

A ROADMAP FOR GROWING AND DEVELOPING THE IMMIGRANT CHURCH:
A CASE STUDY OF THE AFRICAN CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY CHURCH OF
RICHMOND, VIRGINIA.

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

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May, 2014

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ABSTRACT

A ROADMAP FOR GROWING AND DEVELOPING THE IMMIGRANT CHURCH: A CASE STUDY OF THE AFRICAN CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY CHURCH (ACCC).

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What expresses the faith of a congregation is not numerical data but rather stories that the numbers only grossly approximate.¹ A congregation's story creates a framework through which the church can define its existence and purpose in the world. When a church fails to enact the stories that embed its identity, it eventually develops blurry vision and risks being evaluated by its nascent identity, numerical value, and programs. Dan McAdams puts it simply, "If you want to know me, then you must know my story, for my story defines who I am. And if I want to know myself, to gain insight into the meaning of my life, then I, too, must come to know my own story."² Stories have transforming powers and can shape a congregation's identity and vocation. This thesis illustrates how the congregation of the African Christian Community Church (ACCC) of

¹ James F. Hopewell, *Congregation: stories and structures* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 88.

² Dan P. McAdams, *The Stories that we live By: personal myths and the making of the self* (New York: The Guilford Press, 1993), 11.

Richmond, Virginia was transformed from a state of confusion over what constitutes church growth and development. By utilizing Mark Branson's *Appreciative Inquiry and Congregational Change* (AI), a research paradigm that leads a congregation toward changing its conversation through stories and memories that are life-giving and reimagining its past, present, and the future.

ACCC comprises of Liberian immigrants whose lives were devastated by many years of civil war. Members of the congregation have internalized memories of the pain and suffering they incurred during the Liberian Civil War. Despite their negative experiences, members of the church celebrate those stories of their lives that bring vitality and hope. In the words of C. S. Lewis, "God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pain: it is His megaphone to arouse a deaf world."³

³Carl S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: The Harper Collins Publishers, 1940), 91.

To

Joan and our children: Esther, Calvina, Joel, Calvin Jr., Precious, Lydia, and Olive

For your love, prayers, and emotional support

My beloved mother, Olive Joe Manning, and grandpa, Joe Kollie

For giving me the touch-light

BRAVO!

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I remain grateful to everyone who supported me throughout this journey, including members of the Lay Advisory Committee (Dr. Daniel Barclay, Rev. Lydia Stewart-Bull, Hawa Gobah, Julius Brown, Josephine Barclay, John Jackson, and Eva Sherman). Thanks to the storytellers, the interviewees, group participants, members of the Liberian Association of Virginia (LAVA), and the entire congregation of the ACCC. As a result of your faithfulness to the very in-depth process of Appreciative Inquiry, the ACCC is celebrating the signs of God's grace.

Thanks to my dad, The Reverend Dr. Napoleon Chandler Birch, and The Rev. Enid C. Birch (my beloved step-mother), for your prayers and emotional support.

The Rev. D. Eleazer and Glendy Reeves, and The Rev. Billy Davis (my dear friends and partners): my family shall forever remain grateful for the love and support you shared with us---BRAVO!

CHAPTER ONE

REDEFINING AND REFOCUSING

Leading an organization through change is usually an uphill struggle. The process can be ongoing and demands commitment and dedication on the part of the transformer and those involved. Transforming a congregation is even more a daunting task. It is quite difficult to recondition congregants from adapted habits and practices. Change means reshaping the emotions, the lifestyle, the comfort zone, and the peace of others. In terms of the church, the process of leading change can be like repairing a vehicle while someone is driving it at the same time. As silly as this may sound, that is precisely what it takes to undergo change in the church. The church, a living organism, continues with its life--worship, evangelism, discipleship, service, committees, lay-leaders, and the prevailing situation while the push for change is implemented concomitantly. In the context of the faith community, transformation is less about reason and more of discernment. Conventional wisdom does not always work when advocating change in the church. The difference between success and failure, however, depends upon the transformer's ability to own the vision, communicate it in a clear and concise manner, and connect it with the people in a way that it becomes everyone's name brand.

To succeed in the process of change, the visionary has to stand firm on his or her conviction. That may mean risking failure or public shame.

The first paragraph is a preamble to a story of challenge and triumph, a life-changing narrative of the African Christian Community Church (ACCC) of Richmond, Virginia. The Doctor of Ministry Project, from which this thesis was written, aimed at creating a forum for constructive conversations amongst ACCC members and associates for the purpose of clarifying God's call and promise for the immigrant church. The project was conducted with the intent to lead the ACCC toward uncovering the signs of God's gracious presence within the congregation. The interviews/conversations, group sessions, and stories of participants prompted attentive/substantive conversations, critical reflections, and faithful envisioning by adopting appreciation and gratitude as the approach toward congregational change and growth. The key word is *gratitude*.¹

As the founder, pastor, and author of this thesis, I welcome you to share in the storied experience of the ACCC. ACCC is predominantly a Liberian congregation that encountered its period of crisis and transformation. Despite the traumatic impact of their civil war, Liberians are proud people who do not take their faith in God lightly. The two defining elements of the Liberian Christian is Faith in God and love for the church. In this chapter, I will present the roadmap that led the ACCC toward redefining and refocusing its vision.

¹ Mark Lau Branson, *Memories, Hopes, and Conversations: Appreciative Inquiries and Congregational Change* (Herndon: The Alban Institute 2004), x, ix.

Prior to conducting this project in the spring of 2013 with the ACCC, its members became obsessed with the numerical growth to the extent that they ignored the incredible outreach of the church to the immigrant population. Their point of conversation focused primarily on physical growth of the Sunday school, Bible study, and Sunday worship. The most frequently asked question that filtered throughout the congregation was, “why aren’t we growing?” Members of the ACCC were in a dire need for expansion and structure. There was an outcry from some congregants demanding the church to get a choir in place, dress the ushers magnificently, find an organist--do this and that, and we will experience growth. The point is that ACCC was not clear about its identity and vocation. Members of the ACCC did not grasp an understanding of what God has called the church to be. Misconceptions brewed weekly as to what the church ought to be doing and how to go about its mission. Some members crafted a Cinderella image of what they wish the ACCC become—they opted for a dramatic, magical transformation that leads to an increase in Sunday worship attendance. During the “ACCC growth crisis,” so much was demanded of the pastor in terms of what the church ought to be doing or achieving.

Although there are overwhelming reasons that demand a grateful attitude toward God, ACCC members were not cognizant of the extent to which God has blessed them. Some of its members often drew condescending comparisons between their former congregations and the ACCC. Some complained that worship was boring at times, especially Sundays when we had no drummer or an organist. Some congregants still held the “Pre-Liberian Civil War” image of what the church ought to be—when the beauty and elegance of the sanctuary represented the success and dignity of the church. As a

result of the project, the conversation of the ACCC congregation has shifted toward a grateful appreciation of God's presence with the community. One of the learning experiences of the project is that the church is worth more than any physical structure or iconic design. Through constructive conversations, members of ACCC are now adapting a new way of seeing, being, and doing. The church is gracefully heading toward its call to duty.

The Greek term for church, *ecclesia* means "a called out people." Through story enactment and re-envisioning, members of ACCC have come to realized that the immigrant church, an intentional faith community² is unique in its vision and mission to the world...and that a congregation should not be evaluated on the basis of an absence of a choir, the size of the congregation, or the nature of its programs. While the ACCC belongs to the universal church, she has a specific call. The mission statement of the ACCC reads, "Our mission is to proclaim the message, principles, and values of Jesus Christ to the world, irrespective of race, gender, ethnic affiliation, or social status."³ A congregation is worth more than what the numbers grossly portray. The church should all about discipling the lost at all cost, whatever the size of its budget or worship attendance might be.

Each congregation is a called out community that needs to maintain its authentic identity and "ways of being in the world, of relating to one another in community, and of

² *Intentional faith community* is hereby defined as an outreach (ministry, mission, or a congregation) that focuses on a particular group of people.

³ ACCC's Mission statement can be found in the bylaws or at www.africanchristianchurch.org.

enacting ritual, care and spirituality.”⁴ Human experience and story enactment (suffering, injustice, discrimination, and socio-economic factors) must always exist as the focal aisle upon which the immigrant church designs its discipleship and service to the world. True Christian witness within the context of the immigrant church (like the ACCC) means setting the stage where broken lives are mended. True Christian witness means undertaking intentional ministries that address the spiritual, physical, emotional, and psychological needs of the congregation and society as a whole. As a result of the project, members of the ACCC have come to a recognition that the mission of the immigrant church, among other things, is framed around the existence and continuity of an intentional community that upholds the cultural values and norms of its people, responds to the needs of others, helps new immigrants make a smooth transition, and upholds the principles and values of Jesus Christ. Size does matter, but not always in matters of faith. We can turn the world upside down and right side up in spite of the size of the congregation. Rather than concern itself with the events outside of its calling, congregations should seek God’s will for them and act upon it accordingly.

New congregations like the ACCC, (in my definition a new congregation is one in its first decade of existence) tend to construct narratives that are consistent with their nascent identity. They usually indulge in the habit of dropping their net in deep or shallow waters for a catch without considering the repercussions. The desire to grow and become like the church next door can be a sweet temptation for adapting current trends rather than discerning God’s will for his people. Before a congregation is formed, God

⁴ James Woodward, Stephen Pattison, *The Blackwell Reader in Pastoral and Practical Theology* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2000), 106.

had already designed a plan and purpose for it. God has not called any church to mimic another. In his addresses to Macedonia, the Jerusalem Church, or the Corinthian church, the Apostle Paul was aware of the context and the story of the people. It is my conviction, that pastor, church planters, and lay leaders should not fall for the excitement of the moment without first discerning God's will for their congregation or ministry. The events and activities of the time may not necessarily resonate with God's call for your community. The primary learning experience of this project is that God has a special call and anointing for each congregation. Each congregation is a perfect design, made in God's image and likeness. When a body of believers fails to recognize the divine nuggets that God has bestowed upon them, to live within the realm of appreciating their identity and vocation, they risk growing religious murmurs that are never content or satisfied. As a "called out" community, the ACCC needs to celebrate the enormous blessings the Lord has given her in the last decade if she is to experience a fuller understanding of God's intention. There are always going to be trials and tribulations, but God's people have a much greater reason to celebrate the signs of God's grace.

The presence of a narrative of concern, the point of intersection of the multiple narratives that surface around a story, is almost always evident in the congregation's life. Without pulling the various stories that make up the congregation's story and history, a congregation risks losing its identity, which can potentially derail its function and capacity. In the case of the ACCC, the point of intersection for the various narratives came about by matching the iconic images that some of its members held of the typical Mainline Liberian Church with the call and purpose of the immigrant church in the

United States. Like the Israelites (Ps. 137), Solomon's Temple, with its entire splendor, is probably the best place to sing the Lord's song....

As indicated before, the local story at the onset of the ACCC was primarily the resettlement of Liberian refugees within the city of Richmond, Virginia. In partnership with various agencies and churches, the core group of the ACCC galvanized its resources to accommodate war weary Liberians in the city. The influx of (Liberian) refugees served as an opportunity for the ACCC to get involved, in a very positive manner, with shaping the lives of the downtrodden. Those moments prompted an opportunity for evangelism and discipleship. It was a chance to attract the fellowship of the (African) immigrant community to the ACCC through partnership with local agencies to address human needs. That seemed perfectly fine, but to the extent that the church neglected to define its identity contributed to the growth crisis which nearly caused the death of the congregation.

By utilizing Appreciative Inquiry research design, with its focus on stories that evoke life and energy, the congregation is once more engaging and re-envisioning. AI introduced the ACCC to a process that involves group dialogues, story enactment, and reimagining the past, present, and the future. It empowered members of the congregation to consolidate their respective stories into a narrative of opportunity. AI provided the pathway whereby the church is now formulating and imagining its future. In the words of James Hopewell,

A congregation is a group that possesses a special name and recognized members who assemble regularly to celebrate a more universally practiced

worship but who communicate with each other sufficiently to develop intrinsic patterns of conduct, outlook, and story. The flesh and blood the congregation celebrates is not therefore those of a family but those of a universal Lord whose worship transcends the local church to embrace all assemblies that call themselves Christian.⁵

Associating with the practices and events of the universal church is a rewarding experience, but this is not enough to define a church's mission. Celebrating Sunday worship, enacting Lent and Advent, or administering sacraments (ordinances) may not be enough to give a congregation its desire outlook. In the words of Hopewell,

That which holds a congregation together is much more than "creeds, governing structures, and programs. At a deeper level, it is implicated in the symbols and signals of the world, gathering and grounding them in the congregation's own idiom."⁶

Idioms are symbols that relate to the traits of a people. Through the project dialogues, it is becoming evident that some ministries of the church ought to be taken seriously as they are symbolic of who we are and where we are heading. The Monthly Community Meal for example, brings together members of the ACCC and those of the Liberian immigrant community of Richmond into fellowship every third Sunday of the month. "By way of the activities of the project, which included the sermon series, interviews, storytelling, and group conversations ACCC is coming to terms with its worldview, idioms, metaphors, tales, and history. As a result of its monthly community meals, for example, the ACCC is becoming a village that invites the community into fellowship. In that light, the focus is not merely on the food, but also on the people and acknowledgement of the community. According to Hopewell,

⁵ James F. Hopewell, *Congregation: stories and structures* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 12-13.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 6.

The local church suffers and risks its future when it does not take its idioms seriously. If the congregation views itself as merely the repository of meanings better expressed elsewhere, it fails to appreciate its genus; its microcosmic capacity to reflect in uniquely lived form the sociality of humankind. When a congregation considers its own language neither interesting nor important, it devalues its identity and thus its names for and before God.⁷

We must insert that the ACCC was not disrespectful of its idioms and symbols, but was not intentional either about orienting its members toward a greater appreciation for themselves. As a result of the project, the ACCC is upholding the nuances of the African culture and norms. More emphasis is now being placed on contextualizing worship, Bible study, and approach to discipleship.

