responded immediately. “I think I take things too seriously sometimes” she wrote. “...Thank you for brightening my day with a laugh about the skating. Once again, thank you for listening.” Two weeks later, the children and I gathered around her to tell her that we didn't think the Bible had any stories about Jesus roller skating, but that if Jesus had found a pair of roller skates, he would probably have put them on and skated.

She laughed out loud.

Not all of the data we collected and stories we experienced fit abductively into this summary of refreshment, relationship, and playfulness in the gap. Our main volunteers were *Asbury*'s newest and oldest members, but, because of work and school schedules or a lack of interest, a third of our members were unable to participate in the supper experiences. The child care families who participated in the suppers were primarily related to the children who graduated from child care in May. Others may have felt their children were too young. Some had schedule conflicts, and at least one parent felt insulted because our suppers were free. The suppers required a lot of work by many members of *Asbury*, and by the seventh meal, our members were ready for a break. Perhaps the most significant puzzling data involved the very low attendance of *Asbury* members at the child care graduation, a month after the supper series had ended.

Yet something special happened around those tables. Weeks after the suppers had ended, when I met with the part-time staff member we had hired to help with the storytelling, she told me a powerful story. During the spring, she had been participating in a music composition class with a doctoral candidate. Every Wednesday, just before the supper, she had to endure a withering critique of what her instructor described as her "cruddy music." She often drove to the suppers disheartened and dispirited. Then she would put on the robe that was part of our costume as storytellers—a robe that symbolized a different mindset altogether: "I'm here for the kids." We always had a plan, but on that playground picnic area that was *Asbury*'s Hall, the "plan gave [her] the security to go with the flow or with the plan." Unlike the composition class, the suppers were not about being judged or graded. She said they were "a real connection to the community that I

enjoyed and needed.”

As pastor of *Asbury*, I enjoyed and needed that connection as well.

CHAPTER 6

LAMB OF GOD: HOW MY PRESENCE INFLUENCED OUR RESULTS

Stories of God's abundance in the midst of human need, like the Widow of Zarephath, blur the lines of what Heuertz and Pohl call "a need/solution mentality" among followers of Christ.¹ When Elijah meets the unnamed woman, they are both at the end of their resources. In the course of the story, they exchange roles of host/provider and guest/recipient. The pilgrimage of their life together becomes, as the cliché puts it, more than the sum of the parts. This is no zero-sum game, where the gift the host gives to a stranger necessarily deprives the host of finite resources.

Living out this story becomes extraordinarily good news for a Christian church struggling to rediscover our identity and mission in a spiritual-but-not-religious wilderness landscape. We come to believe that we have nothing to give, as our attendance numbers and money decline. That scarcity impacts our self-understanding. We can no longer invite a stranger if we ourselves have become lost strangers. Or so we think, from a mindset of (formerly) wealthy homesteaders.

Things change dramatically when we embrace our poverty, and relearn (repent/return) to trust ourselves to grace that falls like rain from God, on the righteous and the unrighteous alike. Or like manna from heaven in the wilderness of our sojourning—which we gather enough for the day, in faith that God will provide what we

¹ Heuertz and Pohl, 33.

need. Heuertz and Pohl speak of this conversion and learning role reversal between giver and receiver when the “givers” encounter the poor as friends rather than as problems for them to solve. “Those with very little often throw the best parties—sparing no expense.”²

I served as a missionary at *Hinton Rural Life Center* in the Appalachian mountain region of North Carolina the summer I was ordained. Each week I led a group of youth volunteers in renovating the trailer of a mountain family in need. Over the summer, the grandmother who headed that multi-generational household came to know me as a friend. She found out I liked coffee in the morning, and greeted me with a steaming cup each new day of work.

When I returned from my ordination ceremony to resume my missionary responsibilities, the grandmother and her family invited me to a feast in celebration of that milestone in my journey. The table groaned under the weight of the food, which included roast beef and cake, which were beyond the normal means of my hosts. More than the food, they filled me with their love. No one else thought to celebrate my ordination journey that summer, and I had no idea how desperately I needed their love until I took my place in the seat of honor.

Heuertz and Pohl resonate with a growing number of Christian thinkers who are rethinking the meaning of evangelism, hospitality, and mission in this time of reformation. Instead of offering salvation to the lost (as something to possess and give away), followers of Christ encounter Christ on the pilgrim way, in partnership with strangers who become friends. “...[T]ogether with friends, we find a way forward,

² Ibid., 132.

stumbling into the open arms of a loving God.”³ Far from giving away something we own, our hospitable encounter on the Way enables us to find life as we lose it, as Jesus often invited us to do.

This chapter describes the life I found as pastor and lead researcher in this project, as participant/observer. In chapter two, I introduced the concept of reflexivity (see page 21), which Moschella defines as “[the researcher’s] role in the research relationship and its influence on the study.”⁴ In their discussion of reflexivity, Savage and Presnell stress the importance of “attaining a grasp of the ways in which *the researcher’s own story* intersects with the narrative of concern or opportunity [emphasis original].”⁵ In their discussion of reflexivity in research, Swinton and Mowat note that through self-reflection, researchers “turn their attention to their own process of constructing a world.”⁶

Reflexivity engenders a crucial awareness of the researcher’s worldview *as a construction* (as well as an implied respect for the constructions—the stories—of others). I do not see the world as it is, but as I interpret it to be. And I see others in this way as well. According to Savage and Presnell, discerning the ways in which reflexivity colors the research encounter involves self-differentiation, or claiming responsibility for storying (naming) myself and “[assuming] a *kenotic position* as a handler of people’s stories [emphasis original].”⁷

³ Ibid., 138.

⁴ Moschella, 84.

⁵ Savage and Presnell, 74.

⁶ Swinton and Mowat, 215.

⁷ Savage and Presnell, 76.

The Greek word for self-emptying that creates gracious, hospitable space is *κενόω* (*kinao*—see, for instance, Philippians 2:7). A kenotic position, in the sense that Savage and Presnell use it, involves a non-judgmental respect for another person’s story. But recognizing my own story as a construction (and not some mythical, objective truth) does not mean I cannot also respect my own story. In her discussion of reflexivity, Moschella quotes Columbia Theological Seminary Professor of Pastoral Theology, Care and Counseling Pamela Cooper-White’s description of the power of counter-transference in a counseling relationship. ““The more we are able to tune in to our own inner perceptions... the more sensitively we will also be able to tune into the nuances of the helpee’s own feelings....””⁸

Frankly acknowledging reflexivity in research as a gift rather than an impediment to understanding allowed the LAC members and me to value relationships over analysis in our research. We understood the project to be a crucial step on a journey of self-understanding as well as empathy and sensitivity toward our neighbors in the childcare family. We had asked the question, “What would happen if we exchanged the role of landlord for the role of host?” We wondered what (if anything) would happen to us. We were also interested in finding out more about our neighbors, and understanding the gap between us better. But we were under no illusions that our series of suppers would solve a problem in the church.

That meant we were free to enjoy ourselves and the members of the *Asbury Child Care* family.

We practiced intentional reflection on these encounters over supper. I have

⁸ Moschella, 104.

included a sample Table Host Note Sheet as Appendix E. Note the reflexive stance of many of the questions for reflection, such as “How do we experience the role of host?” and “How is the experience of hosting changing us?” In this way, we encouraged each other to see “the self as a medium through which knowledge about the research partners [not subjects]... can be gained.”⁹

I did not fill out the Table Host sheets because I did not serve as a Table Host. I kept a research journal throughout the planning, implementation, and evaluation phases of the project. I also kept detailed notes of meetings I had with my LAC, DMIN cohort and advisors, church members and church and child care staff who were involved in the project. During one of the cohort online meetings on March 28, 2014, I stumbled on a reflexive revelation that opened my eyes to see the project and myself in a new light.

I was also a stranger in need of welcome.

While checking in with the group, I mentioned that our worship attendance had increased by a third for no apparent reason the previous month (February). We were guessing that our excitement about the upcoming supper project created a spirit of excitement in the congregation. “It’s not just the numbers—we are more spirit-filled in worship. Including me.” I had been planning and envisioning the project for months, since August, 2013. But the excitement it was creating in the congregation now that we were on the verge of embarking on it together affected me just as powerfully.

I mentioned to the group that our Bishop, Peggy Johnson, would be attending the supper the following Wednesday, and that she would “get to see us as we are (I’m wearing skates).” The members of my cohort (like some of the LAC, as noted earlier)

⁹ Ibid.

worried that the Bishop's presence might be intimidating, but the excitement we were experiencing gave us courage and confidence to accept and embrace ourselves. This self-acceptance is what Savage and Presnell write about when they discuss the importance of self-differentiation, in the quote above (see page 86).

As I wrote to the group online, I mentioned the easy-going freedom we were all enjoying to talk long after we finished eating our food, while "the kids are running around like it's a picnic in the park." I was proud of *Asbury*'s oldest members, who were "carrying this mission," even though their fears led them to complain at times about the passive and interactive form of evangelism the project was taking. As one of my advisors invited me to wrap up my report, I typed, "Each night, I feel pulled in many different directions, so I mostly play with the kids. That's my gift and need, I think."

And then I told the group, "Just teared up when I typed that." In those tears, I sensed the presence of God's Spirit, leading me into a renewed awareness of grace and love. When I typed, "I think it's more of a need than a gift," one of my advisors asked, "Leading you back to life?" Then she told us all, "We are part and parcel of our projects." I had not thought much about the ways in which this project had as much to do with my transformation as the transformation of *Asbury* congregation.

Serving as pastor of a congregation (and perhaps a religion) that has come to the end of its life weighs heavy on my soul. Death is a serious and frightening prospect. God's resurrection for the Christian faith and for individual congregations (and their pastors) through this present reformation requires a faithful endurance borne of courage to journey on in spite of our fear. Perhaps a playful spirit is the best antidote to anxiety that would prevent us from following God through the valley of the shadow of death to

new life in Christ in such a time as this. And who better to recall us back to our playful selves than children?

Certainly Jesus invited his followers to become like children in order to enter God's realm, as the shadow of Roman rule threatened all Jews with paralyzing fear. I have written above about how this project concept would not let me go, as my automatic wince at the Child Care Board Chair's drowning (or treading water) metaphor continued to haunt me. From the start, I felt led to name this project after Isaiah's vision of God's realm where "a little child shall lead them." Yet I had not given much thought to how (or if) the children in our child care family would lead *Asbury United Methodist Church*.

Nor had I given much thought to how they might lead me, or why I would have chosen a project that had as its genesis their simple insistence the previous spring that they should be invited to the series of suppers held in their nap room. And why had they insisted? They had another name for the room in which we were eating: they called it their nap room. Perhaps that's why Jesus told his disciples to "Go" instead of "Wait for them to come." He knew they would find fields ripe for harvest where people were most comfortable—in their homes and towns.

For many of the children and their families in the *Asbury Child Care* family, our sanctuary and Sunday School spaces represent strange, perhaps even hostile territory. The Child Care classrooms, Friendship Lounge (nap room) and Hall (playground), are part of their home. We had supposed the Hall would be neutral ground, but the children *welcomed us* into the space they used for play in inclement weather. After only a few suppers, many Table Hosts commented on being warmly and enthusiastically welcomed by the children and their families with whom the host from *Asbury* had enjoyed previous

suppers. We had no idea how much we needed those welcoming hugs when we planned to host a series of meals for strangers.

My LAC insisted that I take responsibility for purchasing and preparing one of the suppers, but I knew from the start that my main role would be telling and singing the stories of Jesus with the children. Of course, my worship planning partner and I prepared songs and stories, games and group activities each week, and we arranged the tables and chairs around a carpet in the middle of the Hall, where we planned to gather with the children after supper. Not surprisingly, things did not always go according to our plans.

For one thing, many of the children enjoyed free play, rather than the structured activities. The ones who did choose to gather on the carpet did so sporadically, and had their own ideas about the agenda for the evening. My storytelling partner complained at times about the chaos, but creatively responded with flexible, invitational plans that made room for interaction and participation. This creativity gave birth to the story hunt.

The first night we used the story hunt, we were gathering around the story of Jesus's dedication in the Temple, and Simeon's and Anna's blessing. We represented elements of the story with tangible symbols (a baby doll, an hourglass, and a shawl) that the children could find in hiding places throughout the Hall. To represent the concept of blessing, we chose a cruse of sweet-smelling anointing oil.