Narratives guide a congregation toward adapting its purpose and vocation. God is at work in the human story and experience. The message and attitude of a congregation are influenced by its storied experience. We recognize and act upon God's intention for the community through the stories that give life and bring energy to the congregation. The influx of refugees and the urge to respond to their vast needs caused the church during its formative years to not formulate its main narrative. One interesting narrative that arose during the prospectus is a description of the immigrant church by a member of the Lay Advisory Committee (LAC). This LAC member referred to the immigrant church as "the church in transition." Random House Unabridged Dictionary defines transition as "a movement, passage, from one position, state, stage, subject, concept, etc., to another."⁸ As a congregation comprising members whose stories and history can be

⁷ James F. Hopewell, *Congregations: Stories and Structures* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 9.

⁸ Stuart Berg Flexner, *Random Unabridged Dictionary* (New York: Random House, 1993), 2010.

traced back to their native land and elsewhere in refugee camps, the LAC participant stressed that one cannot gain a fuller understanding of the ACCC without having a holistic view of the church. The ACCC member believes that the identity, vocation, and mission of the immigrant church are not fully rooted within its nascent culture, but in its origin, tradition, and the experiences of the people. The identity of the immigrant church is a combination of its current state as well as its origin. We are an integral part of our past, present, and future.

By the time of the prospectus, the ACCC had dwindled to a tiny congregation. The “Pentecostals” segment of the congregation often championed the cause of casting out the demons responsible for the church’s decline. They led days, and sometimes, weeks of fasting and prayer. This select group of faithful prayer warriors, mostly women, held fasts and offered prayers to keep Satan away, and spur the church’s growth and move it forward. There are some who attributed the decline to conflicts that existed between parishioners, and suggested that an amicable resolution to these issues might give rise to the church’s growth and development. Suggestions were also made about improving my sermons, forming a choir, making praise and worship more intense, and avoiding talks on giving (because it scares people away). We went with the flow, yet the tidal wave of growth did not seem to return.

A decade of hard work, commitment, and sacrifice did not really matter at this point. The incredible outreach of the ACCC to the immigrant population of Richmond through community care groups - a Bible study/fellowship oriented ministry, an after school tutorial program, a food pantry, the Coffee House – a ministry that addresses the

social/spiritual needs of children and youths, the Family Life Conferences to address emotional and psychological issues, refugee resettlement and reorientation programs, among others did not really matter. Nothing the church had done or was doing in term of its witness counted as long as it did not have more people attending Sunday morning worships. Suggestions and criticisms filtered everywhere, with little or no visible results. Frustration loomed over the need to fill the pews.

We live in a time of changing assumptions and paradigms, not a one size fits all society. Congregations are unique in nature and purpose. The environment, culture, socio-political context, and human experience (story, history) affect the total life of a congregation. By uncovering the rich, metaphorical nature of the ACCC through story enactment, members of the ACCC acknowledged that the church could no longer assume that what happens in church A has to happen in church B. Through constructive engagement, members of the ACCC have learned that there are no magical answers to matters of faith other than discernment. ACCC, a faith community, will ultimately find its voice and place by shaping its spirit, not its structure or programs. At the core of the ACCC's problem was not and still is not physical growth. The cries, gossip, and complaints about growing the church simply did not match up with the real narrative of concern which eventually surfaced as participants dialogued, told stories, imagined the past, present, and future. The ACCC needed to find its story and stories; and it did so by,

as Goleman puts it “reframing the common language and marker events of the congregation.”⁹

The success of the project and its effect on the congregation of the ACCC stemmed from its story-evoking approach. Active and inactive members of the ACCC and the Liberian (African immigrant) community of Richmond were drawn into forums of storytelling. Highlights included family stories, stories of the Liberian Civil War, life in the refugee camps, arrival in Richmond, life in America, and stories of their affiliation with the ACCC, just to name a few. The interviews and story-evoking conversations paved the pathway for the relief the church is currently experiencing. The immigrant church, an intentional faith community, stands or falls depending on its ability to honor the dignity of the many stories that comprise its nature and history. Congregational leadership must provide the space whereby its people can imagine and enjoy the rich heritage that stories bring to them. Stories have transformational power when they are pulled into a coherent narrative. Stories are engaging and they enliven the spirit of a people. We gleaned once more from Larry Goleman,

People know from life experience. But what is known lies beneath their awareness until uncovered, at which point the knowledge becomes obvious. Give people facts and the conversation stumbles over disagreement or disputation of the facts. Give them a good story, a bold story, and the conversation intuitively leaps ahead to action. A story moves people beyond fears toward hope, beyond remembered pasts to present and future potential, beyond limited possibilities.¹⁰

⁹ Larry A. Goleman, *Finding Our Story: Narrative Leadership and Congregational Change* (Herdon: The Alban Institute, 2010), 2.

¹⁰ Larry A. Goleman, *Finding Our Story: Narrative Leadership and Congregational Change* (Herdon: The Alban Institute, 2010), 25.

The weeks of deliberate dialogues and reimagining the past and anticipating the present and the future through storied enactment has once again tightened the ACCC's commitment to its call. The revelation that ultimately emerged through the many stories is that since its founding nearly a decade ago, the ACCC did not take the time to define and clarify its call and vocation. Good programs, budget size, number of people aren't sufficient reasons for existing. The lack of clarity of vision was the direct result of the identity crisis. We were a confused and disoriented congregation that needed nurturing in becoming the people God has called us to be in the world. By transforming its conversation, an implicit consensus was reached, one which challenged the church to focus more on its founding principles, which entail the establishment of a multiethnic community center where African immigrants can worship God, uphold and teach values. The ACCC has an obligation to empower children and youths through educational, economic, and other self-help initiatives, identify community resources to assist needy individuals and families, reintegrate and reorient African values, strengthen immigrant families through training and self-help initiatives, advocate for needy families, and provide emotional, psychological and spiritual support to war-ravaged Liberians.

Rather than dwell on claims of wanting to become like the churches to which they once belonged, (in Africa), or the traditional churches they have come across in America, the ACCC must hereafter honor its present being and desist from the sameness stereotype. As stated earlier, the ACCC's incredible outreach to the immigrant population over the years via the operation of a free after school program, a food pantry that addresses the physical needs of immigrants, an annual summer program that usually

ends with the distribution of free backpacks for participating boys and girls, and spiritual and emotional support means nothing if the church is not clear about its vision and identity.

Members of the ACCC also acknowledged that the congregation needed healing. As a congregation that is comprised of folks with internalized anger, frustrations, fear, anxieties, and possible trauma dating back to the Liberian Civil War, the way going forward is healing through the power of story. The church is called to be a community that endured decades of suppression and humiliation in the hands of the military regime of Samuel Doe and nearly two decades of civil war and life in the refugee camps. The prospectus was right on task. It was time to find our story. [For this, I remain indebted to my faculty advisor, Sister Kathleen Flood and colleagues of the Doctor of Ministry Program whose suggestions shaped my thoughts toward facilitating storytelling and re-envisioning through interviews, groups, and community dialogues].

Prior to their migration, most immigrants thought of America as the heaven on earth that “butters bread and sugars cocoa,” as the Liberian idiom says. This delusion often proves to be far from reality once they arrive and begin to confront day to day reality -- jobs, bills, car notes, rent/lease, and the disconnection with immediate family and extended relatives. These burdens are huge enough to prompt confusion and chaos in churches like the ACCC. Hence, the Family Life Conferences, a ministry established at the onset of the church as an intervention to address the presence of trauma, stress, anxiety, and depression was shortly cut off due to what seemed a lack of interest on the part of those for whom it was intended (refugees arriving in Richmond). The Family Life

conference is a fantastic ministry, but was not yielding the needed results because the church had not derived its story.

The formidable reality is that congregations are uniquely called, and the need to clarify their very reason of being cannot be overemphasized. It is counterproductive when congregations simply flow with conventional understandings and comfortable postures. The familiar definition of ministry and success do not necessarily apply in every context. Know your people. Going with the flow can be a major distraction from the primary purpose for which God has called a congregation. We must acknowledge that the world is changing in the midst of diverse cultures and societies. Every congregation has the challenge to transform its basic identity and vocation. We learned from the project, that our church (the ACCC) needed to be an interpretative community. Each congregation has a treasured vision and congregations need to cherish what they contribute to the advancement of God's kingdom. What God has called us to be and do is distinct and may not necessarily resonate with our neighbor's church.

Refocusing the ACCC through a utilization of Appreciative Inquiry was initially a complex task. The paradigm is fairly new and unlikable in strategy because of the restraint it places on negativity; it employs participants to dwell more on the positive, the honorable, the just, the pure...those life-giving memories and stories that drive a congregation toward a hopeful future. Church members are accustomed to problem solving methodologies---set up a "problem solving committee," identify and enlist prevailing problems, and make appropriate recommendations to remedy the situation. Unlike most problem-solving methodologies that complement finger pointing and blame

games, post modern narrative research plays the role of providing procedural map for reflecting upon multiple intersecting ministry context stories. It combines the personal and faith story of the researcher, the ministry context story, the religious tradition of the community, and storied experiences of the culture, among others, to uncover the present. It serves as a network that links the past with the present in order to imagine the future.

Furthermore, the AI process was less about facts and language and more about meaning. It was extremely useful in equipping the student researcher with the tool for evoking the story of the faith community by first guiding him in the process of claiming and understanding his personal story. “By evoking the concern or opportunity and tracing it around various persons who know about it, discerning the various meanings and interpretations surrounding the concern, a thicker, more elaborate story is likely to emerge. This is a step towards a new, rewritten community story.”¹¹ The past is useful in order to imagine the future.

Excitement began to spark as we, including members of the LAC, interviewees, groups, and the student researcher, began to reclaim storied experiences that remained uncovered since the formation of the church. Character is shaped by one’s dominant storyline, and congregations are no exception. To adapt their dominant story and gain a fuller understanding of their identity and call to duty, congregations must create the space to evoke those life-giving stories that influence and shape the character of their congregants.

¹¹ Carl Savage, William Pressnell, *Narrative Research in Ministry: A Postmodern Research Approach for Faith Communities* (Louisville: Wayne E. Oates Institute, 2008), 83.

The next chapter will not only expound on chapter one, which seems as the preamble for this narrative, but will add validity to it. It attempts to align the ACCC story with the experience of the universal human experience.

CHAPTER TWO

A SHIFT IN CONGREGATIONAL DYNAMIC AND CONVERSATION.

Historical Background

Christian fellowship is a gift of grace and plays a formidable role in advancing the Kingdom of God. The church taps into the gifts and potential of its members by promoting fellowship in every facet of its life. Both the Old and New Testaments affirm fellowship amongst believers in theological and practical terms. *Koinonia*, the Greek term for fellowship means to share in common, and to assimilate into one body for the purpose of worshipping, loving, caring, and sharing. The preaching and teaching ministries of the church are validated by fellowship amongst believers. The church expresses its love for God and humanity in tangible ways through the promotion of believers' fellowship (I John 1:7; 2:20). Church ministries that are people-centered tend to experience the unspeakable joy and the peace of Christ. Most churches that make remarkable achievements in their community outreach and missions are those that wrap worship, outreach, and discipleship around activities which are people oriented and community inviting.

Despite diversity and cultural uniqueness of every church, believers are called into commonness of mind, soul, and spirit. Christ charged the church to enhance the fellowship of believers by passing down the New Testament Commandment, “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another (John 13: 34-35). Whether a church stands or falls depends on the extent to which it expresses love and care through the bond of fellowship. The Psalmist puts it effectively, “How good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity! It is like the precious oil on the head, running down upon the beard, on the beard of Aaron, running down over the collar of his robes,” (Ps. 133: 1-2, NRSV). The church, the evidence of God’s presence in the world, has an obligation to spread the love of God through congregations that are friendly, receptive, and welcoming.

Framing ACCC’s Narrative of Concern

ACCC has built a track record of being a loving and supportive congregation since its founding. The immigrant community of Richmond recognizes her for identifying with both members and nonmembers during death or bereavement, marriage, birth of a child, or arrival of a stranger within the community. She continues to exist as a village that radiates the love of Christ in practical ways. ACCC’s success in becoming a fellowship-oriented congregation stems from its heritage. Africans are generally welcoming to strangers. We (Africans) hail a heritage that is people-oriented. In a gigantic world where Christianity represents a very tiny portion of the population, the

need to promote communities with sameness of heart, culture, and story cannot be overemphasized. The immigrant church as an example, (Africans, Japanese, Koreans, Chinese, etc.) contributes a wealth of tradition and storied experiences to the religious identity of their host nation, in this instance, American religious history.

The physical presence of others can be a source of faith, inspiration, comfort and joy. The establishment of (Christian) communities with common episodes--language, culture, politics, values, and socio-economic concerns--should be encouraged and supported. The immigrant church is a cardinal example of why the world needs groups that share common stories. The immigrant church exists as a strong source of inspiration and motivation for aliens whose souls and spirits longed for peace and tranquility. She exists as a life-giving source of energy for brothers and sisters who brave foreign shores in search for a better life. The immigrant church can be a forum through which its members can enact storied experiences while at the same time advocating, inspiring, and encouraging one another. Organizations that bring together folks with related identity and story are needed to give the world its unique flavor. Society benefits from the distinctive blessings embedded within the values, cultural norms, and experience that emerge out of diversity. Asians, Europeans, Africans, Native Americans, African Americans, or Latino bring distinctive values to the overall religious establishment. The existence of groups with similar origin and experience can be a source for life-giving energy to society.

Against this backdrop, African Christian Community Church (ACCC) of Richmond, Virginia was founded in 2003. ACCC was established by a core group of

Liberian immigrants for the purpose of worshipping God and serving as a multicultural center to address the needs of (African immigrants) and other needy people within the city of Richmond and surrounding counties. The church is currently located within the west wing of Hatcher Memorial Baptist Church. ACCC has a “chameleon identity,” comprising of former Baptists, Pentecostals, Episcopalians, United Methodist, Catholics, among others. However, due to its sameness of story and experience, the church continues to exist. Most Liberian immigrants of Richmond agree that ACCC is living up to its call and mission by drawing African (Liberian) immigrants into weekly worship of their God who delivered and granted them visas to come to America. She has served the African immigrant community of Richmond in numerous and invaluable ways, uniting immigrants, teaching values, and advocating needy assistance for the less fortunate. This beautiful storyline, however, began to change when members of ACCC shifted focus from these defining principles toward a desire to be like others. Suggestions and murmurs concerning the need to structure the programs and ministries of the ACCC after churches they once belonged in Liberia were often brought about during leadership meetings. By mid 2008, ACCC had dwindled in size, and the congregation became desperate over its desire to grow numerically. The church began to rapidly lose its sense of being. Members of ACCC evaluated her on the bases of her structure, not on its spirit. Against this background, we launched the Doctor of Ministry Prospectus. This thesis is an attempt to redefine church growth and development from the lens of the congregation of African Christian Community Church (ACCC) of Richmond, Virginia.

By late 2007, members of ACCC held overreaching concerns regarding the decline in membership. Concerned congregants who witnessed ACCC's fast growth during her early years, between 2003 and 2006, feared that ACCC's doors would shut if prompt actions were not taken to remedy her recession. These wearied members, most of whom deacons and lay leaders, longed for a rapid return of the tidal wave of growth that the church once experienced during the period when she was newly established. This crisis prompted some members of the congregation to question my pastoral experience and leadership ability.

African Christian Community Church was founded in October 2003 at a time when agencies and churches resettled hundreds of Liberian (African) refugees throughout the commonwealth of Virginia. During this period, the ACCC was very involved with reintegration and reorientation of arriving immigrants in Richmond and nearby counties. Refugees arrived with needs that were enormous and heartbreaking. Most refugees arrived at Richmond International Airport barely dressed, some with only a change of clothes. Liberian refugees were resettled weekly in Richmond and nearby counties from refugee camps throughout the west coast of Africa due to the networking of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR). Most of these Liberian refugees had no formal education and lacked basic life skills potential to propel their lives in America. They came as single parents, uneducated young girls, parents with no job skills, widows and orphans. Most of the school-aged children had had no formal education, and if they did, it was by the grace of substandard refugee camp schools. Their condition overstretched ACCC's empathy and compassion. Most of the church's current ministries

were started during this period, including—an after school tutorial program, English as Second Language (ESL), Family Life conferences to address the presence of trauma, monthly community meal (every third Sunday), a fellowship oriented ministry that’s being a powerful tool of discipleship, and a clothes closet. All of these incredible ministries did not mean anything he church falls short of its vocation if its mission and theology are not contextually conditioned. She becomes shortsighted when she is unable to address the physical and spiritual needs of its community. The Liberian refugee narrative described herein precipitated a people centered ministry approach of ACCC. The congregation of ACCC has thus, adapted a conviction that the church has a duty to cultivate human lives and advocate justice and peace on behalf of the downtrodden. Within this vanguard, the church consolidated the core group of its newly formed congregation and collaborated with other Richmond Liberian residents and refugee resettlement agencies, churches, and hosts to assist with housing, cultural orientation and renovation, physical, emotional, and spiritual support. The outreach ministries that were established to address the vast needs of these exiles included the Family Life Conference. In partnership with Saint Paul’s Baptist Church of Richmond the Family Life Conference addressed the presence of trauma, stress, depression, and anxiety. In partnership with Hatcher Memorial Baptist Church¹ and The Richmond Baptist Association (RBA) ACCC established an after school tutorial program and recruited volunteers from local churches and the University of Richmond to tutor children and youths of immigrant families. The

¹ Hatcher Memorial Baptist Church provides space for ACCC’s worship, offices, and its discipleship programs.

after school program has existed for nearly a decade and administers English as Second Language Classes (ESL) for immigrants, the adult literacy program, the mentoring of young girls and boys, and the interpretation academic assignments for illiterate parents. ACCC also established the Monthly Community Meals as a discipling arm of the church to bring the Liberian/African immigrant community together and strengthening their bonds. These monthly meals created a forum for immigrant families to reconnect with relatives, friends, and the broader Liberian community of Richmond.

However, as the new church catered to the physical, social, and emotional needs of refugees and the immigrant community in general, it became overwhelmed by compassion to serve, and thus, neglected to formulate its basic organizing principles. The church soon became an adult congregation right from birth. There comes a price with that. Skipping one or more stages of the growth process leads to future challenges. Keeping focus in the midst of a noisy and distracting world can be a treasured jewel. By keeping focus on the image of divine intention a congregation uncovers God's will for her. There is flipside to that; when God's people lose sight of their call and drift toward the glittering objects of this world, they often become incapable to discern the will of God. ACCC outreach to refugees was incredible, but the one million dollars question is – did we act consistent with the will of God? Not every good thing is necessary or expedient. The storyline reflecting the church's fast growth at the onset were short lived as refugees began to gain job skills and worked at least two jobs to pay the bills. ACCC's worship attendance got slim as some congregants became invisible and as government handouts phased out. They had to work in order to support families here and abroad.

This reality erupted concern within the congregation and brewed strife and divisiveness that seemed to drag on for quite a long time. No one seems to care much about the wonderful outreach programs of the ACCC; instead, they primarily concerned themselves with the amounts of people attending church on Sunday morning. ACCC members, comprising “former” Baptists, Pentecostals, Methodists, Seven Day Adventists, Catholics, and Episcopalians often got in the business of drawing condescending images and comparisons that judged the current ACCC pastor and their former pastor. They compared the church they once belonged to and ACCC. Almost always ACCC lost the battle. The fact is that in spiritual matters, success is not always determined by physical results. The premise of success should be predicated upon the extent to which the congregation is obediently fulfilling God’s call and purpose for the church. ACCC was at a point where the congregation had gotten wrapped into a structural frame of mind to the extent that physical results seemed prioritized over the quality of her service to the needy and disfranchised.

This crisis (ACCC’s narrative of concern) derailed the vibrant spirit of the church and hindered its peace and tranquility. The atmosphere which resulted during the crisis described herein, created an unpleasant, ungodly atmosphere and resulted in a blame game and finger pointing. As founder and pastor of the predominantly Liberian immigrant congregation, I was often taken to task and bombarded with questions from anxious deacons, lay-leaders and concerned members over the probable cause of the ACCC problem. In spite of references often made citing mimics of the *American Dream* (working two jobs to make ends meet, less time for the family and the church, etc.) as a

major contributing factor to the church's growth crisis, it became evident by the contagion of the ACCC' growth crisis that excuses and explanations were not the appropriate push to ease the tension and curb the problem.

The critics failed to acknowledge the fact that most Liberian refugees who joined ACCC during her early days [were] not authentic members; they joined ACCC at the time because of its incredible outreach to them. Furthermore, most of the new immigrants that joined ACCC during her early days had assumed autonomy from government handouts. This was another factor that also affected their commitment to the church. Another factor which these concerned members did not take into account is the transitional nature of the immigrant church. Those who immigrate to America often travel from one state to another in pursuit of a better life. As refugees/immigrants were gaining job skills potential, they transition to other environments to join families and friends and combine their bills, find a better job, or live within a more immigrant-friendly environment like Philadelphia, Minnesota, Rhoda Island, Atlanta, and Charlotte.

Furthermore, citations linking ACCC's downward growth trajectory with the socio-economic factors on families, the complexities of cultural reorientation and renovation, and enormous emotional turmoil facing immigrants, including post war trauma, stress, and anxieties were often brushed off by the critics. This "growth crisis" triggered a sense of hopelessness, blurriness of the vision, and loss of purpose for the congregation. At this juncture, my commitment to the mission project had weakened; I ran out of explanations to satisfy the qualms of my concerned members. No idea seemed good enough to heal the bleeding and reenergize the congregation toward faithful service

to the Lord. Frustration and a sense of failure loomed. The best thing at this time, I often thought, was to resign and relocate.

The crisis became even more furious when ACCC worship attendance dipped from approximately 160 to about 40 on high Sundays (the weekend when most of our worshippers are off from work), and from approximately 80 during weekend to work Sundays to roughly 25. Some hard core critics threatened to leave the church if nothing was done to curb the decline. ACCC's future and her ability to viably function in light of the downward trajectory became the main conversation. Gossips blitzed and fueled strife and divisiveness, and more so, they threatened the energy level of the young congregation. This loss of purpose and call by the congregation caused the church emotional turmoil and spiritual emptiness and led to further decline as focus was shifted from the quality of service to physical results and structure. I became frustrated, exhausted, and burned out. I wanted to resign.

Framing ACCC's Narrative of Concern

The ACCC story presented within this thesis relates best to the notion that memory and faith work hand-in-hand. It becomes nearly impossible to create the present, imagine the future, and anticipate possibilities when we forget the past. Members of African Christian Community Church quickly forgot that the main purpose for which the church was founded in less than a decade. As stated, ACCC was planted to be a multiethnic community for the purpose of worshipping God, addressing the needs of immigrants and other needy people, teaching and maintaining cultural values, creating

forums for story enactment, and consolidating fellowship within the immigrant community. Whereas conventional wisdom implies that every church has a desire to expand numerically, however, the defining principles of the ACCC go beyond that. The church needs to continue with its services and program and prayerfully discern God's will for her future. She is called to be a unifier, an advocate, a house of refuge, and a balm for the wounded. Numerical increment, big budget and elegant sanctuary fall within the realm of divine possibility. God provides these things and the church ought to invest its time in celebrating the signs of God's grace and mercies. God delivered members of the ACCC from the ashes of violence and sustained them during years in refugee camps. ACCC stands as a fellowship in which wounded and disenfranchised individuals have the chance to mend their broken lives. She stands as a shrine in which personal and community stories are told. She exists to mitigate healing and empowerment of her people. It was troubling, however, that members of ACCC so quickly became overtaken by a desire to become a traditional congregation where structure often supersedes the spirit of the people.

The behaviors of the concerned ACCC members during this growth crisis can be compared to that of Yahweh and Israel's relationship, exemplified within the Egypt-Promised Land biblical narrative. When referencing Israel and Yahweh in the Exodus, "remember" is probably the most used terminology. Either Yahweh or his agents, Moses, Joshua, and others were always in the business of calling Israel's attention and drawing her back to the core principles that define their partnership. Like Israel, ACCC had barely crossed its "Jordan River" when spiritual dementia seized her. A sizable

percentage of the congregation was either ignorant of the call of the immigrant church, or they quickly confused its nature and purpose with their home churches in Liberia.

As a former exile that migrated to the United States for graduate study in the fall of 2000 through the generous offering of scholarship by the Samuel Dewitt Proctor School of Theology at Virginia Union University, I fully understand the emotional and psychological strain one encounters while away from home. I know what it means to be shackled by loneliness while at the same time undergoing reorientation...it can be overwhelmingly stressful and often traumatic. It was out of this experience that following graduation from the STVU, I embraced the Lord's vision for starting a community church where immigrants can meet weekly to worship God and enjoy fellowship with one another. ACCC exists as a medium for cultural continuity, worship of God, and story enactment, and this ought to be its focus. Unfortunately, my brothers and sisters of the ACCC did not envision the same thoughts; the critics were creating an image that was quite unique from what was earlier imagined. Rather than devote energy and gifts toward praise and worship of God for His unwavering love that delivered members of the congregation from the Liberian Civil War and concentrate more on empowering immigrants through the programs described earlier, members of ACCC started to search for a quick map that would lead them to the Promised Land. The congregation's greatest desire became a wish for an elegant sanctuary, stained glass windows, a grand choir, and a flexible budget. This period (2007 to 2012) led to spiritual dementia in the life of the church and rapidly seized her ability to imagine, initiate, and experience the will of God.

It was not too long from the date of its formation in 2003 when the vision of the ACCC became compromised. The vision and mission of the church became tainted because the primary purpose for which the immigrant church exists had gotten misplaced – worship of God, continuity of the community, teaching values to our children, mending our wounds through story enactment, and strengthening bonds. Although privileged and blessed to be its founder and pastor, I should, however, admit that the ACCC crisis often left me confused and depersonalized. Stress, anxiety, and hopelessness weakened my spirit. There were moments when I just did not know the next step forward. I was rapidly losing my sense of call and fulfillment. Completing my Doctor of Ministry Program with Drew University was a plan on my front burner. Each week I desired a ministry setting where peace and tranquility exists. This thought, however, was revived by the transformation mitigated by the D. Min Project. The dynamic and conversation of ACCC has evolved. The church is adapting an attitude that defines church growth in unique terms from that of the mainstream definition. In chapter two, I will attempt to define church growth and development within the context of ACCC in a more pointed manner; in the meantime, however, let's celebrate how the stories unshackled the church and transformed its mind, soul, and spirit. The dynamic and conversation of ACCC has evolved –TO GOD BE THE GLORY!

Stories That We Share

In the words of Savage and Presnell,

We are in a real sense, our stories. Who we are, what we think, and how we act are all shaped by the many large and small stories that make up the discourse embedded in our multi-sensory social experience...in order for faith communities to define themselves and know what to do in ministry, they must first understand the multiple stories which intersect with a given ministry situation in their specific context...our identities, individual or corporate, can only be pointed to by way of constructions or analogies, that is, story.²

The ACCC narrative of concern illustrated in this thesis is the direct result of an identity crisis and misplacement of purpose. Right from birth, the church jumped right into the refugee crises described earlier and became overwhelmed by its empathy for the human experience. It made no time for self-maintenance and the training of her members to recognize the call and mission of the immigrant church. She had barely crawled when she leaped and began to run. The childhood story of my younger brother Francis, best illustrates the ACCC narrative of concern. He was a beautiful, strong, and fast moving baby that was loved by everyone. During those days, we observed babies in our village go through the normal stages of growth; the baby is born, it learns how to sit, stand, walk, and eventually run. Francis, a very handsome and motivated baby boy skipped a crucial growth stage, crawling. One day I returned home from school amidst news that Francis had walked when he had not yet crawled. I was flabbergasted. How could that be, when he had not crawled, I asked? It seemed mysterious at the time, yet exciting and entertaining. The flipside to that is whenever Francis got ill he became totally unable to walk. He could not recall the natural game-plan that leads to walking. This is true of the church. Organizations that skip critical stages of growth during their formative process are often unable to move forward during crisis. Right from birth, ACCC skip storied

² Carl Savage, William Presnell, *Narrative Research in Ministry: A Postmodern Approach for Faith Communities* (Louisville: Wayne Oates Institute, 2008), 25.

experiences that undergird her nature, purpose, and call. The growth crisis served as a megaphone to arouse the deafness of a church that was well on its way to the grave.