That was the night Bishop Johnson arrived, on April 2. Earlier that day, the Bishop, my wife, the District Superintendent of the Dover District, and I had lobbied in our state's legislative hall to repeal the death penalty in Delaware. That night at *Asbury*, we enjoyed spaghetti and meatballs, and celebrated our grandparents (like Simeon and Anna). I put on my robe and roller skates, and sang "On Top of Spaghetti" with the

children who gathered on the carpet.

After finding the other story hints, the children discovered the oil cruse (container). Instead of anointing them myself, I showed them how to anoint each other—and they anointed us as well. I enjoyed being blessed by the children. We told them that Simeon and Anna anointed Jesus when he was a baby. We also told them that anointing was an act of blessing and love.

Then the children asked us if they could anoint everyone in the Hall.

I was overwhelmed as I watched them run from table to table, anointing their parents and siblings, grandparents, teachers, the members of *Asbury*, and our Bishop. When we met to strategize the week before, my storytelling partner and I talked about how we were learning each week to “dance with the children.” We acknowledged that they were full partners in the dance. This dance of blessing was a dance they had thought up themselves, at the urging of the Holy Spirit. The little children were leading us. And blessing us.

Later, our Bishop would praise *Asbury* for taking the Sunday School to the children in the neighborhood, instead of waiting for their families to bring them to church on Sundays. Certainly, the LAC had planned to incorporate Bible stories each Wednesday evening in our supper series, but I knew that everything had not gone according to our plan. For one thing, we were learning far more than we could possibly teach. And what the children were teaching us involved their invitation to a graceful, chaotic joy beyond our agendas and plans.

They were inviting us to the blessing of salvation.

Philip Clayton, Ingraham Professor of Theology at Claremont School of

Theology, writes about the blindness that comes from seeing ourselves in the church as “possessors” of salvation and knowledge of God that outsiders—“seekers”—cannot find without us. “The real contrast is not seekers versus possessors, but seeking and finding—and seeking some more.”¹⁰ Regardless of who does the planting and watering, according to Paul, God alone gives the growth—and we are all in need of growth. In her book, *Ministry That Transforms: A Contemplative Process of Theological Reflection*, spiritual director and professor Kathleen McAlpin calls this process of always seeking more “ongoing conversion.”¹¹

For McAlpin, mercy lies at the heart of this process of ongoing conversion. As I watched the children dancing from table to table, anointing their parents and teachers and members of *Asbury*, I felt blessed by God’s mercy and grace. As pastor of a “dying” church, struggling to survive in the maelstrom of postmodern redefinition of religion and spirituality, I longed for refreshment from the wellspring of life. Goofing off in my roller skates with the children after supper, singing silly songs, playing freeze tag, and watching them dance a blessing across the playground of our (their) Hall, I realized why I had been drawn to this project in the first place.

I had been starved for the grace, forgiveness, and love of Jesus. Our problem at *Asbury* had little to do with a shrinking budget or falling worship attendance numbers. We had forgotten about the true treasures, new and old, in God’s abundant storehouse. In breaking bread together with strangers who became friends—even and especially the least

¹⁰ Philip Clayton and Tripp Fuller, *Transforming Christian Theology: For Church and Society* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 20.

¹¹ Kathleen McAlpin, *Ministry That Transforms: A Contemplative Process of Theological Reflection* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2009), 108.

of these—they remembered—I remembered. No, WE remembered and we encountered Jesus our Messiah all over again, in our neighbors, from whom we had been too long estranged. This project found me—and the saints at *Asbury*—because I was hungry and thirsty for salvation. I needed the children to lead me, and to lead us, back to life.

CHAPTER 7

YOU TAKE AWAY OUR SINS: WHAT CHANGED IN OUR RELATIONSHIPS

Through our suppers with the *Asbury Child Care* family, our congregation and I experienced Christ's invitation to new life through our guests who had become our hosts. Table hosts regularly reported a sense of joy they felt at being welcomed, themselves, by our guests. Even members of our congregation who could not participate in the suppers noticed that this ministry event brought our congregation together. Before the series of suppers drew to a close, people in leadership and in our hospitality Bible studies asked: "What happens next? How can we keep this going?"

This chapter explores the lasting effects the shared supper experience has had on the *Asbury* congregation and Child Care family, from the perspective of several months after the final supper and graduation in May. The following chapter delves deeply into a comprehensive evaluation of the project using Laurie Green's Doing Theology Spiral. Before exploring that fruitful analysis, however, a more generalized, macro view of the project might be helpful in situating that micro evaluation in the context of lasting change. I offer this chapter in hopes of pausing for perspective, getting a sense of the lay of the land before examining the rich detail in the process of evaluation.

As the supper series drew to a close, there was some talk of continuing the suppers in the fall in our leadership circles at *Asbury*. However, I sensed that God was not simply calling us to replicate the experience of the series of suppers we had shared together with the child care family. Those conversations had triggered mutual

understanding—true communion or *koinonia*—between us that I sensed might be calling us to a new partnership. John Koenig, Professor of New Testament at General Theological Seminary, quotes feminist theologian Letty Russell’s assertion that “partnerships in the New Creation always ‘draw us together in *common struggle* and work, involving risk, continuing growth, and hopefulness in moving toward a goal or purpose transcending the group’” (emphasis original).¹

After sharing several meals together, one Table Host discovered that his guest trained youth and adults in gun safety. At first, this child care parent had been reluctant to share this part of his life story because of his concern that the member of the congregation would judge him for working with guns. Having established a sense of trust over shared food and conversation, the two celebrated a common interest in guns, hunting, and gun safety. Having witnessed the other man’s courage in sharing, the *Asbury* member invited him to a cigar club, a pastime he had been afraid of sharing for fear of being judged.

Once they crossed this bridge, the child care father expressed an interest in donating his time and expertise to teach a gun safety course for the Cub Scouts and Boy Scouts who met at the church. We facilitated the connection between him and the Scout leaders, and this table talk became a catalyst for the child care father to offer his gifts in ministry to others as a partner with the members of *Asbury Church*. In the course of preparing for the suppers, we had noticed spontaneous partnerships with area businesses that were happy to accept our invitation to donate food and supplies for the ministry.

¹ John Koenig, *New Testament Hospitality: Partnership with Strangers as Promise and Mission*, Overtures to Biblical Theology (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 77.

These partnerships, and the work of God's Kingdom they made possible, seemed to be the greater thing to which Jesus was calling us all in the course of sharing supper together.

During the final supper, the Wednesday of Holy Week, we extended formal and informal invitations to our guests to join us for worship on Easter Sunday. No one came. It felt natural for the congregation, after spending time together over the previous six weeks, to extend an invitation to worship with us on Easter Sunday. Yet, from the start, we wanted to make sure our supper invitation came with no strings attached. By then, of course, we had gotten to know some of the stories our guests had shared with us about work and child care obligations, especially on weekends. One Table Host repeatedly commented on her renewed appreciation of the demands of parenting a young and growing family. Even before Easter Sunday, we all sensed that these relationships were more important than boosting our worship attendance numbers.

When our LAC met on May 20, 2014 to evaluate the project formally, we discerned one phrase that best described both the project experience and our hope for its future ramifications for the congregation and child care family: the experience and life-calling of "building relationships." This ongoing, mutually interdependent invitation honors the mystery of individuals, including members of the *Asbury* congregation, whom we can never completely know. Yet it also encourages us to celebrate the little, seemingly insignificant gains in understanding and mutual respect that form the foundation, not only of friendship, but of hospitality as a spiritual discipline and life practice.

At the outset of his book *New Testament Hospitality*, John Koenig quotes Parker Palmer's assertion that in the sacrament of hospitality, "the stranger is not simply the

one who needs us. We need the stranger.”² Koenig goes on to emphasize both the sense of strangeness and surprise in the Greek φιλοξενία (*philoxenia*, the New Testament word for hospitality). He writes that this Greek concept refers to “a delight in the whole guest-host relationship.”³ This sense of delight comes from the discoveries the stranger invites us to make about ourselves as well as the stranger.

We were disappointed that more congregation members did not attend the *Asbury Child Care* graduation on May 16, 2014. The dozen members and staff who did attend represented a typical number of members who had attended graduations in previous years. Yet when we looked deeper than this number, we discovered other changes at play in our relationship with the child care staff. Originally, our LAC had scheduled the graduation for Friday evening, to facilitate better attendance for our congregation. As we got closer to the graduation day, the child care staff asked us to keep the graduation during the day (as it had been originally scheduled) to encourage parents, guardians, and grandparents of the children to attend. We celebrated the honest sharing about scheduling and our primary purpose that our relationship building had fostered in the course of this project.

When members of our LAC began to organize food for the graduation reception, the child care staff expressed their desire to have a smaller reception, so that the staff members could quickly return to their duties in the classrooms. We began to see a pattern in our relationship with the child care staff. At the outset of the project, we planned what we thought was best for the child care family, without their honest input. As the supper

² Ibid., 6.

³ Ibid., 8.

series progressed, however, the child care staff articulated their needs to us with more honesty (not merely agreeing with us, or telling us what they thought we wanted to hear). Though we experienced some initial friction as we learned to adjust our expectations, we learned how to listen, to make room for others, and to serve their real needs (rather than the needs we perceived them to have).

As I prepared for my role in the graduation ceremony, I offered to sing as I had in previous years. I had noticed that the child care staff seemed ambivalent about my presence, though, and wondered what they wanted from me that they were unable to communicate (or that I was unable to hear). During one of the ceremony rehearsals, the child care director asked if I could help lead the children sing three songs during the ceremony, rather than sing a song myself. I agreed gladly. Such was the fruit of our ongoing, hospitable practice of building relationships. We created room to speak and to listen, to invite and to respond. As we build relationships, we give birth to a new story of reconciliation that Jesus makes possible.

In *Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends*, Australian therapists and co-developers of narrative therapy Michael White and David Epston compare the “logico-scientific” and narrative modes of understanding. The former is based on “linguistic practices that rely upon the indicative mood to reduce uncertainties and complexity.”⁴

The narrative mode centers around linguistic practices that rely upon the subjunctive mood to create a world of implicit rather than explicit meanings, to broaden the field of possibilities through the ‘triggering of presupposition,’ to install ‘multiple perspective,’ and to engage ‘readers’ in unique performances of meaning.⁵

⁴ Michael White and David Epston, *Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends*, 1st ed. (New York: Norton, 1990), 81.

⁵ Ibid., 82.

I came to appreciate the wider field of possibilities to which God was inviting us all in the course of preparing for the graduation. During one of the graduation rehearsals, as the children filed past my open office door, one of the children saw me and said to his classmates: “That’s the man who came to our suppers.” He said it so matter-of-factly, this guest-become-host. Before the suppers, I would never have been able to imagine getting an invitation from one of our child care children to supper. I learned to receive such an invitation in the course of the series of suppers I had originally thought we were hosting!

Bradt summarizes White and Epston’s narrative therapy work by focusing on story’s power to reimagine ourselves and others in what Jesus announced as the Kingdom of God. The power of story to bear (and to accentuate, even to celebrate) ambiguity holds the secret to its power to contradict a “totalizing narrative” in which we can get stuck living out “character roles assigned to [us] by this narrative.”⁶ Our practice of totalizing our problem-saturated story at *Asbury* had trapped us all in a deadly cycle of death. This series of suppers and the conversations and stories that emerged challenged this totalizing narrative and cast us all in new, life-giving roles and relationships.

During the course of the project, we discovered ways in which we were actively keeping *Asbury Child Care* a secret. To spread the word in our community, our Board of Trustees invested in a permanent sign attached to the top of our church sign for the Child Care in the fall of 2013. We consulted with the Child Care staff to determine how to design this sign and discovered that we had been calling them by the wrong name:

Asbury Day Care!

⁶ Bradt, 108, 110-111.

In addition to calling them by their preferred name, we added the names of the director and assistant director in our weekly worship bulletin, together with their contact information. And when we updated our church letterhead, we included the Child Care, so that the letterhead announced our community as “*Asbury Church* and Child Care.” When we saw how positively and enthusiastically the Child Care staff responded to this inclusive change, we used the inclusive title in our weekly worship bulletins as well. (See Appendix F and Appendix G.)