The project created the pathway for reconstructing past and present stories of the church. It involved a process that facilitated constructive, critical conversations amongst members of ACCC with the goal of healing wounds and making peace with God and with one another. Mark L. Branson's *Appreciative Inquiry* (AI) use as the project's methodology, created the forum for storytelling, group discussions and re-envisioning. The methodology forbade negativity in the expression and imagining of the past and present. It was time to share life-giving stories. It required positive attitudes and appreciation, a time to recognize and express the honorable, the pleasing, the just, the pure, and the good (Phil. 4:8). While the existence of painful memories was still evident, it was time to point at the grace and mercies of the Lord which has brought us thus far. Participants were encouraged to cite moments when ACCC was alive, days when God was felt amongst us, and Sundays when we felt God's presence and power manifested through our congregation. In chapter three, I will, in a more detailed manner, outline the voices, themes, and stories that were spoken and imagined. It is worth noting, however, that when the people of God adapt an attitude of gratefulness for the nuggets of God's blessings manifested in their lives, the Lord thus moves like a great and mighty wind in their direction.

Throughout the weeks of the project's implementation, participants, including active and inactive ACCC members and the Liberian community were restrained from

negativity in their story enactment and group dialogues. Project participants were encouraged to cite the positive, the honorable, the pleasing, the just, and testimonies of purity evident in their lives and the congregation. During those weeks when members of ACCC solely voiced the abiding presence of the Lord with them and desisted from whines and murmurs, God moved on behalf of our church in ways that were not anticipated. The spirit of the church got revived. The congregation had once again returned to its first love. The fellowship of the church has come alive and is strong. We have once again become a fun-filled congregation. ACCC is now celebrating the signs of God's grace and acknowledging the mercies of the Lord which has brought us thus far. The church cannot be more thankful to God for the transformation propelled by the prospectus in leading change and shifting the dynamic and conversation of the church. ACCC's storyline has moved toward an appreciative model of ministry. Through story enactment, the spirit of ACCC is once again alive and strong. The narrative of concern has taken its proper course. To us, church growth and development means more than numerical value and budget size. It means a united, loving, and spirit-evoking congregation with a common cause. Little is much when God is in it. The rest of this chapter illustrates some of the recurring themes that arose during prospectus' interviews, conversations, and storytelling. It is my belief that with an overview of the various themes that emerged during the project's implementation my reader is able to connect the dots and discern the frame of mind of the congregation pre-prospectus and where she came post-project.

In fulfillment of Drew University's Doctor of Ministry Program a Lay Adversary Committee (LAC), a small group of active ACCC members comprising of lay leaders and congregants worked with the pastor to formulate and frame the project proposal, implement and evaluate it. We included on the LAC some of the very concerned members referred to earlier. To set the stage, proposed a sermon series was proposed with the intent of capturing the direction of the project and prepared the congregation for adapting the proposal. I titled the series: *Where did we come from and why are we here?* These series were preached from biblical texts that align with the ACCC story and experience. Like Israel during her days of exile members of ACCC were challenged to support the existence and continuity of the Liberian community, commit to God's decrees and statutes, trust God in this journey, and celebrate the signs of God's grace evident in their lives. These help lubricate the friction and created a pavement for full engagement.

With the support of the LAC, the rest of the project participants were recruited, including lay leaders, deacons, active and inactive members, community residents, and all with unresolved issues. While AI encourages life-giving stories and positive imagining there were some participants who came prepared to vent out their anger and pain. Those individuals were also encouraged to identify the signs of God's grace evident in their lives and share a story of their best felt moments of the church. This opened the corridor for true reenacting of our stories and history. It helped members of ACCC come to terms with the call and purpose of the immigrant church. Through community engagement, attentive conversations, critical reflections, and faithful envisioning through stories, group meetings, purpose driven interactions with my Lay

Advisory Committee (LAC), and the sermon series, the project set the stage for healing and reconciliation and transformed the conversation. ACCC's spirit is lifted and renewed once again.

The project concluded with a realization that the mission of the immigrant church is less about structure (edifice, pews, stained glass, icons, etc.) and more about faithful service to God and humanity. Through the dialogues, members of ACCC came to a deeper appreciation of God's intervention and miracles that delivered, preserved, and brought this remnant to the United States. These moments gave rise to re-envisioning and reimagining the days when ACCC was organized during the peak of refugee resettlement and renovation by the Catholic Refugee and Immigration Services, the Virginia Council of Churches, Lutheran World Services, and other refugee resettlement agencies. One recollection from the project's implementation is that between 2003 and 2006, the "tidal wave of growth" that once engulfed the church during its early days, referenced during the growth crisis, was artificial and inauthentic. At the time, ACCC assisted with placement of refugees, establishment of an afterschool tutorial program for children and youths, provision of functional/adult literacy for uneducated immigrants, aiding immigrants through unresolved U.S immigration issues, case working for social service benefits, cultural reorientation and renovation, trauma healing, identifying community resources, securing legal advice when necessary, driver's education, and provision of basic life skills. This should be kept on the front burner of the church. We conceded that the mission of ACCC must focus on empowerment, advocacy, solidifying the Liberian/immigrant community, teaching values to our children, and worshipping

God who is our deliverer and provider. By re-envisioning and reimagining, a common consensus was reached by the participants that included members of the Lay Advisory Committee (LAC), deacons, congregation, and Liberian/African community residents. The moment of truth arrived when all, including friends and foes, got on the same boat and agreed that in October 2003 when a small group of Liberian immigrants gathered in the home of Rev. and Mrs. Calvin Birch to start what is now the ACCC, the purpose was to create a multicultural center of worship and discipleship where immigrants can enact their stories in praise and worship, teach cultural values to their children, and express gratitude to God for his intervention and mercies which spared their lives from the carnage of the Liberian Civil War.

The narrative of concern was revived into a narrative of opportunity, from overreaching concerns about structure to faithful service to God and humanity. The congregation has come to terms that the church's vision should be concentrated on empowering immigrant children and youths, upholding and teaching values, serving as a beacon of hope for immigrants, bridging community divide, providing emergency assistance to needy individuals and families, and fostering the Gospel of the Kingdom at all cost. As a result of the prospectus, ACCC is currently brewing a new way of hearing, seeing, and being. The conversation was transformed toward advocating for needy humanity. The slogan, "less is more when God is in it" has become the most famous slogan.

We remain indebted to Mark Lau Branson's *Appreciative Inquiry and Congregational Change* (AI), the research design for my project, for its role in renewing the spirit of the congregation and helping ACCC find her way out of her spiritual drama. AI challenged the congregation of ACCC toward a new way of seeing, hearing, and thinking through a process that involved exploring the life of the congregation through stories, memories, and imaginations and adapting life-giving forces that have shaped its past and provide possibilities for the future. Rather than dwell on its setbacks and pain as a framework for remedying the problem AI challenged the congregation to become "heliotropic, a botanic term that encourages the utilization of life-giving forces; AI drove the congregation of ACCC to adapt positive attitudes that gratify God; it helped us reinvest our energies into the positive, the honorable, the pure, the pleasing, and the commendable."³ Through constructive engagements the church is experiencing renewal; concealed wounds are being healed and the church's conversation has become warmth and welcoming.

Due to her invaluable services to the immigrant population of Richmond and surrounding areas in the Commonwealth of Virginia, most Liberian immigrants see ACCC as a gift from God and an agent of transformation. Liberian immigrants of Richmond accredit ACCC for her role in advocating on behalf of Liberian/African immigrants in terms of physical, emotional, and spiritual support, strengthening the immigrant community, and teaching values and cultural norms. Our common experience

³ Mark Lau Branson, *Memories, Hopes, and Conversations: Appreciative Inquiries and Congregational Change* (Herndon: The Alban Institute 2004), x, ix.

includes stories of pain and suffering, war and exile, violence, murder, rape, and poverty are indicative of shared experience and ought to be the unifying force of the community. In telling and retelling storied experience through the prospectus, members of ACCC came to a realization that God has called our congregation (and the immigrant church as a whole) to foster wholeness, justice, and freedom on behalf of strangers and aliens, the underprivileged, the unchurched, and those disenfranchised by societal evils. Both congregation and community residents agreed that ACCC ought to focus its mind, soul, and spirit on service to God and humanity over the size of the congregation. The ministries, mission, and vision have to be framed around reconstructing the immigrant experience in ways that lead to healing and reconciliation. ACCC mends broken lives; this is our call and duty.

As the project participants and the congregation as a whole imagined ACCC's past and present it became mutually evident that ACCC must always seek to foster the core values that undergird her reason for existence. We recall during the meetings, how ten years ago (2003 to 2013), when the Holy Spirit initiated the vision of ACCC through a small group of Liberian immigrants that met in the home of Reverend and Mrs. Birch. A bilateral agreement was reached that ACCC was formed to meet the social, political and economic needs of immigrants. As a result of healthy engagement the church is returning to its heritage of being a multicultural center that caters to broken lives.

The stories, group conversations, and interviews all indicated that ACCC ought to exist as an intentional community that seeks to provide the occasion for healing, for changing the nature of the immigrant story to the extent that our past experiences do not

dictate the future, for equipping victims of war and injustice into becoming heroes and heroines, and translating our experiences into stories of faith that fulcrums our interpretation of the past, present, and future. As an intentional faith community, ACCC must always strive toward embodying and articulating its beliefs and values in real meaningful ways, such as *The Barnabas Project*, the ACCC's nonprofit organization.

The Barnabas Project was overly referenced by project participants as a unique model for ACCC's vision and mission. Appendix A includes an extended fragment of the bylaws.

Below are some highlights of the Barnabas Project:

The Barnabas Project, Inc. was organized in 2006 by the African Christian Community Church (ACCC) as an autonomous nonprofit to operate exclusively for religious, charitable, scientific, literary or educational purposes, within the meaning of Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code of 1986. Its mission is to assist immigrants assimilate into the American society and give them reason to 'think big'. The project seeks to assist war ravaged immigrants from Africa, as well as other needy individuals and families residing in Richmond and elsewhere in the State of Virginia in such areas as emergency assistance, educational counseling for school aged boys and girls, English proficiency for kids for whom English is not the original language, academic tutoring, mentoring, special services for persons with emotional and learning disabilities, and statewide comprehensive family support. The overarching goal, therefore, is to provide services designed for children, youths, the elderly, women, the disabled, and those considered 'at risk' in achieving the highest level of self-sufficiency whenever possible and to otherwise help them maintain their dignity and self-respect while having their basic needs met.⁴

We create identity through narrative. Human identity is a life story.⁵ You don't know me until you first know my story. My story tells who I am. This fact defines the core of the ACCC narrative described herein. The church had barely grown baby teeth

⁴ The Barnabas Project is a 501©3 organization of the African Christian Community Church.

⁵ Dan P. McAdams, *The Stories We Live By: personal myths and the making of the self* (New York: The Guilford Press, 1993), 5.

when she jumped right into adulthood. The numerous social and spiritual ministries she embarked to pull needy immigrants out of the pit were fantastic, but perhaps not timely. They were, in fact, overwhelming for a group that was just forming and had not defined its vision and core values. She had barely identified values that provide meaning, unity, and purpose to a congregation when ACCC moved right into living as a full grown church. The starting point for the immigrant church is the unraveling of personal, cultural, and nationalistic myths, “the integration of our remembered past, perceived present and anticipated future.”⁶ ACCC had barely revisited, recreated, or explored her cross-Atlantic myths when she quickly drove into the unfamiliar zone. The starting point for the immigrant church is the enactment myths and storied experiences. Myths provide instructions for living. When people with a common goal and purpose are given the chance to share their stories and hear those of others, they tend to develop a sense of belonging and ultimately make long term commitments to the organization. This is a stage of life that my congregation skipped. The “growth conflict” was quite helpful with bringing us back to a self-definition of the church’s identity and its call to the world. This tells everything about why the methodology of my prospectus led to such a resounding success to the extent that it gave impetus to a redefinition what growth and development means from the standpoint of the immigrant church. The methodology of the prospectus was one that engaged the congregation of ACCC with a process that allowed everyone a chance for reimagining and reliving his or her story. Everyone is a storyteller, whether through folktale, legend, myth, epic, or history. Stories help us

⁶ Dan P. McAdams, *The Stories We Live By: Personal Myths and the Making of the Self* (New York: The Guilford Press, 1993), 12.

organize our human data. Stories create the avenue for self-expression to the world to which we belong. Stories are less about fact and more about expression.

It is safe to assume that the defining moment for the entire prospectus experience arrived when everyone, including friends and foes of ACCC, felt relieved of their anguish, frustration, and hard-core differences and the church gave listening ears without being defensive. The process of envisioning and enacting past memories and imagining present and future possibilities brought about healing and reconciliation. The storytelling moments were entertaining, instructional, fulfilling and joyful. Stories have the capability to mend our brokenness, heal our sicknesses, and move us toward ultimate fulfillment in life. The stories shared helped divert our self-centered aspiration more toward building a vibrant immigrant (ACCC) community that addresses the holistic needs of people. I am deeply blessed to be a Pastor who happens to be trained in the field of Psychology, with a Master's of Science Degree (MS) from Grand Canyon University in Phoenix, Arizona. The science of psychology informs us that when we ignore the role storytelling plays in our lives and we fail to make sense of our lives through stories, we tend to harm ourselves emotionally. Through genuine mythical expressions, the prospectus became a conduit whereby some of the most important concerns of the (Liberian) immigrants were heard. That supersedes numerical values and physical structure, and spurs my conviction that the immigrant church should be in the business of creating the medium of expression (worship, fellowship, discipleship, storytelling, and community forums) for individuals and families that represent values and cultures unique from mainstream society.

Throughout the project implementation no one denied the tremendous embrace of the ACCC toward Liberian/African immigrants of Richmond. It shall always be my belief that in this postmodern era, the church cannot conceive or practice theology through mere intellectual debate that is void of practical, social, and economic initiatives. The church falls short of its call if she is not ministering to the holistic needs of its called-community in practical terms. Christianity cannot be framed around mere intellectual theory, a doctrine divorced from life, or some form of mystical emotion. Faith needs to be defined by responsible and obedient actions that seek justice and peace for the underprivileged, butters bread and sugars cocoa for the hungry, and teaches values for the succeeding generation. Prior to his execution by the Gestapo, Dietrich Bonhoeffer once inserted, “the curse of the godless man sounds more pleasant in God’s ears than the hallelujah of the pious.”⁷ I believe the discipling actions of the church speak louder than its words. The church is more than an ideal that we realize in the course of time. The church is a transformative reality created by God. Transformation within this context means blending the emotional, physical, and spiritual embodiment of the people. To this end, the ACCC shall remain committed to its Christian witness while at the same time responding to the challenges of this age and time.