So much more than a name change was happening with these powerfully symbolic changes. We were listening more and discovering more in our relationship with the Child Care family. Through this experience, we not only came to understand the Child Care better, but we began to reimagine ourselves in new ways. In the fall of 2014, we began holding staff meetings on the first Wednesdays of each month, a practice we had given up for over a year. In this resurrection, we decided to invite all staff members, including the Child Care director and assistant director, who had not been invited to participate in earlier staff meetings (we had always assumed they would be too busy). Not only did they attend, they became an integral part of our conversations about the life and ministry of the church. The changes in our sign, letterhead, and bulletin represented not merely a more inclusive stance toward the Child Care, but a more inclusive way of understanding ourselves as a church community.

Koenig quotes theologian and spiritual writer Henri Nouwen’s use of the phrase “free space” when he refers to this more inclusive “space inside us” which discovers room to “[welcome] marginal people because it expects them to be bearers of God’s

abundance or catalysts for it.”⁷ Koenig writes that “the church supper” serves as the “classic institutionalization” of the kind of free space that facilitates gatherings of strangers “without rigid agendas” and encourages them to “experiment with new social relationships.”⁸ One of the lasting changes I have witnessed as *Asbury*’s pastor in the wake of the suppers we hosted for the Child Care family involves the free space God created for the members of our congregation to experiment with new social relationships and roles in other settings besides the Hall.

On Easter Sunday 2014 the *Asbury* congregation welcomed six adults and two children into membership through baptism and renewal of faith and new life in Christ. Half of these adults were followers of Christ who were also homosexual persons living in committed, loving relationships. Four of them had participated in the supper series, together with two children, and two adults had served regularly as Table Hosts. Nearly three years before they joined, two of these new members had attended a worship service at *Asbury* with their elementary age foster son. During that initial worship service, one of the members of *Asbury* had glanced back at them and had judged them “disgusting” as they whispered loudly to a person sitting next to them in the pew.

Two years later, these partners in love and in Christ managed to return to find a welcome in the congregation, the choir, and in ministry to our child care through the series of suppers we held in the spring. They offered us all forgiveness and understanding—and a second chance to live more fully into Christ’s calling to love our neighbors as ourselves. One of these partners had experienced rejection from the child

⁷ Koenig, 126.

⁸ Ibid.

care staff person sitting at their table during one of the first suppers. Their life experience of Christ's ability to heal and to see beyond this wounding rejection enabled them to overcome the other's fear with love and understanding.

Our Easter reception into new life in Christ and membership included an outdoor reception with refreshments (of course) that became for us a celebration of the new life Christ offers to us. We could see the fear behind our wounding rejection of others, learn to forgive ourselves and make a new start in this free and open space of hospitality towards ourselves and others. We consumed more than just food for the body during those suppers—Christ nourished our souls in a new community of strangers-made-friends as Christ broke down the dividing walls of hostility between us.

When this couple experienced a fresh welcome and reception as members of our choir, the choir became a welcoming community for others. One member, who had recently had a baby, had a difficult time finding child care to attend rehearsals (we did not offer child care during choir rehearsals during the week). Bernhard and Clapp warn “the failure to make child care available can be a self-fulfilling prophecy.”⁹ This woman had not only dropped out of the choir, but had stopped attending worship. Our choir director reached out to her and invited her to return in the spring, and an interesting series of reversals began to take place.

Though this woman had felt cut off from the congregation, she continued to bring her infant to *Asbury Child Care*, which is where she saw the invitation to join us for supper in the spring. When I saw the woman at one of the first suppers, she told me that another daughter had piano practice on Wednesday evenings, so she and her family

⁹ Bernhard and Clapp, 78.

would not be able to participate in the rest of the suppers. Something must have changed her mind, though. After a couple of the suppers, her husband (a Roman Catholic adherent who did not typically attend worship at *Asbury* with his wife and daughters but who sometimes attended “meet, eat, and greet” events) attended the suppers and took the older daughter to piano practice, so his wife and her infant could enjoy sitting and talking after supper.

By the end of the supper series, the whole family attended the supper and stayed after to share and enjoy their neighbors in the child care and congregational families—and the older daughter skipped piano practice! Meanwhile, the choir had installed a portable crib in the rehearsal room and invited the woman to bring her infant with her to choir rehearsals—which she did. And while everyone realized this was only a temporary fix, the notion that the choir members could act in the free space of Christ’s empowerment in their relationship with this woman and her family served as a living embodiment of the new community—the new *koinonia*—Christ died to create.

As pastor of this movement of God at *Asbury*, I was unable to watch from the sidelines, but felt compelled and encouraged to live into this free space created by God in Christ Jesus and filled with the Spirit. When a neighboring congregation closed their food closet and asked to integrate their volunteers with our small food closet ministry, our Administrative Assistant needed to spend much more time helping this ministry expand. The Staff-Parish Relations Committee (SPRC), in charge of overseeing all staff, supported the redirection, as I did, and we were amazed to see the ministry grow from feeding a half dozen people to feeding over fifty people every Friday. When we invited people from our congregation to participate in this expanded ministry, some of our oldest

members responded immediately with great enthusiasm, and another part-time staff member followed her passion and volunteered several hours each week to offer her gifts to her neighbors who were hungry.

In the fall of 2014 (as I write this paper), we are engaged in a Stewardship Campaign that has more to do with our stewardship of God's calling than raising money to balance the budget. We are discerning how God is using these two passions, feeding the hungry and caring for children, as we articulate a mission for our congregation. We have several feeding ministries at *Asbury*, including the Friday Food Closet, a ministry which distributes a monthly supply of USDA-supplied food to over thirty families (some who are part of our child care family), two groups that prepare food twice every month for over 150 persons at a local shelter, participating in Meals on Wheels, and raising money through *CROP Walk*. And in our seventy years of ministry (as of 2015), we have touched far more lives through *Asbury Child Care* than any other ministry of the church.

As I reflect on the long-term changes at *Asbury* catalyzed by our spring supper series, I believe that the series worked so well precisely because it synthesized these two long-term passions and spiritual gifts of the body of Christ at *Asbury*: food and children. Instead of having to choose between one focus or the other, God led us to find a way to celebrate the intersection of both passions, in a feasting Hall the children, staff and families of the child care family could call their own. When our Stewardship Campaign consultant invited us to dream of a letter celebrating God's miraculous work among us and our neighbors in five years, I could not help but think of the suppers where I had known the risks and rewards of hospitality for others and for myself.

As I prayed about God's mission for *Asbury*, God's Spirit led me to write:

The church members, the community and neighboring church leaders were amazed that [*Asbury Church*] was accomplishing a seven-day a week ministry of caring hospitality to the children, youth, and their families in our neighborhood, welcoming and nourishing them with bread for the body, mind, and soul.

Though we still do not know exactly what that ministry of caring hospitality might look like, we have tasted the goodness of God for us and through us in these supper encounters with strangers who welcomed us. And as the tagline of the potato chip commercial goes, “No one can eat just one!”

A month after the child care graduation, the official end of the project, I met with our Administrative Council Chair, who leads our lay leadership team at *Asbury UMC*. For many reasons, she had not been able to attend the suppers, but she had felt their impact and sense of enthusiasm, as so many members of the church had. We discussed ideas for our upcoming seventieth anniversary celebration in 2015 over a lunch of sandwiches and salads. At *Asbury’s* fiftieth, the year they dedicate the newly constructed Hall, the congregation held an elaborate dinner for present and former members and pastors. There were speeches, an anniversary program complete with sponsored advertisements, and elegant table settings for the banquet.

But the ceremony must have been bittersweet. Even in 1995, *Asbury Church* was a shadow of its former self in the glory days from the 1950s to the 1970s, when the church couldn’t build fast enough, and a dozen buses gathered children from the surrounding neighborhoods to sing, to play, and to worship God. As we contemplated what a celebration of our seventieth year in ministry might look like, this lay leader and I knew we would not be holding another banquet for ourselves. We wanted to celebrate our past as a launching point for God’s future among us—the continuation of God’s calling for

such a time as this, in 2015.

While we were talking, we considered the success of the series of child care suppers, and how we might replicate the fundamental elements of that project in a series of celebrations of ministry to and with our neighbors throughout 2015. At the time, our United Methodist Women had just sponsored a *Cakes and Cars* pancake breakfast and car show to raise funds and awareness for ministry to children enslaved in human trafficking. To pull off the event, they entered into a partnership with our neighbors who liked to show off their cars (something most of our church members knew little about). In that ministry partnership, we discovered new connections and possibilities. Our District Superintendent participated in the car show (no one had known he was an avid car enthusiast).

As we talked and broke bread together, we began to envision a series of monthly events sponsored by *Asbury Church* that would invite our neighbors to partner with us in ministry to and with people in need in our local community and beyond. This would be the way we would celebrate not only our seventieth year in ministry, but perhaps every year in ministry: a series of block parties in which we celebrate and participate in God's transformation of the world through the love of Jesus Christ. Perhaps this mindset will be the lasting legacy, the transforming change God's Spirit catalyzed in a series of suppers we hosted for strangers who invited us to taste and see the goodness of God in a new a fresh way.

Koenig quotes Bolivian theologian Mortimer Arias in calling this ministry partnership “centripetal mission or evangelization by hospitality.”¹⁰ As the Spirit blows

¹⁰ Koenig, 106.

freely in these open, hospitable places, like the wind, where it will, everyone receives an invitation to share life as a gift to others as citizens of God's Kingdom. I cannot imagine a more appropriate way for *Asbury* to live into God's future than by practicing something we know by heart—preparing and serving good food—as a celebration of God's in-breaking reign in our neighbors and in our neighborhood, beyond the walls of any building.

CHAPTER 8

GRANT US PEACE: EVALUATION AND THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

There is a moment in the celebration of the Eucharist, or the Lord's Supper, when after the Great Thanksgiving and the Lord's Prayer, as presider, I break the bread and lift the cup, and announce that we are sharing in the body and blood of Christ. Then everyone gathered sings *Agnus Dei*: "Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world, have mercy on us." After repeating this intercession, there follows a final intercession: "*dona nobis pacem*: Grant us peace." And then we receive the bread of heaven and the cup of salvation—together.

Paul writes to the saints gathered at Ephesus: "he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us" (Ephesians 2:14). Contemporary singer-songwriter and composer Rufus Wainwright, in his rendition of this transformational prayer (from the 2004 album, *Want Two*), beautifully expresses the moment of healing in the final intercession. His aching lament finally resolves musically the moment Wainwright sings "*dona nobis pacem*." God answers this prayer for peace as we ask it. We ask and pray corporately, around a Table set with simple, nourishing gifts. Christ calls us to experience peace as we partake and participate in the mystery of the body of Christ.

In John 14, Jesus blesses the disciples with this peace as a parting gift. There is tension as well as transformation in this peace of Christ that is not given "as the world gives." For the past three years, I have gathered early each Sunday morning with a few

saints in the restored Chapel at *Asbury United Methodist Church* to celebrate communion. Most Protestants are unable to experience the Eucharist more than monthly, and this weekly experience has invited me to taste and see the richness of God's grace as we say, sing, and enact the liturgy together. After confessing our sins, we pass the peace of Christ by embracing each other. And as we sing to the Lamb of God, our prayer for peace always comes as a gracious surprise.

The fifth chapter of this paper began by exploring the gracious surprise of our main research finding, that the gaps between us invite us to a graceful space for refreshment, building relationships, and for play. We had been careful to ask at the outset not "How can we close the gap between our congregation and our neighborhood?" but "What *would happen* (to our relationship with our neighbors in the child care family) if we served as their host instead of landlord?" We imagined that this new role would foster a healthier relationship with our child care family, but we set aside our expectations for intervention and change in order to embark on a journey to a place God might show us (on the way).

Chapter six described some of the ways I experienced personal transformation as host in that gap. Chapter seven reflected on stories of the communal transformation our congregation experienced as hosts in a gap that became for us, rather than a zone of isolation and anxiety, a holy space where God is creating a new community and building new relationships. This chapter systematically evaluates the individual and communal transformation we experienced in the gap as hosts, using Laurie Green's theological spiral of action-reflection, from his book, *Let's Do Theology: Resources for Contextual Theology*.

In *Narrative Research in Ministry*, Savage and Presnell advocate what Seward Hiltner, a leader in the field of pastoral care, calls a “perspectival approach to evaluation” that “envisions the ministry project story as a diamond with many facets.”¹ The multifaceted perspective of Green’s Doing Theology Spiral includes four major phases (facets) throughout the process: Experience, Explore, Reflect, and Respond.² This method evaluates the process of transformation and change throughout the process, instead of the more traditional “before and after” perspective from which to evaluate transformation and change.

For each of these four phases, I will describe the transformational perspective that aspect of the process made possible in our understanding and experience of the gap between the *Asbury* congregation and our surrounding neighborhood. For the purposes of this paper, I describe that process chronologically, using each of Green’s stages in turn. Because Drew’s Doctor of Ministry process requires a Prospectus that outlines the project in advance, we began with a response to the situation of the gap (the supper series) I had identified before forming the Local Advisory Committee. This allowed us to engage in action-reflection in the midst of an ongoing spiral of experience, rather than as a linear cause-effect transformation from problem to solution.

Experiencing the Gap: Denominational Transformation

I described in chapter two the personal and communal journey I took with the congregation on which this project found me. One milestone in this journey was my

¹ Savage and Presnell, 124.

² Green, 24, Figure 2.5

reaction (the wince) when the Child Care Board Chair told the congregation that the Child Care kept the church afloat in June, 2013. By December, I articulated in my Prospectus the notion that “embracing an understanding of Asbury Day [*sic*] Care as a mission of the church rather than as a revenue source might enable our congregation to discover God’s purpose and provision in sharing our love with and taking delight in the families and children in our Day Care and in our community.”

The heart of that statement is the phrase “mission of the church.” After only two years as pastor, I knew enough to realize that in the many years of numerical and financial decline, the people of *Asbury* had replaced a sense of mission and purpose with an all-consuming anxiety to survive. As our LAC met for the first time on September 10, 2013, I sensed that the real gap we needed to explore was the gap between our community of faith and Christ’s calling that enabled us to be a community of faith in the first place.

In my research for this project, one of my advisors suggested looking at missional church movement writings. One of the first I read was Hirsch’s *The Forgotten Ways*. I got a kick out of Hirsch’s use of the acronym “EMC” to abbreviate the phrase Emerging Missional Church, because *Asbury*’s stained glass window includes Einstein’s famous equation relating mass and energy and the speed of light: $E=mc^2$.³ We had played with this acronym as well, as part of a visioning task force in my first year as pastor of *Asbury*. We used the letters to form a statement of our Mission: to Empower all people to live in God’s love as we Magnify God, Commune with Christ, and Collaborate with the Holy

³ Alan Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating the Missional Church* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Brazos Press, 2006), 66.

Spirit as the Body of Christ.

Einstein's equation predicts the enormous potential energy in all mass. But we weren't tapping into any spiritual power by coming up with a neat acronym. Hirsch keeps the focus on mission as a way of being. His definition of missional church is worth quoting here in full:

...a working definition of missional church is a community of God's people that defines itself, and organizes its life around, its real purpose of being an agent of God's mission to the world. In other words, the church's true and authentic organizing principle is mission. When the church is in mission, it is the true church.⁴

Green writes that when we start from experience, "we own the experience and try to get inside it as much as possible."⁵ But getting inside the experience of the loss of purpose takes us to a place where we fear to go. As we experienced the gap in the early stages of our group process, we endeavored to "tell all the truth but tell it slant" in the words of Emily Dickinson's famous poem.⁶ So instead of experiencing the question, "Why do we exist?" we entered into the experience of a more playful but related question, "What would happen if we were host instead of landlord?" The former presumes a catastrophic failure, which is our worst fear. The latter acknowledges at one and the same time both a problem and a potential path forward.

For Green, this initial stage of the Doing Theology Spiral involves more group formation than analysis of the problem, which comes later in the process. As the group

⁴ Ibid., 82.

⁵ Green, 41.

⁶ Emily Dickinson and Thomas Herbert Johnson, *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson* (Boston: Back Bay Books, Little, Brown and Co., 1997), 506.

forms and feels safe, the members of the group can share openly and articulate a problem worthy of further inquiry and exploration. In our case, my articulation of the problem generated a group, the LAC, which began the process by experiencing both the question that brought us together as well as the process of becoming a group.

As I considered whom to invite, I thought about the spiritual gifts and leadership positions (past and present) that would qualify persons to serve effectively on the LAC. I invited our present and one of our former Child Care Board chairs, a Trustee who had volunteered at *Asbury Child Care* the previous summer, a gifted visionary, a meticulous project planner, and the Child Care director and assistant director. To my great surprise, everyone agreed to serve.

Our Child Care director and assistant director work long days, from six a.m. to six p.m., and understandably preferred to spend evenings with family. Their agreement to serve on the LAC struck me as a signal of commitment to their relationship with the church. Even when they decided to stop attending the evening meetings in 2014, they arranged to meet with me during the day once a month, so that they could continue to serve as part of the LAC.

Everyone I invited to the table was deeply committed to church or child care, and serving of the LAC entailed additional work for all of them. Aside from Child Care Board members (who met with the child care staff monthly during the day), *Asbury Church* leaders did not typically meet with our child care staff. Our present Child Care Board chair resigned from the LAC after two meetings because she was upset that our Nominating Committee did not invite her to serve on a committee that oversees Staff-Parish relations.

That this group of diverse people in our church and child care came together at all became part of a new narrative of the gap between the two. As we continued to meet together, we entrusted to each other stories from the past as to why the gap had grown. But from the start, everyone's presence around the table contributed to an experience of connection and mutual commitment in that gap. Our first night, we experienced the narrative power of our many perspectives. Each of us recognized the symbiotic relationship between church and child care in our shared facility and shared financial fortunes, to say nothing of our shared history.

During our second meeting, over finger cookies and grape juice, each of us shared what we brought to the table and to the group. Our visionary offered the gift of "a great love for kids," as well as a background in corporate human relations at DuPont.⁷ She shared a gift of passion as well. "The children are our future; they will impact the Church. We need to be more intentional about including them. This church is gonna change!"

Our trustee told the story of his involvement as a volunteer preparing food and telling stories of Jesus to the children. "I was involved in the Trustees and I noticed how the kids are so loving; I was shocked when they touched my leg and held onto me. I insisted on getting a background check in order to touch these kids." Besides preparing and serving lunches with his wife one summer at *Asbury Child Care*, he "read Bible stories for them at holiday times." He told us,

some of the kids listened attentively and some of them just wanted to see the pictures. It wasn't for the kids; it was for me. I'm hoping to relay the message to the rest of the church congregation: the Day Care loves to have visitors. I'd like for other people in the church to know what a joy it is.

⁷ This and other quotes from our second LAC meeting are taken directly from my notes from October 1, 2013.

Our present child care board chair told us, “I bring a sense of lived history to the table—I have lived so much of it. She told us about a time when “most of the [*Asbury Child Care*] staff members were members of the church.” She had also served on the child care staff. “When the church buses picked up neighborhood kids, we had many more children involved in our kindergarten program.” She saw the Lenten suppers as an evangelistic opportunity. “This church used to be very well-known in the surrounding community. The more things we do between the *Day Care* [*sic*] and the church, the more the church will be known in our community.”

The Child Care director brought knowledge of the child care and state regulations (that had disqualified so many members of the church from serving as child care staff members). Then she also told us,

Asbury Child Care welcomes volunteers. The staff is close to burnout at times. ... The *Child Care* visited the *Weston Senior Center* recently and would like to involve the staff and children in other mission projects on behalf of *Asbury UMC* in the community. This is a distinctly Christian *Child Care*; this is a calling, not a business.

Our project planner began by sharing, “I am the only childless person at the table. I tend to look at things with an eye to business and mission/purpose.” In spite of leading our Sunday School program and Vacation Bible School in previous years, she told us, “I don’t have a lot of experience with children.” She continued,

I think that the current relationship between the church and day care is abysmal, but I think there are endless possibilities. ... I have a vision of a pipeline from the *Day Care* to the church, through which children are introduced to the love of Jesus and walk down the hall to Sunday School. The day they leave *Day Care* should not be the day they leave the church.

Our former child care board chair, also gifted at project planning, told us, “I am always looking for new opportunities and venues to share Christ.” He took great pride in

making substantive changes during his tenure as child care board chair. “I worked hard to implement busing to and from *Wilmington Manor* and to make continuing education available for staff certification.” Having been involved at *Asbury Church* since 1973, he deplored the gap. “There should not be a demark between the *Day Care* and the church.” He also understood the imperative of change both at work and at church. “I have learned the value of constantly retooling, changing to meet the needs of a changing environment or market.”

Our assistant child care director brought “a living history of the relationship between the church and the child care” to the table.

I was married here fifteen years ago by the Rev. Norm Poultney, who invited me to transfer my employment to *Asbury Day Care* during the marriage preparation sessions when he found out I was teaching at another day care. I began working alongside the women (Mrs. Myers, Mrs. Supolo, and Mrs. Rhoades) who had once taught me at *Asbury Day Care*. I remember Mrs. Myers taking me home and caring for me when my grandmother died.

Listening to those stories of gifts of LAC members around the table, I realized that this gap where we had gathered was full of surprises. We would learn to expect surprises throughout the course of this project. As the members of the LAC group shared the gifts they brought to the table, we generated an experience of expectation and curiosity. With each story, members commented that they discovered something new. In this way, our experience of the gap as a group led to transformation in the way we saw each other, as well as the problem, because in different ways, we were all part of the problem.

Rather than increasing our sense of guilt, despair, or a need to defend ourselves by shifting the blame to others, this experience gave us space to brainstorm and to reimagine

our past, present, and future experience of the gap together. One powerful demonstration of this reimagining experience involved our Child Care Board chair's recognition of our "in-house" series of 2013 Lenten suppers as not just a missed opportunity, but also as a season of preparation to share in Christ's love through hospitality in 2014. Methodists understand this kind of unconscious preparation as God's prevenient (come before) grace. But we also experienced God's grace at work retroactively!

When our Bishop, Peggy Johnson, joined us for supper, she received the blessing of the children who anointed her with oil. Then she celebrated what we were doing as a model for our Annual Conference (400 churches) to bring the Good News of Jesus to neighborhood children who would not ordinarily come to church or Sunday School on the weekend. Our Bishop's perspective opened our eyes to experience the gap as a miraculous birthplace of new ministry and mission we could not have planned ourselves. (We had thought we were simply sharing dinner!) Our experience of new and renewed relationships in the gap led us to recognize God's presence in the gap in ways we could not have dreamed were possible.

Exploring the Gap: Congregational/Contextual Transformation

Laurie Green writes that in the exploration phase of the Doing Theology Spiral, "the group must now move from impressionistic anecdotes into factual analysis."⁸ Our exploration (like this project as a whole) relied on narrative analysis to give us a wider perspective and understanding of the nature of the gap between the church and child care. In the course of those conversations and intentional encounters, we also discovered gaps

⁸ Green, 60.

(as well as invitations to heal) in our congregational community, and came to appreciate the complexity and richness of the relationship between the church and child care.

For our third LAC meeting, on October 29, 2013, we shared a potluck supper together. Half of us were unable to attend, but the rest of us began what seemed like an enormous task of planning the series, including methods of assessment. How would we know whether or not the project succeeded? Two weeks earlier at our project colloquium, I had decided, in conversation with my advisors and cohort members, to use Green's theological spiral to evaluate the project. Though I was unclear about exactly what that kind of evaluation would look like (there was no precedent for using this method among the Drew DMIN candidates), I knew that we would be evaluating transformation and change throughout the process, rather than at the end.

The following LAC meeting turned out to be a watershed for our exploration of the gap. All members of the LAC met on November 19, 2013, and after some preliminary conversation about using an upcoming Foster Care Holiday party the church would be hosting as a dry run for our suppers, we began exploring the gap together. Our visionary and trustee lamented that when the children in the church grew up, no one had replaced them. Our former child care board chair suggested a child care celebration Sunday that would invite child care children and their families to join us for worship and raise awareness in the congregation of the child care ministry.

Then the assistant child care director told the group that she has "never experienced anything different" than a gap between the church and child care in her sixteen years on staff, although she appreciated efforts the church made to improve communications and responsiveness to facilities repairs and improvements in child care

spaces. She shared with us that child care advertising is largely word-of-mouth from families that have sent several generations of children here. While Asbury Child Care is well known in the community, only a few children enrolled in the child care or their families are connected to the church.