Another theme that emerged through the conversations is the consensus which acknowledged that the unity and strength of the ACCC does not lie within a “set of

⁷ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together: A discussion of Christian Fellowship* (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1954), 8, 9.

beliefs and practices, but within the factors that contribute to our stress.⁸ In spite of its chameleon outlook of Baptists, Methodists, Episcopalians, Pentecostals, Catholics, Seventh Day Adventists, and Lutherans doctrine, and formal religion has not yet become a divisive factor. In spite of its diverse composition, ACCC continues to exist as a beacon of hope for immigrants. The very unique nature of ACCC has been possible thus far (about a decade) because the focus more on our common episodes—one people, one nation (or continent), common experience, one God... and less on organized religion. The story of the ACCC does not end with the story of the new immigrant, but it extends to a need for establishing the language of authentic identity whereby we organize our way of being in America, of relating to one another in community concerns, and of enacting ritual (sacraments or ordinances), care, and spirituality.⁹ This in my judgment embodies the essence of the church.

We (ACCC post prospectus) have arrived to a realization that the church exists as the center where individuals and families have a space to enact their stories through worship, discipleship, and fellowship. ACCC is henceforth moving toward becoming a multicultural center where the stories of individuals are enacted through their worldview, through idiomatic expressions, and through the lens of God's story. As a body the church has values, laws, creeds, and biblical standards by which she governs and is governed. For it is within our gathering that exiles have the space and the courage to tell their

⁸ Edwin H. Friedman, *Generation to Generation: family Process in Church and Synagogue*, (New York: The Guilford Press, 1985), 19.

⁹ James Woodward, Stephen Pattison, *The Blackwell Reader in Pastoral and Practical Theology* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2000), 106.

stories. In the words of James Hopewell, “story weaves a living fabric of common episode.”¹⁰ It shall be my humble and pleasing duty as a wounded healer to continue to create the environment where immigrants and broken people can receive healing of their brokenness and make sense of their situations. I must admit, drawing from the many voices from the conversations, that there is no expert therapist for healing wounded souls, except the Lord alone. The church, however, has a duty to set the stage where individuals have the freedom and will to express themselves. Through divine grace we will continue to position the church as a bridge whose principal duty is to unite the body of Christ into a functioning community where worship takes its form and shape and where healing occurs. Because we’ve managed to keep the focus on our common struggles as exiles and on those values that hold us together, doctrinal differences, such as tongue speaking and “Holy Ghost baptism,” have not had enough spunk to break us apart.

In spite of its cultural complexion and ecumenical complexities, the ACCC continues to be a unifying force for immigrants. Despite the very negative potential that doctrine can pose on unity, ACCC remains strong principally because of the huge power culture has on community building. Through the community of stories comes new life possibilities and shared hope for all. As both spiritual and community leader, I and the community are constantly enthralled by the many stories, good and bad, that I we are hearing. These shared storied experiences are beginning to shape our lives and draw meaning and purpose to why we exist as an immigrant church. From these “larger stock

¹⁰ James F. Hopewell, James, *Congregation: Stories and Structures* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 149.

of artforms”¹¹ I am able to draw compelling sermons that lift the spirits of my congregation, inspire their faith, and expand their vision. From these “large stock artforms” our community can make sense of who we are as a people. These “artforms” of stories continue to serve as the foundation for our continuous existence. Despite its complex ecumenical diversity, the ACCC continues to gracefully exist as a community of storytellers. Psychotherapists, professional counselors, psychologists, and family systems theorists generally agree that individuals and families heal faster and better through expressions of pain and trauma, done verbally or nonverbally. The chain of symbols reflected within our stories opens a neural pathway and gives us preliminary fantasy gratification. Through these interactions, I learned some “tricks of self-management”¹² as a pastor, community leader, husband, and a parent.

The role of the immigrant church in the advancement of the kingdom of God, whether European, Asian, North or South American, or African (Ghanaian, Liberian, Sierra Leonean, Ethiopian, or Nigerian) is vital and strategic. Because she reflects a tiny drop in a huge bucket within her host nation, the immigrant church counts on the consolidated support of each member for its mission and ministry. With oneness of heart and spirit, the church can be empowered to serve its called community and stand on behalf of the less fortunate.

¹¹Don Culpit, *What is a Story?* (London: SCM Press, 1991), 5.

¹² Don Culpit, *What is a Story?* (London: SCM Press, 1991), 45.

We accredit the early church for her zealous efforts in establishing and fostering the values that commonness brings to our faith and world. Their unwavering love, strength, unity and support for “everyone who had need” are evident in Luke’s Acts. The tremendous outreach of the church in support of the community of believers remains visible and undeniable. Luke’s Act reports, “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teachings and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Awe came upon everyone because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common, (Acts 2: 42-44). God was intentional and deliberate in his creative act. From the core of his perfect creation we enjoy wealth of distinctive groups and peoples. God made no error about that. The existence of communities (peoples) that share common episodes ought to be encouraged. In their stories society develops a greater sense of appreciation for the uniqueness of language, cultural values, national identity, experience, story and history.

CHAPTER THREE

THE PROJECT IN ACTION

We live in anxious times, and congregations are no exception. Anxiety, the general term for several disorders that cause nervousness, fear, apprehension, and worrying, occurs when reaction is out of proportion with what might be normally expected in a given situation. Anxiety is uneasiness of the mind that people experience over an impending or anticipated ill.¹ Anxiety has ripple effects on the life of a congregation. It negatively influences a congregation's ability to appropriately discern God's will and act accordingly. A congregation's fear over budgetary shortcomings, a reduction in membership, the replacement of an itinerant leader, or a delay with an anticipated goal can impede its ability to assume the right course of action during crisis. When this happens, a congregation may break into splinter groups, and each group may attempt to identify the problem and frame a story around it. The narrative that emerges from these fragmented groups often gets adapted by the larger body, and over time, may shape the identity and destiny of the entire community.

¹ Larry A. Golemon, *Finding Our Story: Narrative Leadership and Congregational Change* (Herdon: The Alban Institute, 2010), 92.

The “growth crisis” of the ACCC, illustrated in chapters one and two, is indicative of a congregation that was overwhelmed by anxiety. Prior to the project of this thesis, ACCC did not clearly define its identity and purpose for existence. She neglected to purposefully locate her story and heritage during the formative years. ACCC worked so hard to match up with the influx of Liberian (and other African) refugees. The church embarked upon attractive evangelistic and discipleship endeavors, directed mainly to the immigrant population of Richmond. The ulterior motive was to grow the congregation. The truth is that programs, events, and activities do not necessarily constitute the core values of a congregation. Not every good thing is necessarily expedient. Congregations must undertake intentional, deliberate, and purposeful actions to locate their dominant story out of the many narratives that exist. By doing this, the church can frame her story and identity. The stress and anxiety levels of congregations can be mitigated through story-evoking actions that are intentional and purposeful.

The project for this thesis created the forum through which members of the ACCC engaged to locate, frame, and enact their storied experiences. The candidate, (the student) launched the project with a sermon series titled, “Where did we come from, and why are we here?” These sermons “stirred the waters” and paved the way for the project’s subsequent implementation. They served as the project’s megaphone to resuscitate a dying congregation.

The Sermon Series

Where Did We Come From, and Why Are We Here?

The first of the sermon series was preached on January 6, 2013. The text was Exodus 3: 1-12. Moses' call and commissioning by Yahweh illuminated the textual antithesis. The setting is near Mount Horeb, otherwise known as Mount Sinai. Yahweh calls Moses while he tended the flock of Jethro, the Priest of Midian, his father-in-law. This text presents God as "THE COVENANT KEEPING GOD" who is faithful and remains true to HIS WORD, regardless of geography or time. God's faithfulness is not deterred by geographic location or the span of time. The grace and mercies of God are illustrated at the scene during the encounter between Moses and Yahweh. Moses, a runaway fugitive, is called to serve as Yahweh's agent of deliverance. Rather than indict Moses for his past sin, Yahweh instead, calls him to take the mantle of leadership.

The passing of time is neither a deterrent to God's promise or call to duty. The omniscient God remembers. Forty years passed since Moses' fearful flight from Egypt (Ex. 2: 1-15). Moses now lived as an obscured shepherd, humbled by poverty to the extent that he did not have a flock of his own. More than four centuries lapsed since the death of Joseph in Egypt, yet Yahweh, the "COVENANT KEEPING GOD", remembered his promise with His people, "I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob" (Ex. 3: 4-6). Yahweh is consistent in His love and promise. Humanity goes astray, but God is faithful. The "Burning Bush" (Ex. 3: 2-3) reinvigorates Yahweh's covenant relationship with Israel. Here, God calls Moses by his name, Moses, Moses (Ex. 3:4).

Members of the ACCC were challenged to consider themselves as a covenant people. Yahweh, the covenant God of “the underdog,” remembers the afflictions of his people. God weathered the storm with his chosen people. The merciful God of Israel, portrayed in Exodus 3, is the God of Liberian immigrants. In God’s unwavering love and compassions He delivered Liberian immigrants from the brutal Liberian Civil War. This same God, referred to as Yahweh, keeps his promise. Through the grace and mercies of Yahweh, “THE COVENANT KEEPING GOD,” Liberian immigrants were sustained in refugee camps.

Divine discipline is an attribute of God. Like any good parent, God disciplines His children for the purpose of full restoration. In God’s power, He loves and seeks His people when they go astray. The sermon challenged members of the ACCC with an awareness that Yahweh might have permitted the Liberian Civil War as a medium of discipline to renew His covenant with Liberians. The Liberian Civil War, therefore, serves megaphone to arouse a deaf nation. The experience should be seen as a faith multiplier and a medium for spiritual development. Yahweh, the merciful God, provided manna for Liberian immigrants during the civil war and throughout their experience in the refugee camps.

Like Moses, God knows each member of the ACCC by their first and last names. Despite the loss of our families, property, and infrastructures, Liberian immigrants bear the name of God. The sermon challenged the ACCC congregation to remain hopeful and faithful. God’s people are indeed, a perfect design; they bear integrity and a heritage

which are distinctive, the sermon challenged the congregation. Worshippers were encouraged to teach the beautiful values of the Liberian culture to your children...you are a covenant people. God has given you (Liberian immigrants) another chance, in America.

History informs us that the Liberian Church was founded first, then the nation. Liberia's Declaration of Independence was written, signed, and read in Providence Baptist Church of Monrovia, Liberia. Since its founding in 1847, Liberians refer to themselves as "A Christian Nation." The nation later violated its covenant with God. Rampant corruption within the political hierarchy, ritualistic killings, ethnic hatred, witch-hunts, and the like, prompted the Civil War. In spite of its wealth of mineral resources (e.g. iron ore, diamond, rubber, gold) Liberia is counted within the poorest nations on earth. The sermon called on members of the ACCC to remain faithful to God by upholding their covenant relationship with God. Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is "THE COVENANT KEEPING GOD and Savior who provided and sustained Liberian immigrants throughout their journey.

Rather than worry about our physical structures, (e. g. building, programs, budget) members of the ACCC ought to invest their efforts toward celebrating the signs of God's grace, which are so evident amongst them. Rather than complain about church growth in numbers, members of the ACCC need to celebrate the love of God which delivered and brought them to the United States. As a sign of Yahweh's presence and power, Moses witnessed the bushes on fire without being consumed; this was a perfect illustration of

divine grace. In the same way, the deliverance of Liberians from the carnage of the Liberian Civil War and resettlement in the United States is a sign of divine grace.

The second project's sermon was preached on January 13, 2013. The text, Psalm 90: 1-12, portrays Moses' prayer on The Day of National Reunification following forty years of desert wandering by the Israelites. Highlights of this sermon included God's continuous presence with His people in the form of divine provision and protection (vs. 1), the role of divine chastisement in the spiritual growth and development of God's people (vs. 7-9), the transient nature of human beings in comparison with the eternal nature of God (vs. 10), and a charge to members of ACCC to live wisely (vs. 12). This sermon challenged the congregation of the ACCC to forgo bitterness, hatred, divisiveness, and bear no malice for culprits of the Liberian Civil War. God did not abandon Liberians throughout their rocky journey. God, the Righteous Judge, will bring to justice the unrepentant on the Day of Judgment. The Apostle Paul urges believers of Jesus Christ with these words -

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord."²

The sermon called for peace, forgiveness, and reconciliation amongst members of the ACCC. Yahweh, "THE COVENANT KEEPING GOD", remembers and keeps His

² Romans 12: 14-21 (NRSV).

promise. God has been and will always be Liberia's dwelling through all generations. In "thick and thin," God has been "Our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble, (Ps. 46:1). As the Liberian idiom says, "God buttered our bread and sugared our cocoa." This sermon was climaxed with a charge to members of the ACCC to live as dying people, always taking account of the brevity and uncertainty of life and of the inevitability of death.

The third sermon, preached on January 20, 2013, was subtitled, "The Bridge between Mount Sinai and Mount Zion." The passage is particularly inspiring, and henceforth, included in its full text:

On the third new moon after the Israelites had gone out of the land of Egypt, on that very day, they came into the wilderness of Sinai. They had journeyed from Raphidim, entered the wilderness of Sinai, and camped in the wilderness; Israel camped there in front of the Mountain. Then Moses went up to God; the Lord called to him from the Mountain saying, "Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the Israelites: You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation."³

This text marks the realization, a fulfillment of God's promise to the Israelites, spoken to the Patriarchs, reiterated to Moses in Exodus 3 (first sermon). It took the Israelites three months of trusting God to get to the foot of Mount Sinai. They saw God's deliverance from Egypt and received His guidance along the way. The Israelites witnessed God's glorious victory at the Red Sea and His unceasing provision of food and water. They had so far, celebrated their first battle over the Amalekites. Moses initially encountered

³ Exodus 19: 1-6 (NRSV).

God's vivid presence; it was now time for the whole nation to experience Yahweh, the God who defeated the Pharaoh of Egypt.

Yahweh's linking of the nation with the weakest of the patriarchs, Jacob (vs. 3) is indicative of divine grace in the midst of human frailty. The God of Jacob, who translated the runaway fugitive into being the father of the Hebrew Nation, can, in His divine love, grant His people victory and peace to Liberian immigrants from their trauma and pain. The call for obedience and submission (vs. 5a) is Yahweh's call for the Israelites to frame their identity and integrity in Yahweh. Liberia, once considered peaceful and harmless, is categorized with some of the most ruthless and inhumane nations of the world. As stated often, the congregation of the ACCC is predominantly composed of Liberian immigrants. Liberia remains our heritage; however, what define us are not the brutal memories of the Liberian Civil War. The sermon challenged Liberians immigrants to develop and maintain a positive image; they are worth more than mass murderers and broken infrastructures. The sermon challenged the congregation to root its identity in God alone. Traditional norms, cultural norms, and national heritage all fall short without God's blessings.