Our former child care board chair noted two external factors that contributed to the gap. The first was the adoption of those stringent child care teacher certification requirements by the state that had prevented several church volunteers from serving on the staff (mentioned previously). The second, again, was the availability of a pre-kindergarten program in public schools, which reduced both enrollment and involvement of children and church members. Our visionary shared that in the early days of the child care, many church members worked on the staff for no pay or for very low pay. The double doors in the hallway between the sanctuary and child care spaces, which were locked during the day for security and safety, represented for her a “boundary between different worlds.”

The child care director agreed that the relationship between the church and child care has gotten better over the past two years. Then she told the group, “we used to hate the church.” When their children were smaller, both the director and assistant director attended *Asbury* with their families. Yet when they suggested some changes to improve a Sunday School ministry their children enjoyed, some members of the church told them to “find another church family” and leave *Asbury*.

Worse than this kind of hostility was the indifference the child care staff had sometimes experienced from the church, depending on the changing pastors and volunteer leaders and child care board members, she told us. When she was hired as

director, the Staff Parish Relations Committee “went over everything about her job description and expectations,” but later “fell off the face of the earth.” In 2007, she told us, “every answer to the problem of meeting our budget [which includes a sizable contribution to the church] was to raise tuition arbitrarily, which forced us to lose tons of families.” Seven years later, the day care enrollment is half what it was then, and most of the children enrolled pay with government subsidized *Purchase of Care* funds.

A previous child care director had abused the trust of the children and the church in the late 1990’s. She used corporal punishment and fed the children “leftover bakery goods” from her parents’ bakery. Unable to properly post bills and payments, and with tuition in arrears, she needed a loan from the church to pay the staff. Other staff members reached out to the pastor to address these problems but he did not do anything in response. According to the child care director, this former director ultimately “left in handcuffs.” And while one of the members of the church helped the current director get the accounts back in order, the story gave us a better understanding of the history of the gap from the church’s as well as the child care’s perspective.

The meeting had been cathartic for our child care director and assistant director and eye-opening for the rest of our LAC members, who spent most of the conversation listening. Though the child care director and assistant director continued to support the project and meet with me individually to coordinate plans and communication, they did not attend another LAC meeting after November 19. After illness and vacation precluded their involvement in our January 14, 2014 meeting, they told me that their schedules were too busy for evening meetings, but that they would be happy to meet with me during the day.

It was painful to hear about the church's intentional part in building the gap through our hostility and indifference. At the close of that November 19 meeting, I offered an apology to the director and assistant director on behalf of our congregation. Yet I also felt encouraged that our exploration in this group setting had enabled us to discover hidden truths about the gap that gave us an appreciation for its complexity. It must have also been painful to experience the story the child care staff members told us that night. Their willingness to explore the gap with us around that table gave us an appreciation for the transformational power of entering the gap, rather than closing (or ignoring) it.

Throughout the project, members of our church talked about how the series of suppers unified the congregation. The experience of unity made me think of the Great Thanksgiving: "By your Spirit, make us one with Christ, one with each other, and one in ministry to all the world...." When we become the church in mission, we truly come together. But this experience of unity also calls attention to a more typical state of disunity. Our exploration revealed an experience of the gap in our own community of faith. Two of the stories I introduced in chapter four reveal ways in which the project enabled us to explore transformative ways of navigating the gap between congregation members.

In the first story, one of our table hosts expressed, in her written comments afterward, dismay that I had not arrived sooner in order to give the participants from *Asbury* guidance when they arrived an hour before the supper (see page 60). The following evening, as I put on my robe in my office before leading the Ash Wednesday worship service, the woman stopped by my office to apologize for being so critical. I told

her that I appreciated her honest feedback and had not taken offense at her remarks, but that I appreciated and accepted her apology. Then we worshipped together.

What struck me about the incident was how our experience of hosting child care families led us to treat the other with greater respect and sensitivity. The first supper had not been well attended by the child care family, so we had rehearsed being hospitable to each other. Even when the hall was filled with guests, our practice of hospitality to others had a ripple effect in our faith community. Our exploration of the gap outside our church revealed a gap within. When we celebrated the supper series in worship, one of our LAC members described the ministry project as “doing what we do best: reaching out to others.” This act of reaching out enabled us to reach in as well.

In the second story, one of our leaders (who was also a project participant) was overcome by grief during a meeting in which I suggested symbolizing the resurrection with an empty casket on Easter Sunday (see pages 65-66). When the woman left the meeting, the ferocity of her grief stunned the other leaders, who chastised me for my insensitivity. As I noted in chapter four, we experienced ourselves as strangers in that gap of grief and our common need for the grace of God in Christ Jesus.

Serving our guests together in the final supper two nights later strengthened our ability to understand and care for each other. Exploring the gap revealed both the power of our fear of death as well as the power of love to prepare a table before us in the presence of our enemies. Even when the enemy turned out to be ourselves, we found God’s welcome and forgiveness at the table, receiving Christ’s gift of grace even and especially as we extended it to others. One of our Table Hosts put it this way: “Clearly, the church grew together in an atmosphere of helping others while working together; no

one person or group seemed to feel that they had to do everything. Bonds and relationship were created that may pay dividends in the future.”

Reflecting in the Gap: Personal Transformation

These examples of “growing together by helping others, of reaching in by reaching out” (in the gap between ourselves and our neighbors) demonstrate a paradox of Christian faith. The Prayer of St. Francis expresses this paradox in the phrase: “For it is in giving we receive.”⁹ Laurie Green writes that during the third phase of the Doing Theology spiral, “we bring the story of the Christian community’s past experience of God alongside the present experience that we have been exploring.”¹⁰ He uses the metaphor of an optical illusion, where two facing profiles (representing our present experience and Christian scripture and tradition) create not merely a gap of space between them, but a new shape (which looks like a candlestick).

Green writes, “...the encounter between the experience and the Christian heritage in our theological reflection is a moment of new mindedness when the disciple is brought to a whole new awareness and very often a challenge to repentance.”¹¹ When we celebrated what God made possible in our congregation in the course of this ministry project, one of our LAC members (our corporate planner) said, “Even though we had a plan, life stepped in and we had to learn to roll with the changes. I could feel God

⁹ *The United Methodist Hymnal: Book of United Methodist Worship*, 481. An abundance of scriptures convey this theme. Among my favorites are Ecclesiastes 11:1; Mark 8:35 and parallels; Luke 6:38; John 12:24; and Philippians 3:8.

¹⁰ Green, 77.

¹¹ Ibid., 83-84.

encouraging me to move with the change.” The repentance language in this statement evokes the sense not of shame and remorse, but of a dance with God. The root meaning of μετανοέω (*metanoeo*, the Greek word typically translated as “repent”) is an act of turning, which Shaker Elder Joseph Brackett (1797-1882) celebrated as a dance in the song, *Simple Gifts*. “When true simplicity is gained/To bow and to bend we shan't be ashamed,/To turn, turn will be our delight/Till by turning, turning we come 'round right.”¹²

For this project, we gathered around a series of six scripture passages throughout the season of Lent in Sunday worship and several weekly Bible studies to reflect on Christian tradition. For our Bible study, we used six of the thirteen chapters and study guides in the book, *Widening the Welcome of Your Church*, by Bernhard and Clapp. Each week in worship, I preached on one of the key passages mentioned in the chapter our small groups studied the week before. See Appendix H for an overview of these scriptures and weekly themes.

The first Sunday in Lent, we gathered around Paul's injunction in Romans 15:7 to “welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you.” One of our Bible study participants told the story of turning back in their vehicle to assist a woman carrying several heavy grocery bags along the road. When they approached her, they realized that she was frightened of them; they were strangers to her. This passage in Romans encouraged us to see the risk of hospitality from the perspective of the person who is a stranger to us. Their trust becomes a gift of grace.

¹² Episcopal Church., *The Hymnal 1982: According to the Use of the Episcopal Church* (New York, N.Y.: Church Hymnal Corp., 1985), 554.

The first supper, we found out what would happen if we risked throwing a party and few of the guests showed up. We rehearsed being hospitable to each other and had a party anyway! During that first sermon, I mentioned that the Greek word for welcome, προσλαμβάνω (*proslambano*), breaks down to mean “taking with.”¹³ This command from Paul’s letter to the church at Rome and *Asbury* invited us all to experience being taken with God.

Throughout our experience of reflecting in the gap, the scriptures beckoned us to risk the possibility of grace in the midst of our vulnerability. In *Daring Greatly*, Brené Brown, a research professor at the University of Houston College of Social Work, writes (in a chapter entitled “Mind the Gap”),

If we want to isolate the problems and develop transformation strategies, we have to hold our aspirational values up against what I call our practiced values.... Are we walking our talk? Answering this can get very uncomfortable.¹⁴

Yet in the heart of this vulnerability, Brown celebrates the grace that “Most of us can go through the majority of our ‘faults’ or ‘limitations’ and find strengths lurking within.”¹⁵

This miracle of God’s grace in the gap became a consistent theme of our practice of reflection at *Asbury*.

For the second study, Bernard and Clapp suggested preparing refreshments for the group. I left everything to the last minute, and my Administrative Assistant moved the

¹³ See Philemon 1:17 “So if you consider me your partner, welcome him as you would welcome me.”

¹⁴ C. Brené Brown, *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead*, 1st ed. (New York, NY: Gotham Books, 2012), 176.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 200.

cheese and crackers I had prepared to the Fellowship Hall kitchen, assuming I had purchased them for the supper. The container for iced tea leaked, and a member of the group was allergic to the artificial sweetener I used. I felt like my efforts in hospitality resulted in a fiasco, and worried that the supper (for which I was responsible that evening) would also flop.

We were gathered around the parable of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25:31ff. We talked about how God allowed us room to risk creatively and to learn from our engagement with others. As we enjoyed cheese and crackers, tea and water, the group celebrated that in loving and serving others (and God), we practiced and experienced God's unconditional love for us all. One woman in the Bible study, who was also a Table Host, wept when she considered the harsh, judgmental aspects of the parable (the judgment of the goats). The sheep, however, lived in loving service to others unconsciously, without thought of reward or punishment. This no-strings-attached love blessed the giver and receiver with God's graceful presence in the gap.

We learned to experience God's grace in the tension the reflection process created between God's calling in scripture and where we found ourselves. The third week, we considered the tantalizing promise of Hebrews 13:2 of entertaining angels in the act of hospitality. One of our Table Hosts, who was about to join the church, shared a story of being "ditched" by his guest, a Child Care staff member who left his table to join friends and coworkers at another table. Our Visitation Pastor shared a similar experience, and invited us all to reflect on our common experience of rejection and the love to understand and overcome that rejection. Our new member and his partner demonstrated their faith in continuing to serve as Table Hosts in spite of their experience of rejection.

During the fourth week, we gathered around Jesus' well-known correction of his disciples, to "Let the little children come to me..." when they rejected the children (Mark 10:14b). We struggled to get beyond the "Hallmark quality" of this image to the harsh reality of children's vulnerability and invisibility. This uncomfortable truth prevailed not only in Jesus' time, but also too often in our own time. One of our Bible study groups erupted in an argument about whether it was appropriate for children (like Mary, who I introduced in chapter four) to participate in worship at *Asbury* at all.

Yet even here, grace abounded in the gap of our uncomfortable honesty with each other. Mary's parents chose the season of Lent to encourage their daughter to go with the rest of the children to the Sunday School classes after the Children's Blessing early in our worship service. No one had asked them to do so, but their decision demonstrated respect for the members of our congregation who felt our worship services were inappropriate for small children. Respect could flow the other way as well. In the spring, our choir members responded to a returning member's need for child care. Recall that, during Thursday night rehearsals, they placed a portable crib in the choir rehearsal room and took turns caring for the baby.

Our reflection with the scriptures raised our discomfort level, but also our ability to trust each other with uncomfortable truths and receive that trust without judgment. During the Bible study on Luke 14:13-14 ("when you give a banquet, invite the poor"), one of our study leaders told the group that she had felt excluded at *Asbury* because she and her husband did not have children. This was a difficult story to share, but the fact that she shared her story (and the group received it), again made us all aware of the gap in our midst, not merely beyond the walls of the church. In this way, God invited us to

hospitality not only for the strangers' sake, but for our own sake as well.