If Israel obeys Yahweh and abides by His commandments, she shall become a treasured possession... a priestly nation. Maybe the Liberian Civil War and life in the refugee camps were the "Liberian Egypt;" perhaps, the community of the ACCC has arrived at the Foot of Mount Sinai, following years of desert wandering. God is seeking us today. God wants to make us His treasured possessions. If the congregation of the ACCC will obey God and keep His commandments, she will experience the abiding

presence of God. The text is a typology of Christ, who will ultimately fulfill the promise of Mount Sinai. Rather than tarry at the foot of Mount Sinai forever, members of the ACCC might begin to enjoy the gifts of Mount Zion. Christ is the perfect bridge between Mount Sinai and Mount Zion. Sinai speaks of fear and terror, but Zion speaks of love and forgiveness; Sinai is in a dry desert, but Zion is the city of the Living God. Mount Sinai is carnal, but Mount Zion is spiritual. At Sinai, only Moses could come and meet God; at Zion, there is an innumerable company of priests, a general holy assembly. Sinai had guilty people in fear, but Zion has men and women who have been made perfect. At Sinai, Moses is the mediator, but at Zion, Jesus is the mediator. Sinai put forth an Old covenant, ratified by the blood of animals; Zion has a New Covenant, with Christ as its author and finisher, ratified by the blood of God's precious Son. Sinai was all about barriers and exclusion; Zion is all about invitation. Sinai is all about the Law, Zion is all about the grace and mercies of Jesus Christ.

The series were concluded on January 27, 2013, with Joshua's recounting of the history of God's faithfulness to the Israelites (Joshua 24: 1-15). It seemed evident, by the absence of any mention of Israel's chastisement in the wilderness for forty years, in both addresses of chapters 23 and 24, that Yahweh totally forgot the sin of His people. Yahweh's outmost concern, at this juncture, was to employ the exclusive commitment and service of His people. Maintaining faithfulness to God amidst His showers of blessings remains a human challenge. This message challenged members of the ACCC to remain faithful to God always, who by His grace, spared their lives during the war, preserved them in exile, and is "buttering their bread and sugaring their cocoa" in America.

Voices and Stories

As the sermon series were underway, the Lay Advisory Committee and the student/pastor met weekly to enlist participants, discuss the methodology of Appreciative Inquiry, identify resources, and edit questionnaires for pending interviews, group sessions, and community forums. The "Pastoral Spotlight," the segment of the worship bulletin assigned to the pastor for announcements, was utilized weekly to educate the congregation on the nature and methodology of Appreciative Inquiry. Intensive trainings of the LAC and some obvious project participants were done in January and February, 2013. ACCC's historical narrative, its values, bylaws, and mission statement were reviewed for contextual purposes. The remainder of the training aimed educating

participants on the project proposal, the methodology of AI, its basic assumptions, processes/steps, and the questionnaire, as illustrated below:

What is Appreciative Inquiry?

Mark Branson's *Appreciative Inquiry and Congregational Change* seeks out stories of strength, faithfulness, and spiritual vitality within the lifespan of the congregation. The goal of Appreciative Inquiry is to evoke a conversation that focuses on the honorable, the pure, the pleasing, and the commendable for bringing about change in congregational life and ministry (Phil. 4:8; I Thess. 1:2-3). Rather than dwell on deficits and liabilities (blames, negative criticisms, stories of failure, memories of gloom and hopelessness), AI seeks the positive and the productive; it seeks evidence of God's gracious presence with His people. AI promotes a long-term change in congregational habits. It encourages the formation of new habits that arise from an attitude of focusing on the positive – thanksgiving and gratitude. Mark Branson introduced his congregation at First Presbyterian Church, Altadena, California to this unique way of seeing, hearing, and thinking via AI. AI is more than a strategy for change or a method of research; it is both, but further leads the congregation (or any organization) toward an effective medium for communicating, discerning, and imagining its history, values, current activities, and the life of its surrounding community. AI is built on theories that move a congregation away from deficit-based models toward the images and forces that are most life-giving. It draws the congregation into a continuous process of perceiving, thinking, and creating

Appreciative Inquiry Assumptions⁴

1. In every organization, some things work well.
2. What we focus on becomes our reality.
3. Asking questions influences the group.
4. People have more confidence in the journey to the future when they carry forward parts of the past.
5. If we carry parts of the past in the future, they should be what are best about the past.
6. It is important to value differences.
7. The language we use creates our reality.
8. Organizations are heliotropic – this is a botanical term that refers to how plants tend to lean toward the sunlight for energy; in the same manner, organizations need to lean toward their source of energy.
9. Outcomes should be useful.
10. All steps are collaborative.)

Basic Processes and Steps⁵

1. Choose the positive as the focus of inquiry.
2. Inquire into stories of life-giving forces.

⁴ Mark Lau Branson, *Hopes, and Conversations: Appreciative Inquiries and Congregational Change* (Herndon: The Alban Institute 2004), 24-27.

⁵ Mark Lau Branson, *Memories, Hopes, and Conversations: Appreciative Inquiries and Congregational Change* (Herndon: The Alban Institute 2004), 28.

3. Locate themes that appear in the stories and select topics for further inquiry.
4. Create shared images for a preferred future.
5. Find innovated ways to create that future.

The above five processes can be summed up into four action steps:⁶

- Initiate (introduce AI, develop topical focus/theme, and craft interview questions, and types of questions).
- Inquire
- Imagine
- Innovate

Note: Appreciative Inquiry is built on theories that move a congregation away from deficit-based models toward the images and forces that are most life-giving.

Should we (ACCC) focus on obstacles, dysfunctions, and deficits, or should we focus on generative qualities, successful events, and positives narratives?

The ten AI assumptions reset the tone at the ACCC, contextualized the conversation, and created a path for healthy engagement. Assumption 1 focused on identifying resources, narratives, and activities of the ACCC that are energizing and life-giving; assumptions 2 and 5 state, “What we focus on becomes our reality,” and “If we carry parts of the past in the future, they should be what is best about the past,” unshackled the negativities of the past and replaced them with hopeful, promising thoughts of the future. Whatever dominates the emotions and conversations of an organization or an institute becomes its reality. Participants were challenged to brainstorm and identify productive

⁶ Ibid., 67.

narratives of the past and present, upon which the ACCC will build its dominant narrative. Participants were challenged to use the dysfunctions of the past as a source of reference, not as the foundation on which their values are built. In the words of Mark Branson, “Generative change should displace meaningless structures and dysfunctional practices with the strengths of the organization’s most life-giving narratives and behaviors.”⁷ Of outmost importance is to replace hopelessness with stories and resources that bring hope and excitement to the congregation.

Assumption 8, “Organizations are heliotropic,” was helpful with redirecting the congregation toward life-giving behaviors, events, and activities. Plants lean in the direction of sunlight; in the same way, the church leans toward narratives, activities, and events that are inspirational and energizing. This assumption challenged participants (and the congregation) to invest in and share stories and memories that bring joy, peace, hope, and anticipation for the future. The AI was a collaborative effort of every participant, including the LAC, active and inactive ACCC members, and Liberian immigrants of the Liberian Association of Virginia. It created the space for positive engagements and team cooperation. Together we tailored the interviews, derived interpretations, and re-envisioned the future. Images are powerful tools for leading change in the congregation. By creating life-giving images of the future, congregations can resuscitate buried dreams and remain hopeful toward the future.

The entire AI process was wrapped around locating the signs of God’s gracious presence with the congregation and the Liberian immigrant population of Richmond. AI

⁷ Mark Lau Branson, *Appreciative Inquiry and Congregational Change: Memories, Hopes, and Conversations* (Herdon: The Alban Institute, 2004), 24.

aims at “Choosing the positive as the focus of inquiry.”⁸ From the ashes of violence, God’s gracious hands not only delivered Liberian immigrants from the Liberian Civil War, but gave them a new home in America. Reciprocating God’s gracious love through grateful praise needs to be place above all else. Grateful appreciation to the Lord must remain at the core of the church’s mission, worship, and ministries. The project challenged the ACCC congregation to locate the signs of God’s gracious presence in their stories, memories, and conversations.

A sample of the questionnaire has been included to mirror recurring themes derived from the interviews, group conversations, and community forums. Appendix B will include the questionnaires in entirety. They were structured in three basic parts: the first part includes questions on values, relationships, and identity; the second segment explores the authentic nature of the ACCC worship and ministry; and the third portion deals with cultural reorientation and renovation. These questions were evocative, and challenged participants to share their best felt memories of the church, locate the signs of God’s gracious presence within their stories and the stories of the church, motivate faithfulness and involvement into the mission and ministries of the church, and drive participants to create images upon which the church can frame its identity and call to duty. The sample questionnaire⁹ is illustrated as follows:

⁸ Mark Lau Branson, *Appreciative Inquiry and Congregational Change: Memories, Hopes, and Conversations* (Herdon: The Alban Institute, 2004), 66.

⁹Mark Lau Branson, *Appreciative Inquiry and Congregational Change: Memories, Hopes, and Conversations* (Herdon: The Alban Institute, 2004), 12, 68-70.

A. Questions on Values, Relationship and Identity

1. Tell me a story about your personal experience with the ACCC. What are some moments when you felt this church was most alive? What made it exciting? Who was involved? What happened? What was your role? What did you do? Describe what you felt.
2. What do you value most about the ACCC? What activities or ways of life of this church are most important to you? What are some of the church's best features?
3. How is this church contributing to your spiritual growth? What relationships or programs or events have been most powerful and helpful in fostering the congregation's relationship with God? What are the most valuable traits or characteristics of the ACCC? Describe what made/makes the difference and how that has happened.
4. What are the healthiest, most life-giving aspects of the relationships among people at our church? What would you say have been most valuable about our friendships? Have certain groups being especially valuable to you? What would you say is most important about how we relate to each other? Offer some examples on how we live together at our best.
5. When you think about how ACCC has related to our Liberian community of Richmond, what do you think has been most important? How do we express God's love, mercy, and justice to others? What have been your own most important ministry and missional experiences in relating to others?

6. Don't be humble. We really need this information. What are the most valuable ways you contribute to the ACCC personally--your personality, your perspectives, your skills, your activities, and your character? Please cite some examples.

B. Questions on Ministry and Worship

1. What are the most valuable aspects of the congregation's worship? Share some thoughts about the best worship experience(s) you've had with the ACCC. How did this worship affect you? How is ACCC's worship shaping its members and the community of exiles in Richmond? How is the ACCC's worship uplifting?
2. Consider the following ACCC ministries: The Barnabas Project (summarized in Appendix A) is a nonprofit ministry which has operated an after school tutoring program and a food pantry for a decade; the Monthly Community Meal; the Annual Summer Program; the Women's Missionary Union; Men's Ministry; the Ministry of Deacons; Community Care Groups; the Coffee House. How are these ministries fulfilling God's call and promise? How are these ministries fulfilling God's call and promise for the ACCC? Which ministry/ministries are missing? What are your best experiences with any of them?
3. If you were serving as the head of any of these ministries, what new insights will you bring?

C. Questions on Cultural Reorientation and Renovation

1. Compare your Christian experience in Liberia and in the refugee camp.

Where are you in your spiritual growth and development today? What are the differences in your Christian journey? Cite some challenges. What are the blessings?

2. Make three life-giving wishes for the ACCC
3. What do you believe the immigrant church is all about?

Recurring Themes

Names of the participants/interviewees are not disclosed for the sake of anonymity. We have, however, cited their gender, association with the ACCC, and/or their respective roles in the church or the Liberian immigrant community of Richmond. We begin with responses to the questions of value, relationship, and identity.¹⁰ The President of the Liberian Association of Virginia (LAVA) wrote:

ACCC's style of worship is a blend of our African tradition (e.g. songs) and the Christian faith. It is absolutely this perspective or style of worship that most Liberian immigrants cannot get from our home churches in Richmond; therefore, we rely upon the ACCC. Overall, ACCC provides a home away from home; feeling for me that I can't get from any other church in Richmond. I believe ACCC's best feature is its worship – traditional, spiritually uplifting, biblically grounded and informal. The “praise and worship” (PAW) and preaching are great. ACCC's worship service often begins with a time of PAW that really gets a person in the mood for worship. As a result, you're often in a better position to receive the “word” from the Pastor. Regarding relationships or programs, I think the community leadership that Pastor Birch continues to provide is invaluable. Personally, I discuss very confidential and important issues with

¹⁰ When quoting participants in surveys and questionnaires, I offer them exactly as written. While conventions of grammar and punctuation may be ignored, this delivery assures authenticity.

him before either reaching a decision or sharing with the broader community. ACCC is the “hub” around what everything we’ve been able to either accomplish or initiate in the Liberian community. Primarily, most of the members in our community are either active or affiliate members of the ACCC. ACCC’s expression of God’s love and mercy can be seen in its programs (the Barnabas Project), the Summer Program for all children (but a great service to children of immigrant parents). As a community leader, I try to be a regular presence at the ACCC to benefit from what it offers me spiritually, but to also send a message to the broader Liberian community that it is important that we support (financial and talent when possible) the activities of the ACCC. Most importantly, ACCC is a “constant” on my prayer list.

Responding to the questions on Values, Relationships, and Identity, LAVA’s President seemingly identifies a few essential themes, including, the recognition of the authentic African nature of the ACCC’s worship; the church as a home away from home, establishing sustained support for needy individuals and families; nurturing children and youths in ways that meet their holistic needs; and expressing God’s love and mercy in a more tangible manner. LAVA’s President reinforces the need to establish a spontaneous tie between the church and the immigrant community. He further encourages the ACCC to continue to play its role within the Liberian Community of Richmond as a multicultural and welcome center for immigrants. LAVA’s President continued -

ACCC becomes most alive when its worship service is associated with an event (e.g. anniversary, Christmas Eve Service, New Year Eve Service, etc.). Usually, such an event will include members from the broader immigrant community and friends of the ACCC. Overall, these events have been both spiritually uplifting and culturally re-enforcing due to the African traditional way ACCC worships.