In her "Hospitality" essay in the anthology, *Practicing Our Faith*, Ana Maria Pineda, professor of Hispanic spirituality and theology at Santa Clara University, celebrates the mysterious mutuality in hospitality. "[X]enos, the word that means 'stranger' in Greek, also means 'guest and 'host.' This one word signals the essential mutuality that is at the heart of hospitality."¹⁶ One of our LAC members put it this way: "This is a different way of being church: for others, which brings us together." As we reflected on the scriptures and our experience as hosts at the suppers, God called us to risk naming the gap, entering into the gap, and discovering God's grace in the gap.

Responding in the Gap: Transformation of the Church

United Methodist pastors Daniel Smith and Mary K. Sellon describe a visioning process as one in which "the congregation and its leaders open themselves to Scripture, to each other, and to God's voice, so that the people can surface the vision that will guide them toward renewal."¹⁷ Green writes that experiencing, exploring, and reflecting on a given life situation in the Doing Theology Spiral creates this vision which compels us to take action in response. "During this Response stage, ... we must seek action which faithfully fulfills the particular Vision which has been so carefully worked out through

¹⁶ Pineda, Ana Maria. "Hospitality." In Dorothy C. Bass, *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People*, 1st ed. (San Francisco, Calif.: Jossey-Bass, 1997), 33.

¹⁷ Daniel P. Smith and Mary K. Sellon, *Pathway to Renewal: Practical Steps for Congregations* (Herndon, Va.: Alban Institute, 2008), 82.

the process of the Doing Theology Spiral.”¹⁸

At the outset of this chapter, I wrote that our LAC and congregation began the process with a response I had already defined in my Prospectus. Such is the nature of a spiral. As Green writes, “our response becomes the new Experience that the group will want to Explore and Reflect upon.”¹⁹ For the purposes of this evaluation, I will examine (1) the ways in which we experienced transformation in living out this response, and (2) the ways in which that transformation enabled us to envision a new response, not *to* the gap, but *in* the graceful space of the gap.

When we recognized and celebrated the many members and friends of *Asbury* congregation and Child Care family who participated in the project during worship, several of our LAC members told the congregation the story of the transformation they had experienced, personally and as part of our congregation. Our trustee confessed to the congregation that, in the early stages of the project, the chaos of the children running everywhere upset him. In the course of the suppers, however, he told us that he came to understand that “it’s all about the kids. Let them play.”

I remembered three years earlier, when I first met this same man on the night our District Superintendent introduced me to him as the new pastor of *Asbury UMC*. I asked him to describe the church in one word, and the word he chose was: “old.” As he told his volunteer story about time with the child care children (another faithful response in the Doing Theology Spiral) and his work as a member of our LAC, he relished the role as “Pop Pop” for many of the children in our child care. As he responded in faith, he

¹⁸ Green, 108.

¹⁹ Ibid., 121.

celebrated his age, and the average age of the congregation, as God's gift to the children, and as their gift to him.

Another LAC member, who served as a Table Host, commented after the final supper that "life and not death appears to be filling the church family." In part, he felt that this sense of life arose out of our experience as hosts of children and their families who invited us to be "worried less about getting things right and more concerned with doing." He and other members of the church shared a "humble optimism" that some of the child care families would accept our invitation to join us for Easter worship. He also mentioned that many members felt "the dinner series was a very positive opportunity for the *Asbury Church* family to pull together as a family and serve others."

This focus on process instead of outcome enabled our congregation to respond with loving hospitality to our child care family in faith that overcame our fears. After all the talk, study, preparations, and prayer, our response of opening our Hall and our hearts to others in faith dispelled our fears of strangers (who became friends) and of our perceived inadequacy (God proved far more adequate than we could have imagined). At times, our experience, exploration, and reflection exacerbated our fears. I certainly felt overwhelmed by the magnitude of the gap at certain points in our journey in this ministry project. Yet as we responded in the midst of these fears, we experienced Christ in us, eternal hope of glory, in surprising, grace-filled ways.

One of our Table Hosts wrote that he did not feel comfortable serving as a Table Host, but ended up doing so because, as he told me later, "I knew I should probably be a host." In spite of his introverted nature, he experienced a welcome by parents at the table he hosted who enjoyed "the opportunity to sit and communicate without having to worry

about their children and without home distractions, like the TV.” The LAC member mentioned above called this “Holy Spirit-led hospitality.”

Green writes that the transformation we experience in responding inevitably leads to a renewal of the Doing Theology Cycle. Having touched on some of the ways in which we experienced transformation in our ministry project response, I now turn to the ways in which that transformation enabled us to envision a new response. Initially, many of our members believed that the answer to the question, “What’s next?” was a more sustainable form of the supper series for the child care family, perhaps monthly. When leaders discussed this option during our April Administrative Council meeting, I wondered how we might expand our gaze to consider larger, more general issues, such as evangelism and loving service in Christ’s name in our neighborhood.

Recall that we had mentioned earlier that a few weeks after the Child Care graduation, the official end of this ministry project, our United Methodist Women sponsored a *Cakes and Cars* event at *Asbury* (to raise funds and awareness for efforts to stop human trafficking). This event, coming on the heels of our series of child care suppers, helped us to imagine a “What’s next?” response, such as the series of Seventieth Anniversary celebrations of God in our neighborhood that I wrote about at the end of the previous chapter.

The *Asbury* congregation inspired me, as we responded in the gap together, to take bold steps of faith in response to Christ’s clear invitation to new life. On May 19, while preaching on John 14:12 (“the one who believes in me... will do greater works than these”), I announced my registration for the *Ride to Conquer Cancer* in Philadelphia on October 11-12. I registered in response to Christ’s invitation to get into the fight, in

spite of my misgivings about raising the minimum \$2500 to qualify to ride. I confessed to the congregation that I could not imagine acting in faith without their help.

Together, we raised \$5000, double the amount required. I was able to ride over 135 miles in the course of two days after recovering from injuries I sustained in a crash while training eight weeks before the event. Responding in faith led me through a winding, surprising path, just like our experience hosting the child care suppers. As we responded in the gap between the now and the not yet of God's kingdom at *Asbury*, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world, granted us peace in the presence of our old enemy, fear (of strangers, irrelevance, risk, failure, and death).

This peace of Christ passes all understanding, according to scripture, and is not of this world.²⁰ Mann warns that aging congregations near the end of their life cycle must choose not between life or death, but *how they will die*, because renewal will seem like death.²¹ Only the peace of Christ can give us the courage to make such a choice, individually or corporately. Perhaps the dance of that precarious peace, like some fiddler on the roof, can only be accomplished following the vanguard of our children.

²⁰ Philippians 4:7 “And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus”; and John 14:27 “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.”

²¹ Mann, 12. Mann quotes Percept International researcher Mark Regele in *Death of the Church*, a book he co-wrote with Mark Schulz: “The Church has a choice: to die as a result of its resistance to change, or to die in order to live.”

CHAPTER 9

THE LORD BLESS YOU AND KEEP YOU: PASTORAL AND THEOLOGICAL
IMPLICATIONS

When I was as young as the children in *Asbury Child Care*, I worshipped with my parents at *Belmont Park Methodist Church* on Hawthorne Lane in downtown Charlotte, North Carolina. My mother had grown up at Belmont Park; my grandparents and aunt and uncle attended with us. During the service, I drew the backs of people's heads on contribution envelopes I opened up, and napped or rested my head in the warmth of my mother's lap. I still remember the sweet sound of the choir singing "The Lord Bless You and Keep You" followed by the "Sevenfold Amen" at the close of every service.

By the summer of 1988, the *Belmont Park* congregation left the building it had moved into thirty-five years earlier and merged with a new, younger church plant (*University City UMC*) ten miles north, outside of the city. The members of *Belmont Park* decided that they could no longer serve their neighbors who were moving into the neighborhood that surrounded the church building where they met for worship. In other words, their gap was too large. *New Hope Missionary Baptist Church*, a predominantly African-American congregation, bought the church building on Hawthorn Lane, and has prospered there since.

This method of renewal, a combination of what Malphurs calls Remix (merger) and Relocation, may not be the most faithful option for the members and leaders of the

Asbury UMC congregation.¹ We believe that God may be calling us to a Revitalization and renewal of ministry at our current site.² We realize that such a revitalization (resurrection) will necessitate a very real death. Mann puts it this way: “most elements of an old identity and purpose must be relinquished is anything new is to occur.”³

So I bring this project paper to a close with a song of blessing I learned when the time came for the congregation to leave the sanctuary and spill out into the neighborhood. If this is the story of a church (and a Church) that came to the end of its life, it is also the story of what happens next. After offering a bracing dose of reality in her book, *Can Our Church Live?* Mann closes with this blessing: “May our congregations live and die in holy curiosity about what God will make of us next.”

Like the widow of Zarephath, we shared with the *Asbury Child Care* family what felt to us like a final meal, in a spirit of holy curiosity. Like the widow, we discovered a rich abundance of God’s blessings at a table set with faith and expectation. For a season, we stilled our anxiety and desperation over the need to close the gaps of relationship, relevance, and our *raison d’être* or mission. McAlpin celebrates the invitation of “the documents of Vatican II, particularly *Lumen Gentium*, [which] emphasize that the church does not have a mission but rather participates in God’s mission (*Missio Dei*) to the world.”⁴

Our Pentecostal pilgrimage includes the need to articulate a renewed sense of

¹ Malphurs, 184-185.

² Ibid., 185.

³ Mann, 11.

⁴ McAlpin, 94.

mission for our time, but we know we are not alone: our mission is a partnership with God. In their chapter “Surfacing a Guiding Vision,” Smith and Sellon celebrate that “God is actively at work in the world,” and that “God wants something both for the congregation and for the people served by the congregation.”⁵ We do not have to generate the miraculous power of resurrection and healing in our community and our congregation; neither must we choose between nurturing ourselves and serving our neighbors. In the gap, around a table, which God set before us in the presence of our enemies, we discovered God’s graceful space for refreshment (in the wilderness), reconciliation (building relationships), and recreation (play).

Refreshment (In the Wilderness)

Since the suppers with our Child Care family, *Asbury Church* has held two (unprecedented) worship services followed by lunch together in our Fellowship Hall. The first celebrated a week of Vacation Bible School in August, and included an inflatable bouncing room for our children to enjoy after worship. Instead of sitting in rows of chairs, or pews, we sat around tables set for lunch. The second (in late November) celebrated a day of consecrating ourselves and our gifts to serve our neighbors above and beyond our institutional and maintenance needs. After nearly twenty years, our Hall has become a place of worship, feasting, and celebration of Christ’s call to “further the reign of God” in our neighborhood.⁶

For many years, we have answered that call by feeding our neighbors. This

⁵ Smith and Sellon, *Pathway to Renewal: Practical Steps for Congregations*, 93.

⁶ McAlpin, 92.

summer, *Our Lady of Fatima* Parish, a Roman Catholic congregation near us, closed their food closet and asked if they might join our food closet ministry. Decades ago, we had celebrated a ministry partnership with *Fatima*, but that spirit of partnership had declined together with the decline of both congregations. We had recently closed and cleaned our food closet out after a mice infestation, and a couple of *Asbury* volunteers were feeding perhaps ten persons each week on Fridays.

By the fall, we were feeding over fifty persons each week in a ministry that involved over two dozen volunteers from both churches. We decided to give up our annual joint Thanksgiving worship service with *Fatima* last year. This Thanksgiving week, we plan to hold a feast of Thanksgiving for all of the volunteers from both churches, as they prepare special Thanksgiving groceries for our neighbors, including seven households from our Child Care family. Some of the same businesses that partnered with us by donating food for the suppers are providing for our feast.

When the Trustees told our leaders about a \$50,000 bid for a new loading dock to expand another *Asbury* feeding ministry, they supported spending as much as the ministry required. This amount represents about a sixth of our total budget. (The Trustees contracted to build a loading pad for a quarter of that initial bid.) Clearly, God is abducting and transforming the hearts of our congregation as we journey into the gap of our need and God's miraculous provision.

Sellon, Smith, and *Alban Institute* collaborator Gail F. Grossman describe the essential foundation of church redevelopment. "The focus shifts from concern around

survival to an eagerness for the future.”⁷ Our experience of refreshment, reconciliation, and recreation in the gap during the suppers with our child care family gave us a foretaste of this future to which God is calling us all. We name what God is doing for us and for our neighbors through our food closet for what it is: a miracle. Every week we clean out our stock entirely, so that God can fill it again for the following week. Just like a widow long ago.