This participant believes that events and activities of the ACCC should be community-oriented and culturally driven to meet the needs of the African population and bring life and vitality to the church. His emphasis is on fellowship amongst Liberian immigrants as a medium for creating a home away from home. The Annual Anniversary Celebration,

the Watch Night Service, the Monthly Community Meal, the Family Life Conference, and the Coffee House are events and ministries that pull ACCC members, associates (frequent worshippers those who love the church but have commitment elsewhere), and community residents into a gathering filled with fun, fellowship, and praise. These events and ministries create the space of storied enactment, cultural engagement, and purpose driven fellowship. The President of the Women's Missionary Union (WMU) was a thorough, remarkable, and an outstanding interviewee who touched on several different features of the church and the community. On the issue of growth and development, the WMU President stated, "I have always dwelled on numbers, but AI has transformed my perspective. What we need is commitment and dedication to the call of the immigrant church. We need to be a service-oriented congregation." The interviewee echoed a need for consistent fast and prayer, all night tarries, leadership development, unity, and a return of the quarterly family life conference to provide counseling to individuals and families traumatized by the Liberian Civil War. The WMU president wrote -

I was most alive, motivated, and excited about being involved with the ACCC when I first visited in 2008. I had found a church where I could "fit in." The worship service, the people's warm greetings, all reminded me of home (Liberia). I was so excited; I had found my home church. The presence of God was (and still is) in this church. Besides, there were acquaintances and former school mates who were a part of the ACCC. I knew this was where God wanted me to become a part of what he was (and is) doing. Church members may come and go, but the ACCC continues to be the African Church in the community, upholding the African way of worship. Our children and the generation born in America will also experience the Sasa, drums, clapping of hands, and dancing. We want to experience God contextually, to sing the Lord's song in our own way.

This participant reinforced the notion that Liberian immigrants must be of one mind and one purpose in order to make things happen. Bilateral partnership between LAVA and the ACCC is needed to advance the goals of the church and the community. She noted that we are defined by common episodes--we have one heritage, one nation, similar immigration concerns, one experience, and one Lord and Savior.

The intentionality of the immigrant church is crucial, and has to remain central to its vision and ministries. The immigrant church exists as a multicultural center for mending broken lives, fostering values, promoting fellowship, connecting families, healing through constructive engagement, networking, advocating for the less privileged, and framing storied experiences. Its call and mission transcends once a week Sunday gatherings. The immigrant church must be a “Balm in Gilead” for the brokenhearted, a comfort for the lonely, a welcome center for strangers, and a home away from home. Our very existence as a community breaks ethnic barriers and heals the wounds caused by the Liberian Civil War, she concluded.

The Director of the Youth and Children’s Ministry believes the ACCC comes alive by investing its energy and resources in the children and youths of the church and the immigrant population of Richmond. She emphasized that credence must be given to programs and activities that enhance the spiritual growth and development of children and build the interpersonal skills. This participant cites the Vacation Bible School (VBS), the Annual Summer Program, the Coffee House Ministry, Bible Drill, (quarterly children’s program to enhance their leadership skills), and other social ministries and events that excite the kids and encouraged them to assume ownership of the ACCC in the

future. ACCC, in her judgment, needs to do more with ministries and programs that promote healing, inspire peace and reconciliation, and advance the African culture and tradition.

A former president of the Liberian Association of Virginia inserts that the ACCC must continue to play the role of a “bridge” between the church and the community. He believes the idea of a mutual partnership between the church and the larger immigrant population. This participant reiterated that the ACCC was most alive during her early years when she served as a welcome center for arriving refugees in the City of Richmond. He further cited the need for cooperation between the ACCC and LAVA in advocating for social justice for immigrants, linking new arrivals and needy families with community resources, embarking adult literacy programs, and teaching cultural values to children of immigrant descent.

On the Value, Relationship, and Identify questions, a member of the clergy injected her support for fellowship oriented events as a mechanism for growing and developing the ACCC, an example being the Monthly Community Meal. This ministry was very instrumental during the early years of the church in drawing the immigrant population and well wishers together on the third Sunday of each month. This participant reinforced the need to reactivate the monthly fellowship meal as an effective evangelistic and discipleship strategy. By so doing, she emphasized, the church will reconnect with the broader community and fully assume its role as a lighthouse and a welcome center for immigrants.

A former instructor of the University of Liberia suggested that enhancing interpersonal relationships within the ACCC will spur the church's discipleship and strengthen its growth. This participant believes that the ACCC must continue to serve as the microcosm for the advancement of the African cultural values in Richmond. ACCC comes alive when she serves as a welcome center for immigrants, he continued. The worship style also makes a huge difference, he reinforced. The church's worship must at all times, be contextually conditioned to include the presence of African instruments, the choral response, and a spirited atmosphere of worship. Hymns are inspirational, but African traditional songs must take center stage, this participant stressed. The former university instructor pinpointed the monthly fellowship meal as the "Palavat Hut" of the ACCC. The "Palavat Hut" creates the space for community engagement and interpersonal relationship building. The elder further cited the ACCC's tremendous outreach to refugees and needy families during her early years. During this time, the church performed exceptionally well in its witness to immigrants, including her involvement in educational ministries (adult literacy, English as Second Language, after school program), family interventions (assisting individuals and families in the process of accessing community resources) and assistance with immigration related issues. The need to continue this bond and reestablish the warmth spirit of the past was echoed by this participant. He stressed the need to establish partnership between the church and the immigrant community. The participant went on to accredit the pastor's sermons, noting that the sermons are inspiring and instructional.

Addressing the Value, Relationship, and Identity questions, a Liberian Association of Virginia (LAVA) member cites the need for ACCC's active role in resolving conflicts within the church and the community. This participant believes that the ACCC needs to be empowered financially in order to adequately serve the population. The African heritage must be uplifted in this part of the world. That means every Liberian immigrant of Richmond needs to be functionally involved with the vision and mission of the ACCC, the interviewee concluded.

On Ministry-Related Questions, there were more agreements than differences. Participants overwhelmingly proposed that the church's worship must be Afrocentric in nature -- characterized by the presence of praise and worship, African choruses, and the freedom to express oneself through dance, clapping, and/or shouting. There was overwhelming praise for the Word. Nearly all of the participants praised the pastor for his preaching ministry. Interviewees stated that the "preached word" has been contextually conditioned to meet the needs of the congregation. On occasions of community worship, the pastor's sermons were said to have been helpful with healing, mending differences, reconciling conflicts, and edifying the congregation.

The project participants generally agreed that the future of the church rests in the hands of the youths and children. The church, therefore, needs to invest in the spiritual growth and development the children and youths. Recommendations were made advising the ACCC to discipline and encourage the boys and girls in ways that get them to apply their maximum potential. Many participants echoed the view that the church utilizes the Barnabas Project, its nonprofit organization, to expand its witness and outreach to

immigrant population beyond the City of Richmond. The longevity of the ACCC's Sunday worship had both positive and negative commentary. Some worshippers frowned on the two-hour worship period, while others suggested the two-hour worship should be maintained. The latter group suggested that the ACCC worship period must be framed within a two-hour window to make ample time for worshippers to engage with one another and experience God. One participant, sharing her opinion on the two-hour worship wrote, "This is all the time that we share together...on weekdays, everyone is going about their respective businesses."

The sermon series also came alive via the interviews and group forums. One interviewee wrote, "The sermons were dynamic and contextually befitting; it is helpful to know that Liberian immigrants are GOD'S COVENANT PEOPLE. The sermons made the gateway to productive dialogues. They helped my family move toward a grateful appreciation of the Lord for His grace and mercies that have brought us thus far."

Another participant wrote about the sermons, "What drives my love for ACCC is the centrality of The Word of God. The sermons series were therapeutic; they not only reconnected me with my heritage, but gave me a greater appreciation of who I am."

Some church events and ministries that triggered a broader consensus on questions of Ministry and Worship, including the Year End Revival, the Annual Summer Program for children and youths, the Coffee House, a ministry that educates and empowers students on trending issues, and the after school tutorial program.

On Ministry Questions, LAVA's President reiterated,

ACCC's most fulfilling expression of God's love, mercy and promise to the immigrant church can be seen in the Barnabas Project and the Summer

Program for all children (but a great service to children of immigrant parents). Overall, I believe these programs are not only a visible sign of a great vision, but its spiritual impact on our immigrant population is significant. Many of the families that attend or participate in these programs have very limited if any other options.

The opinions of LAVA's president and other participants intersect with Dietrich Bonhoeffer's stance on insistent realism, a view that true Christianity is a "Turning away from the phraseological to the real...Christianity could never be merely intellectual theory, a doctrine divorced from life, or mystical emotion, but always it must be responsible, obedient action, the discipleship of Christ in every situation of concrete everyday life, personal and public."¹¹

On Cultural Reorientation and Renovation, many of the project participants indicate that there is no such thing as a balance between time for oneself and commitment to God, as noted here by this LAVA member:

I'm driven by the statement – "To whom much is given, much is expected." Since moving to the United States in the fall of 1996, God has, and continues to bless every aspect of my life, (spiritual, professional, personal, etc.) in immeasurable ways, even in the midst of challenges and shortcomings. Therefore, I see it as my obligation or commitment to God to identify with a local church family and use my talent(s) in my community to promote His Word.

The President of the WMU wrote, "Being a fast paced society, America is so much different from Liberia in how it is built. But in order to place a balance between family and service to God and life in America, I will have to prioritize commitment to God, even though I have to work and provide for my family." Matthew 6: 33 was the most quoted scripture passage within this segment of the questionnaire, "Instead, be concerned above

¹¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together: A Discussion of Christian Fellowship* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1954), 8.

everything else with the Kingdom of God and with what he requires of you, and he will provide you with all these other things,” (Good News Bible). The point is that God remains faithful to His people in all things and at all times.

Feedbacks from the stories, interviews, and group/community forums trend toward the presupposition that the ACCC exists as a covenant community. As a covenant people, members of the ACCC owe God their undivided surrender to God in righteousness, holiness, and sacrificial service. The COVENANT KEEPING GOD of the Israelites is also the COVENANT KEEPING GOD of the immigrant. Reflecting on their storied experiences (redemption from the agony of the Liberian Civil War), members of the ACCC owe God their unwavering allegiance. True faithfulness to God and family must surpass everything the Liberian immigrant seeks. The questionnaire concludes with a request for participants to make three wishes for the ACCC. Responses included prayers for peace and reconciliation, recommendations, advice for the leadership, statements of solidarity and support, and grace, as illustrated below:

- “May the peace of Christ reign forever with the ACCC and the Liberian immigrant population of Richmond; may lasting peace and political sanity return to our mother land; Amen.”
- “I wish that members of ACCC will refrain from whining about numbers and focus more on how we can strengthen the church’s witness to the world. May we dwell more on celebrating the signs of God’s gracious presence with Liberian immigrants.”

- Invest in ministries and programs that drive children and youths toward utilizing their maximum academic, social, and spiritual potential;
- Promote bilateral relationship between the ACCC and the Liberian Association of Virginia (LAVA); through this partnership, create the space for fostering interpersonal relationships amongst immigrants and continue constructive engagement between the church and the immigrant community;
- Strengthen the existing Community Care Groups (the neighborhood Bible study) and utilize resources for expansion of these care groups; (The Community Care Group is a discipleship oriented ministry that links ACCC members one another during week days in various localities of Richmond);
- Promote peace, reconciliation, and unity amongst various ethnic groups within the ACCC and the Liberian immigrant population of Richmond;
- Continue to meet the needs of the community by investing in such programs as the Barnabas Project, the Coffee House, and Adult Literacy.
- Minimize the use of hymns in worship and increase traditional African music; let ACCC's worship be more afrocentric, evidenced by the presence of the Sasa and the Conga,
- Design an educational curriculum that includes sound biblical nurture, teaching African cultural values, norms, and traditions to children of African descent; and

- “I wish that ACCC will do the things she did in the past: be more engaging with the community.”

Summary

Doctrine, structure, programs, and creeds are not enough to hold a congregation together. While each of these is unique to the total life of the church, their combined relevance may not be adequate to save a congregation during intense crises. Consider the chameleon composition of the ACCC: its membership includes (former) Catholics, Episcopalians, Charismatic Pentecostals, Baptists, Seventh Day Adventists, and Methodists. The presence of these denominations evident doctrinal issues such as consubstantiation (Catholicism), transubstantiation (Protestantism), fire baptism and tongue speaking as the evidence of salvation (Pentecostalism), the role of the sacraments or ordinances, fiery contemporary church music versus the utilization of hymns, and written litanies. In spite of these respective doctrinal orientations, members of the ACCC continue to stand together. Programs, creeds, structure, policies, procedures, and bylaws tumble and fall when the congregation is not identified by strong biblical principles and episodes (stories) that the people share in common. It is unimaginable, that the ACCC, with such diverse composition, has pulled through its numerous storms. The church celebrated its tenth anniversary in October, 2013. TO GOD BE THE GLORY!

Furthermore, paying keen attention to defining rituals (the monthly fellowship meals, the Coffee House, the Family Life Conference, etc.) and celebrations (Watch

Night Service, ACCC/LAVA combined service, annual revivals, wedding receptions, dedication of children, etc.) not only helps the church identify its core values, images, and phrases that establish the congregation's identity, but strengthens the church's witness to the world and brings vitality amongst congregants. These people-oriented events promote fellowship, love, and unity in the church. When fully implemented, they can become mechanisms for emotional and psychological healing.

Pivotal to the life and the future of a congregation is the enactment of storied experiences. Stories not only bring excitement within the bond of fellowship, they also nurture the spirit of the congregation. We learn and grow from experiences of the past and the present. Creating the space for storytelling of congregants, of their faith tradition, of their church's past and present, of their community, and of their tradition is helpful with reclaiming the past, discerning the present, and imagining the future. The collaborative process that involved individual and family interviews, group and community forums, and stories of active, inactive, and former members set the stage for characterizing the ACCC. When everyone gets involved with framing the church's identity and characterizing its call, the vision becomes everyone's.

I close this chapter with the assumption that African immigrant churches in the United States have a bright future if their members can understand and connect with the factors that affect the growth and development. Like any viable entity, they, too, can become functionally stable and administer transformative kingdom building initiatives in the United States and elsewhere.