Elijah challenged this hopeless but faithful woman to empty her jar in hospitality, so that God could fill it over and over again. As we experienced our suppers, we discovered that the many gaps were places for God to shine abundantly and miraculously in the midst of our need. In the gap between our neighbors and ourselves, God revealed a playground for a community picnic. In the gap between our expectations and reality, God blessed us all with a communion of grace. In the gap between our past glory and present despair, God called us out (*ekklesia*) into a world that needed the gifts the Spirit had given us to offer. And the world we encountered at table offered us gifts for which we had lost even the imagination to “ask or imagine” (Ephesians 3:20-21).

Reconciliation (Building Relationships)

McAlpin quotes feminist theologian Elizabeth Johnson, who celebrates the way in which “Jesus ‘widened the circle of the friends of God’ to include the most devalued persons.”⁸ Jesus leads us still on Pentecostal pilgrimage to offer and to experience a

⁷ Mary K. Sellon, Daniel P. Smith, and Gail F. Grossman, *Redeveloping the Congregation: A How to for Lasting Change* (Bethesda, MD: Alban Institute, 2002), 93.

⁸ McAlpin, 93.

welcome among strangers, where God makes a home with us (John 14:23; Revelation 3:20). We came to this project (I came to this project) wondering how God might breathe new life over the bones of a dying church. As we gave thanks and broke bread with strangers, young and old, on the pilgrim way, God opened our eyes. We saw Jesus among us; we entertained angels unaware!

Death is swallowed up in victory.

And what happens next? For our Seventieth Anniversary, we plan to host a series of block parties for our neighbors throughout 2015. Half of these events are ministries we already offer, such as a Christmas Party for Foster Care children and their families in northern Delaware, our UMW *Cakes and Cars* event, a *Trunk or Treat* Halloween party in our parking lot, a panel discussion and information booths for our seniors, and perhaps a reprise of one or more of our child care family suppers. We are having fun planning other events for our neighbors, including a Skate Park day in our parking lot, a blessing of the animals, an outdoor concert, and a community dance. We might even rent the local skate rink and invite our neighbors to join us for a skate party.

This is not the way a dying church is supposed to behave. The risen, living Jesus Christ is teaching us the way to tell a new story: the Good News of God's realm surrounding and encroaching on us from all directions. Our leaders are dreaming dreams again; our sons and daughters are prophesying (Joel 2:28-29 and Acts 2:17-18). When we recently asked our leaders to imagine God's future for *Asbury* in five years, they responded enthusiastically. The most consistent theme involved a vision of *Asbury* as a "food hub for the hungry," "the biggest in New Castle County." They dreamed of expanding our child care staff and facilities. In five years, God has given our leaders a

vision of *Asbury* as a culturally diverse congregation of young and old welcoming our neighbors into new life in Christ through ministries of healing, education, and recreation.

We are rehearsing a different narrative at *Asbury* from the much-recycled tale of our rise and fall. Perhaps the most profound transformation we experienced in the suppers was the blurring of boundaries that had long held our spiritual imagination captive. These include the boundaries between friends and strangers, or between saved and unsaved (which we conceive as those who think they have no need of Jesus and those who know they do). They also include the boundaries between children and adults, hosts and guests, or clergy and laity. Jesus' reveals to us: the word for this boundary-blurring experience is reconciliation.

Recreation (Play)

The last boundary blurring, or reconciliation, between clergy and laity, is crucial to the realization of God's dreams in our world. Having been set apart for ordained ministry, I experience the crushing limitations of this boundary acutely, and I long for the reconciliation only Christ can accomplish. Alban Institute church consultant and author Loren Mead articulates the complexity of healing this divide. "The church of the future needs clergy who can lead us into the deep places, who can teach us the enduring story of the people of God. We do not need them to be managers of an institution."⁹ This seems to justify a separation between clergy and laity. But then Mead writes, "Clergy by themselves cannot and will not relinquish their power. There will be no change until the

⁹ Loren B. Mead, *Transforming Congregations for the Future*, Once and Future Church Series (Bethesda, MD: Alban Institute, 1994), 97.

laity takes the lead. The church is too important to be left in the hands of the clergy.”¹⁰

Mead encourages clergy to embrace God’s distinct gifting and calling to “equip the saints for the work of ministry” (Ephesians 4:11-12). No one group of followers of Christ can attempt to do the work of ministry alone, or as vicarious proxy for others. The temptation to do so appears in many guises, especially for ordained leaders in the church. As the sixth senior pastor at *Asbury*, I have struggled with a powerful temptation to turn this old ship of faith to a new course by sheer force of will. Clergy who take on this crushing, impossible task burn themselves out while atrophying the members of the Body of Christ.

“Leadership through self-differentiation” by contrast, “[moves] a family toward its goals but also [maximizes] its functioning, as well as the health and survival of both the family and its leader,” according to Friedman.¹¹ This kind of leader works “to define his or her own goals and self, while *staying in touch* with the rest of the organism” so that “the body will follow [emphasis original].”¹² During the course of the suppers, the children especially encouraged me to lead through self-differentiation by using the gifts the Holy Spirit gave me.

During our two training sessions for table hosts, I told our members that I would not be wearing roller skates for the suppers. I had worn my roller skates for almost every previous event in the Hall. Skating came naturally to me, and I enjoyed playing up the idea that the church had started in a skating rink. But perhaps the real reason I enjoyed

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Friedman, 228.

¹² Ibid.

wearing skates at fellowship events was because I had a ball wearing them. I knew some members of the church disliked it when I skated in the Fellowship Hall, though, and felt obliged to adjust my leadership of the suppers to their expectations.

The first supper, several of the children who gathered after supper for stories, songs, and games asked me where my skates were. Some of them had seen me skating at other church fellowship events. It is difficult to describe the flood of God's grace I experienced in their invitation to skate (I laced up for every subsequent supper). By the final supper, I led them around the Hall on skates, singing and dancing "The Chicken Dance" (by request). I have written above that the children helped me to discover my gift and my need for play (see pages 88-89).

This gift of recreation in our Hall the children claimed as their playground freed me from anxiety and fear. My joyful embrace of God's unique gift and calling among the children created hospitable space for the members of *Asbury* to shine in their diverse and unique gifts (and needs). After the second meal, no one made a big deal of my contribution (either to praise or to berate me). The *New Living Translation* of Ephesians 4:16b describes what we experienced together each night. "As each part does its own special work, it helps the other parts grow, so that the whole body is healthy and growing and full of love."

A Little Child Shall Lead Them

Like Mary (who I described serving communion above, pages 52-53, and 57-58), these little children recreated God's communion and community among us through their playful spirit. The prophet Isaiah communicated this vision as a sign of God's reign. The

children among us invite us into “God’s recreation of the new day” regardless of what we happen to be wearing on our feet.¹³ I have experienced a powerful sense of God’s presence among us in leadership meetings when we laugh and playfully consider the many miraculous signs of what God is doing among us and among our neighbors.

Nearly two years ago, in the midst of the season of Advent, a family called me to come to their home minutes after the patriarch had died. He had roller-skated in his youth, earning the nickname “Crazy Legs,” but had lost both of his legs to diabetes late in life. The day he died, he blessed the members of his family, and then gave his spirit to God. When I arrived, relatives were grieving in various part of the house, while this man’s body grew cold on his deathbed. I asked someone to take me to his body, and his great-granddaughter led me to the empty room.

She danced in her nightgown and assured me that her great-grandfather was in heaven. His wife joined us, and together we anointed and blessed his body and commended him (and ourselves) to God’s care. Before long, nearly everyone in the house had gathered around the body at the invitation of this little one who understood perhaps better than anyone the promise of resurrection. Again, here was another little child who led me.

Paul writes from a prison cell, “to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain” (Philippians 1:21, TNIV). Earlier, he assures the church, “the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion” (Philippians 1:6). We cannot fail. In the course of seven suppers during the season of Lent, 2014, we remembered together as Jesus refreshed, reconciled, and recreated us in a gap filled with grace. But it was the

¹³ *The United Methodist Hymnal: Book of United Methodist Worship*, 145.

children who worship with us and the children of our child care family who really invite us to a sharing in Christ and the children. How? Because “a little child shall lead them”!

APPENDIX A

PROJECT OVERVIEW—HOSTS AND SUPPERS

Lenten Suppers for the Day Care Family at Asbury: Tuesday, March 4, the six Wednesdays from March 12-April 16, and Friday, May 16 (5:00-7:00 pm)

We're expecting an open house kind of rolling start, so we plan to have a couple of Asbury folk greet each day care family (and introduce themselves) as they arrive (to pick up their children from day care and eat). This host couple (could be related or not - we're sending them two by two) will show the day care family where the food is (served buffet style in the kitchen) and then escort them to their table, where the host couple will join them for supper and get to know them better. During supper, the table hosts will ask a question designed to break the ice and to generate conversation (such as: "What was your favorite food growing up, and how has that changed as you've grown older?"). This conversation will include the children. Each pair of table hosts will be trained to observe and record (later) the stories and flavor of the interaction at the table. The hosts will invite the family to the supper the following week, and ask them how they can pray for them during the week. If the family asks about our Sunday schedule, the hosts will of course let them know about how and when to attend worship and Sunday School, but we're intentionally avoiding making this a membership drive.

The table conversations are the most important part of the suppers, but we plan to have music in the background, a Power Point slideshow of pictures of day care children, staff and their families (from pictures submitted by the day care family for this purpose) and roving, costumed storytellers, who will share a short scriptural story that celebrates the role and place of children in God's realm. One night, we'll have a display of day care artwork. We'll always have crayons and paper placemats (as well as paper table coverings) for coloring or doodling (we are planning to collect these) and one of our members will be making table favors that celebrate and communicate an aspect of God's love for us all in Jesus. Because of day care pick up, families will be arriving and eating at different times. Each table holds six - or seven. We could put a couple of smaller (parent/guardian and child) day care families together at a table, but all tables will include a pair of Asbury hosts.

After supper is over, and before we break down and clean up, we'll gather all of the table hosts for a short (15 minutes) time of sharing and prayer. Everyone will take some time later that evening or week to write down their reflections and observations and turn them into our LAC members. I'll be preaching a series about hospitality during Lent (that we'll also be studying together in several small groups) and sharing some of these observations and stories during the sermons each Sunday. As the suppers progress, we will also solicit stories and reflections about how the suppers are going from the day care families.

Each night will have a particular theme:

- Tuesday, March 4 - Mardi Gras! (Boy Scout Troop 27) Pancakes, masks, pinwheels, and face painting
Storytellers: Intro?
Hosts: Ask about how your family celebrates special days and times.
- Wednesday, March 12 - Kids' Menu @ Day Care (Bo Gordy-Stith)
Storytellers: Fish and the loaves multiply when a child shares lunch!
Hosts: Ask about your favorite food as a child/adult. (John 6:11-14 – key verse: 9)
- Wednesday, March 19 – Show & Tell (Jack and Mary King) Kids' crafts and artwork on display
Storytellers: Let the children come to Jesus – for a blessing. (Mark 10:13-16 – key verse: 14)
Hosts: Ask for a story about a favorite thing you would like to bring for show and tell (or a thing you created).

Lenten Suppers for the Day Care Family at Asbury: Tuesday, March 4, the six Wednesdays from March 12-April 16, and Friday, May 16 (5:00-7:00 pm)

- Wednesday, March 26 - Staff Appreciation Night (Merle Ciesielski and UMW Hope Circle)
Storytellers: Luke 4:16-24 – key verses: 21 and 22 – Jesus makes the story come alive!
Hosts: Ask about favorite teacher or coach – who helped you be the best you could be.
- Wednesday, April 2 – Parent/Grandparent Career Night (Martin and Michelle Walter)
Storytellers: Birth story and the blessing from Simeon and Anna (Luke 2:1-40 – key verse: 33)
Hosts: What do you want to be when you grow up?
- Wednesday, April 9 – Mission Possible: St. Jude's Children's Hospital (Hal and Beverly Barker) – Possibly bring in items and toys/fundraiser
Storytellers: Jaurus' daughter – she is only asleep! Get her something to eat! (Mark 5:21-43 – key verses: 39 and 41)
Hosts: What do you care most about?
- Wednesday, April 16 – Lost and Found (AdCouncil) Easter egg hunt in the Hall
Storytellers: Jesus gets lost (and found) on a trip to Jerusalem! (Luke 2:41-52 – key verse: 45 and 48)
Hosts: Invite people to tell the story about someone special in your life who is no longer alive, who you will never forget.
- Friday, May 16 – Day Care Graduation and Reception – (TBD) we will invite former staff and alumni to join us, and share their old day care pictures and stories.
Storytellers: Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat (what will become of your dreams)? (Genesis 37:17b- 21 – key verse: 20)
Hosts: What was your earliest, best memory?

We will set up 12-15 tables (with 6 chairs) in the Fellowship Hall around a large rug in the center, which will demark a stage area. The storytellers may use this as a place to act out the story they are telling each night, once a large crowd gathers in the space, or they may read or tell stories to children who have finished eating and are ready for some interaction before their parents/guardians leave. Around the circle of tables, we will set up four trees (either with leaves or merely branches) decorated with lights, at each of the four corners. We will also set each table with one or more battery-operated candles as a centerpiece.

Each Week during Lent, we will offer a Bible study on Hospitality that will compliment a worship series, based on the book, "Widening the Welcome of Your Church" by Fred Bernhard and Steve Clapp. The topics and scriptures for each Sunday are as follows:

1. March 9 – Chapter 1 "Hospitality: Not Optional and Not Safe" – Romans 15:7-13 (key verse: 7) and Luke 4:14-30
2. March 16 – Chapter 2 "A Biblical Look at Hospitality" – Matthew 25:31-46 (key verse: 40) and Genesis 18:1-15
3. March 23 – Chapter 6 "Welcoming Strangers" – Hebrews 13:1-8; 20-21 (key verse: 2) and 1 Kings 17:1-16
4. March 30 – Chapter 7 "Welcoming Children" – Mark 10:13-16 (key verse: 14) and Isaiah 11:1-9)
5. April 6 – Chapter 10 "Hospitality and the Overlooked" – Luke 14:7-14 (key verses: 13-14) and Ezekiel 37:1-14
6. April 13 – Chapter 3 "The Oakland Experience" – John 13:1-20 (key verse 14) and Philippians 2:5-11

APPENDIX B

FEBRUARY 19, 2014 LETTER OF INVITATION



February 19, 2014

We are about to embark on a missionary journey to our neighbors. Sometimes crossing the street or the driveway can feel like a huge distance to travel – and our neighbors feel like strangers to us. At Asbury Church, we have realized that many of our neighbors who are part of our Day Care family have been coming to our house for a long time without experiencing what it means to be welcomed with open arms in God's house.

So we're inviting them to dinner at God's house, here at Asbury. And we're inviting you to be a part of that welcome.

We plan to host a series of seven weekly dinners, starting on Tuesday, March 5, and then on each of the six Wednesday evenings leading up to Easter, from March 12 to April 16, from 5-7 each night. Already, over 70 of our members and friends have joined the ministry team, and we believe this mission is important enough to invite everyone at Asbury UMC. Especially you.

Please prayerfully consider how God is calling you to help us welcome our Day Care family each night. We suggest the following ways to share the gift of your life:

- Pray for the mission team
- Send notes of encouragement to mission team members
- Participate in a Bible Study (Sunday, during the week – day/evening – or online)
- Help with set up and break down of our Fellowship Hall
- Help decorate the tables
- Help prepare and serve the meals
- Serve as a table host (together with a partner from Asbury)
- Donate supplies for the meals
- Write notes of encouragement to those who will be serving and hosting

We would appreciate your responding to this letter by returning the enclosed invitation to serve or by calling the church office (302-328-5649) and letting us know how you would like to be a part of this venture. Each Sunday leading up to Easter, we will be sharing stories of how this missionary event is drawing us all closer to God in Christ as we break bread together with strangers who become friends. You are a vital member of Asbury and we will only accomplish what God is inviting us to do together with you.

Your Partner in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "P. Bo Cf-h".

APPENDIX C

SUPPER SERIES FLYER

STARTS
MARCH

4

Join Us for Supper at Our Place!

Asbury Hall - next to the Day Care entrance anytime between 5-7 pm

Join us for supper as we welcome the Spring after a too-long Winter. Starting Tuesday, March 4, and for the six Wednesdays between March 12 and April 16, come on over to Asbury Hall after picking up your children and enjoy a meal you don't have to make or clean up! It's our way of saying thank you for sharing your wonderful children with us. We've set a place at the table just for you!

TUESDAY - MARCH 4 - MARDIS GRAS!
WEDNESDAY - MARCH 12 - KIDS' MENU
WEDNESDAY - MARCH 19 - SHOW & TELL
WEDNESDAY - MARCH 26 - STAFF APPRECIATION
WEDNESDAY - APRIL 2 - PARENT APPRECIATION
WEDNESDAY - APRIL 9 - MISSION POSSIBLE!
WEDNESDAY - APRIL 16 - LOST & FOUND
(EASTER EGG HUNT)



APPENDIX D

FIRST SUPPER FLYER

Free Pancake Supper!

**TONIGHT from 5-7
Asbury Hall**

**Celebrate Mardi Gras
with Us**



**Sponsored by the Boy
Scout Troop 27 at
Asbury United
Methodist Church**

APPENDIX E

TABLE HOST NOTE SHEET FOR MARCH 19, 2014

Table Host Note Sheet for Wednesday, March 18, 2014

Name: _____

Please note: Do not feel obligated to complete every line of this form. Use the items that trigger your memory about the most important things that happened tonight.

1. How do we/they interact with each other at the Table?

2. How does the relationship change over the course of the supper series?

3. How does our faith in Christ impact this relationship?

4. How do we experience the role of host?

5. In what ways do the families from the Day Care "host" us? What gifts do they bring to the Table?

6. How is the experience of hosting changing us?

7. Other Comments

Table Host Note Sheet for Wednesday, March 18, 2014

Theme: Show & Tell

Supper: Jack and Mary King

Story: Jesus says to the disciples: "Let the children come to me."

Hosts: Ask for a story about a favorite thing you would like to bring for show and tell (or a thing you created). Some of the children have already brought an item for show and tell tonight.

You may also want to ask about the following day care activities this week:

- Tuesday – Mix and match clothes
- Today – Crazy Hair day
- Tomorrow – Sports day (favorite sport?)
- Friday – Pajama day

For the blessing:

God is great, God is good,
and we thank him for our food.
By his hands we all are fed.
Give us , Lord, our daily bread. Amen.

Observation - What are we looking for?

We are collecting stories about what happens when we invite our Day Care family (children, parents/guardians, and staff) to join us for a series of suppers during Lent (spring).

These stories include what happens for us (members of Asbury UMC, as we plan, pray, study the Bible and reflect, set-up, cook, serve, greet, host, and clean up.

Results are results – we are simply collecting stories about what happens when we engage in this ministry/mission to and with our Day Care family.

Focus on using "I" statements about what you see, experience, and how you feel, rather than evaluative, general statements about the "success" or "failure" of our efforts.

Our primary "subjects" are ourselves (we are player-participants) and the adults (parents/guardians and staff):

- How do we/they interact with each other at the Table?
- How does the relationship change over the course of the supper series?
- How does our faith in Christ impact this relationship?
- How do we experience the role of host?
- In what ways do the families from the Day Care "host" us? What gifts do they bring to the table?
- How is the experience of hosting changing us?

APPENDIX F

NEW LETTERHEAD



APPENDIX G

MAY 24, 2014 WORSHIP BULLETIN (FIRST AND LAST PAGES)



JESUS SET OUR HEARTS ON FIRE

WE GATHER IN THE NAME OF JESUS

Serving as Ushers today: Bob Shephard, Bill Hudghton, Charles McCall, Dennis Berkey

Greeters: Linda Mumford & Jan Pietruczenia

Prelude Gary Hostetler, Minister of Music & Arts

Acolytes: Jessica Zarin & Jacob Puharik

*Welcome & Call to Worship Kathy Wayne, Lay Servant
(please stand in body or in spirit)

Leader: Receive my love, O Beloved, You who hear my voice and my supplication

People: You incline your ear to me, and I will call upon You with trust both day and night.

Leader: When the snares of fear encompass me, when the pangs of loneliness envelop me....

People: Then I call upon You, my Rock: You come to my aid, Your strength upholds me.

Psalm 116:1-4, Nan C. Merrill translation

*Opening Praise (please stand in body or in spirit)

I Will Call Upon The Lord (words on screen)

Amazing Grace-My Chains Are Gone (words on screen)

I Love You Lord (words on screen)

Welcome and Children's Blessing

Pastor Bo Gordy-Stith

Upcoming Events at Asbury



Asbury Day Care Graduation
Friday, May 16 1-3 pm



Strawberry Festival
Thursday, May 22 5-7 pm



UMW Cakes and Cars
Saturday, June 21
8 am-3 pm

Last Sunday, 108 gathered to worship. Average Weekly Budget Income is \$3,520.00. Our Average Weekly Giving for April was \$3,873.00.

Contact Information

300 East Basin Rd. New Castle, DE 19720 asburynewcastle.net
 302-328-5649 (Office) 302-328-5640 (Day Care)

Admin. Assistant—Sandy Jablonski (office@asburynewcastle.net)

Day Care—Angela Kirkley/Danielle Clemens (asburydaycare@yahoo.com)

Finance/Operations—Bob Shephard (bobshephard@verizon.net)

Pastor—Bo Gordy-Stith (pastor@asburynewcastle.net) 302-373-5143

Music & Arts Minister—Gary Hostetler (macpianoman@yahoo.com) 379-3732

Visitation Minister—John Jackson (jet14jan@verizon.net) 302-366-1538

Office Hours: M-F 9 a.m. to 1 p.m.

Sunday Worship:

8:15 a.m. Communion (Chapel)

10:15 a.m. Main Worship (Sanctuary)



APPENDIX H

LENT 2014 WORSHIP AND BIBLE STUDY PLAN

Asbury Worship Themes & Scriptures for 2013-14 (RCL C-A)

We Go With God

Theme for Year: Go from your country and your kindred and your fathers house to the land that I will show you.
(Genesis 12:1)

Date	Liturgical Cal	Notes	Theme	Psalm	First Reading	Second Reading	Key Verse	Life Application
	Widening Jesus' Welcome at Asbury (Mar 5-Apr 18)							
Wednesday, 3/5/2014	Ash Wednesday		Invitation to Freedom	51:1-17	Joel 2:1-2, 12-17	Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21	Matthew 6:3-4	
Mar 9, 2014	Lent 1	Hospitality: Not Optional and Not Safe (1)	Hospitality: Not Optional and Not Safe (But Good!)	32	Romans 15:7-13	Luke 4:14-30	Romans 15:7	Jesus inspires and makes possible the widening of our hearts to welcome strangers - overcoming our real fears.
Mar 16, 2014	Lent 2	A Biblical Look at Hospitality (2)	Hospitality - the Biblical Way to Find God	121	Genesis 18:1-15	Matthew 25:31-46	Matthew 25:40	Jesus invites us to realize that we welcome God when we widen our hearts to welcome a stranger.
Mar 23, 2014	Lent 3	Welcoming Strangers (6)	Strange(r) Love	95	1 Kings 17:1-16	Hebrews 13:1-8; 20-21	Hebrews 13:2	Jesus, the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow, gives us confidence change - to widen our hearts and welcome God.
Mar 30, 2014	Lent 4	Welcoming Children (7)	Let the Children Come (to Bless Us!)	23	Isaiah 11:1-9	Mark 10:13-16	Mark 10:14	Jesus commands us to make way for the children, who will lead us to God's Kingdom in our midst.
Apr 6, 2014	Lent 5/ Communion	Hospitality and the Overlooked (10)	Communion: A Banquet Without Boundaries	130	Ezekiel 37:1-14	Luke 14:7-14	Luke 14:13-14	Jesus life and ministry demonstrate God's boundary-less love, and invites everyone to his Table.
Apr 13, 2014	Palm/Passion Sunday	The Oakland Experience (3)	Prepare Ye the Way of the Lord	118:1-2, 19-29	Philippian 2:5-11	John 13:1-20	John 13:14	In the graceful act of refreshing and welcoming, we prepare ourselves and the strangers among us for God.

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