CHAPTER FOUR

I AM MESMERIZED

A fundamental duty of a pastor is to lead the congregation through a process of clearly defining its mission and identity. This is particularly essential for intentional faith communities, like the immigrant church, where there exists a blend of local and foreign narratives. The pastor, the mediator between theory and practice, must be proactive with discerning God's will for the people. Within intentional faith communities, where practice tends to exceed theory, the pastor champions the discipline of pastoral care and counseling, social ministries, social justice, worship, leadership development, and the spiritual nurture of the congregation. It is an intriguing obligation, as pastor of an immigrant church, to guide the congregation toward a realization of its way of being in the world, of relating to one another through fellowship, performing sacraments (ordinances), and administering ministries of caring and sharing.

I was intrigued by the privilege to serve in the capacities of the pastor, the candidate, and facilitator of this project. This was indeed, a rewarding experience. The Doctor of Ministry Project led members of the ACCC to a realization that we live in a time of changing assumptions. The days of sameness are gone. This is the time to

embrace the uniqueness of difference. Churches need to tailor their worship and ministries to meet the needs of the congregation. The one size fits all principle is obscure and gone. The ministries or programs that worked a long time ago may not work this time around. The time and the environment continue to change at a fast pace. The days of changing assumptions and paradigms have arrived. Christian workers need to accept that, while it may be possible to learn from other contexts and from the programs many congregational workers are developing, the path of ministry is one in which each congregation is unique in context, story, and experience. There are no magical solutions, or cookbook to follow. God is speaking to each congregation uniquely. What the church needs is discernment of God's will.

. The Doctor of Ministry project not only induced calm and mitigated the stress and anxieties for all sides (LAC, interviewees, group forums, and those who held overreaching concerns about the ACCC's growth), but rather paved the way for constructive, critical dialogues and story enactment. As a participant observer, I am particularly mesmerized¹ by the transforming power of AI, a process which translated the congregation of the ACCC from its deficit-based approach to congregational problem solving (e. g., murmurs, shifting blames) toward becoming an interpretative community that perceives, thinks, and creates through the use of sustained life-giving resources. The AI methodology, which involved interviews, storytelling, group conversations, and community forums were helpful with healing interpersonal conflicts.

¹ Mesmerize in this text means to be fascinated.

Rather than waste energy on trending issues that yield no positive returns, members of the ACCC have made a turn toward investing their emotional and physical resources into virtues which are honorable, pleasing, and contextually conditioned. By employing AI, the ACCC has shifted her focus toward the establishment of authentic Afrocentric worship, promotion of cultural reorientation and renovation, the teaching of African family values, encouraging unity and fellowship amongst immigrants, and valuing diversity. At the core of this transformation is the call for the church to be translated, as it was during its early years, into a multiethnic welcome center.

Elaine Graham's article, "Practical Theology as Transforming Practice," condensed in *The Blackwell Reader in Pastoral and Practical Theology*, is quite insightful and uplifting when framing arguments on the nature and purpose of intentional faith communities. She argues that the Pastor, also the practical theologian, has a duty to contextually articulate biblical principles in ways that not only make sense to his or her congregation, but also serves as a roadmap for the spiritual growth and development of the community as a whole. In this light, the pastor of the immigrant church, the practical theologian, must practice what he or she preaches. That translates into reconciling the human experience (social, political, and economic factors) with divine reality (worship, commitment to God, and discipleship). As the practical theologian, the pastor (of the immigrant church) is divinely assigned to provide the occasion for healing, transforming the nature and purpose of the church, and moving the congregation toward a deeper gratitude and appreciation of its heritage. The church fares well when efforts are galvanized toward shaping its spirit over its structure and programs. Congregations

realize the best of their future when they embark ministries and activities that strengthen their spirit over a track record of Sunday morning attendance and financial giving.

The Christian leader, therefore, has a duty to remain faithful to the call of Christian witness while at the same time, tending to challenging issues of the present age. Since its formation in 2003, the ACCC has sought to become a positive influence on the Liberian (African) immigrant population of Richmond, Virginia. ACCC continues to bring the Kingdom of God in the midst of the people. God's people are scattered everywhere, throughout the world. They bear a need for inner peace and tranquility. Humanity hungers for soul food. The church in light of this reality, exist as the feeding center. The church, an evidence of God's gracious presence in the world, fulfills its call to duty when she engages in practical actions that address the holistic needs of the community. We must practice what we preach, in all dimensions of faith.

The ACCC, a small congregation of about one hundred active participants, is accredited for its extensive outreach to the immigrant population of Richmond. This "little church located near the big heart of God," as she is often referenced by congregants in prayers and exaltations, has over the years, sought to make a positive influence on the immigrant community. Its immeasurable witness, referenced in chapter two, was not a mistake, but an obedient response to God's call for the Christian to be his brother's keeper. In spite of her challenges and shortcomings, the ACCC remains praiseworthy for its extensive outreach to refugees and needy families, especially during her early years (2003-2006). The church fails to fulfill its duty if it does not meet the needs of the total human being -- mind, soul and spirit. This indeed, has been my story

and the story of the ACCC since its establishment in 2003. Most of the ministries listed within this thesis were deliberately established to address the emotional, spiritual, and physical needs of immigrants. It has been my pleasing duty to serve as founder and first pastor of the ACCC. My sacrificial service with the ACCC is in grateful response to God's love, which delivered me from the tragic Liberian Civil War.

With great delight I extend heartfelt gratitude to the family of Drew University Doctor of Ministry Program. To all my faithful professors and administrators, thanks for tuning my energy level into high frequencies for success. Like Jesus' disciples on the Mount of Transfiguration,² I am captured by the moments we shared together. Permit me to close this section with these lines from the hymn, *Sweet Comfort*,³ which I composed as a course requirement at Drew University Doctor of Ministry Program. This hymn is a testament of my adventure between Drew, the ACCC, and my family.

In Him I've found com-fort, in Christ all is well;
 When tempted beneath raging seas, whatever the course,
 I will stay in thy care---Son of Man, Son of Man, Thou Art God
 Refrain
 Sweet Comfort, thou Art Mine, sweet Comfort, sweet Comfort, thou Art Mine!

With Him I've found friendship, in Christ life is firm,
 The world may be crude and unjust, whatever may come,
 I'll transcend, even so- Christ is Lord, Christ is Lord, Praise the Lord!

The cross Calvary's power, the cross Christ divine
 In Him all redeemed heaven's sure, whatever my state
 I'll commit to the Lord, triune God, triune God, thou Art Mine!

² Matthew 17: 1-8

³ The hymn, *Sweet Comfort*, was written by as a worship course; the hymn is fashioned after Fanny Crosby's *It is Well With my Soul*. The tune is VILLE DU HAVRE.

APPENDIX A
THE BARNABAS PROJECT⁴

BYLAWS

Of

The Barnabas Project, Inc

ARTICLE I

NAME

The name of the corporation is The Barnabas Project, Inc. (the “Corporation”).

ARTICLE II

PURPOSES

2.1 **Tax Exempt.** The Corporation is organized and operated: (a) exclusively for religious, charitable, scientific, literary or educational purposes, within the meaning of Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code of 1986, as amended (the “Code”), the regulations issued there under, or the corresponding provisions of applicable future United States Internal Revenue laws or regulations; (b) to do and perform any and all acts or services that may be incidental or necessary to carry out the above purposes; and (c) to engage in any lawful act or activity which is authorized by the Virginia Nonstock Corporation Act.

The Corporation is organized as a not-for-profit corporation, and no part of the assets or net earnings of the Corporation shall ever inure to the benefit of or be distributed to any director, trustee, or officer of the Corporation or any private individual; provided,

⁴ Appendix A includes a fragment of the bylaws of The Barnabas Project; it is presented verbatim to maintain its authenticity.

however, reasonable compensation may be paid for services rendered to or for the Corporation. No director, trustee or officer of the Corporation or any private individual shall be entitled to shares in the distribution of any of the corporate assets or dissolution of the Corporation. No substantial part of the activities of the Corporation shall be the carrying on or dissemination of propaganda, lobbying, or other attempts to influence legislation. The Corporation shall not participate or intervene in (including the publication or distribution of statements) any political campaign on behalf of (or in opposition to) any candidate for public office.

Notwithstanding any other provisions of these bylaws, the Corporation shall not conduct or carry on activities not permitted to be conducted or carried on (a) by an organization described in Section 501(c)(3) of the Code and exempt from federal taxation under Section 501(a) of the Code; (b) by an organization contributions to which are deductible under Section 170(c)(2), 2055(a)(2) or (3) and 2522(a)(2) or (3) of the Code; or (c) which is a nonstock corporation organized under the laws of the Commonwealth of Virginia.

2.2. **Mission and Goals of the Corporation.** The Corporation has the following purposes and powers, it being expressly provided that enumeration of its specific powers shall not be constituted to limit or restrict in any way the general powers of the Corporation:

- (a) To function as a non-profit organization whose general purpose is to assist African immigrants including the elderly, youth, disabled persons, women, minorities, and other at-risk African populations;
- (b) Though the Corporation's primary objectives target the needs of Africans and African immigrants in the United States, the Corporation also pledges its commitment to humanitarian service for all people if and whenever it is both needed and expedient for the Corporation to engage therein;
- (c) To promote and support collaboration among service organizations, businesses, the faith community, and others for the purpose of forming alliances that will help to eliminate duplication of services and broaden service networks in order to meet the needs of more people through more effective program and service delivery;
- (d) To serve as an advocate for the suffering people of Africa and also African immigrants who reside in the United States by engaging in the identification of unmet needs and the development of programs designed to meet them;

- (e) To administer various programs that will address their basic emotional and physical needs;
- (f) To provide programs and services which will contribute to the success of their families;
- (g) To provide programs that will help these persons maintain the highest level of self-sufficiency whenever possible and to otherwise help them maintain their dignity and self-respect while having their basic needs met; and
- (h) To provide programs that will provide one or more of the following: emergency assistance, educational counseling, English proficiency, tutoring, mentoring, special services for persons with emotional and learning and disabilities, statewide comprehensive family support, international program initiatives that connect American communities to families in African countries and assistance for those seeking to immigrate to the United States of America.

APPENDIX B

QUESTIONNAIRE FOR ACCC PARTICIPANTS

Drew University
Doctor of Ministry Project Prospectus
African Christian Community Church (ACCC)
Church/Community Forum Questionnaire

D. Questions on Values, Relationship and Identity

1. Tell me a story about your personal experience with the ACCC. What are some moments when you felt this church was most alive? What made it exciting? Who was involved? What happened? What was your role? What did you do? Describe what you felt.
2. What do you value most about the ACCC? What activities or ways of life of this church are most important to you? What are some of the church's best features?
3. How is this church contributing to your spiritual growth? What relationships or programs or events have been most powerful and helpful in fostering the congregation's relationship with God? What are the most valuable traits or characteristics of the ACCC? Describe what made/makes the difference and how that has happened.
4. What are the healthiest, most life-giving aspects of the relationships among people at our church? What would you say have been most valuable about our friendships? Have certain groups being especially valuable to you? What would you say is most

important about how we relate to each other? Offer some examples on how we live together at our best.

5. When you think about how ACCC has related to our Liberian community of Richmond, what do you think has been most important? How do we express God's love, mercy, and justice to others? What have been your own most important ministry and missional experiences in relating to others?
6. Don't be humble. We really need this information. What are the most valuable ways you contribute to the ACCC personally -- your personality, your perspectives, your skills, your activities, and your character? Please cite some examples.

E. Questions on Ministry and Worship

7. What are the most valuable aspects of the congregation's worship? Share some thoughts about the best worship experience(s) you've had with the ACCC. How did this worship affect you? How is ACCC's worship shaping its members and the community of exiles in Richmond? How is the ACCC's worship uplifting?
8. Consider the following ACCC ministries: The Barnabas Project (summarized in Appendix A) is a nonprofit ministry which has operated an after school tutoring program and a food pantry for a decade; the Monthly Community Meal; the Annual Summer Program; the Women's Missionary Union; Men's Ministry; the Ministry of Deacons; Community Care Groups; the Coffee House. How are these ministries fulfilling God's call and promise? How are these ministries fulfilling God's call and promise for the ACCC? Which ministry/ministries are missing? What are your best experiences with any of them?

9. If you were serving as the head of any of these ministries, what new insights will you bring?

F. Questions on Cultural Reorientation and Renovation

10. Compare your Christian experience in Liberia and in the refugee camp. Where are you in your spiritual growth and development today? What are the differences in your Christian journey? Cite some challenges. What are the blessings?
11. Make three life-giving wishes for the ACCC
12. What do you believe the immigrant church is all about?

APPENDIX C

SAMPLE QUESTIONNAIRE/RESPONSES FROM A PARTICIPANT OF THE
LIBERIAN ASSOCIATION OF VIRGINIA (LAVA)⁵

Questionnaire

1. Reflecting on your experience with the ACCC, what are some moments when you felt our church was most alive? What made it exciting? Who was involved? What happened? Were you involved? What did you do? Describe what you felt? ACCC becomes most alive when its worship service is associated with an event (e.g. anniversary, Christmas Eve Service, New Year Eve Service, etc.). Usually, such an event will include members from the broader immigrant community and friends of ACCC. Overall, these events have been both spiritually uplifting and culturally re-enforcing due to the African traditional way ACCC worships.

2. Describe briefly your best felt moments of the Liberian/immigrant community of Richmond. What happened? Who was involved? What made it exciting? How is that uplifting to our community? Was ACCC involved (directly or indirectly)? Make one or two wishes for the Liberian community of Richmond. My best felt moment of the Liberian/Immigrant community is during the annual celebration of our graduates. During this event, we recognize all community graduates for that year during a formal service/program. ACCC is very involved as the service/program is held at its worship location. Personally, I will like to see the Liberian community move beyond being an “event driven” organization/association to a “project/initiative driven” organization/association. Unfortunately, the challenge is Liberians in Richmond have very “short” attention span that makes it very difficult to implement an initiative/project that requires sustained commitment of time (e.g. two years) and resources. This is why doing events to keep the community “alive” is modus operandi for now.

3. What do you value most about ACCC? What activities or ingredients or ways of life are most important? What are the best features of this church? As I indicated earlier, ACCC’s style of worship is a blend of our African tradition (e.g. songs) and Christian faith. It is absolutely this perspective or style or worship that most Liberians/immigrants cannot get from our home churches in Richmond, therefore, we rely upon ACCC.

⁵This response of LAVA’s participant is presented verbatim to maintain authenticity.

Overall, ACCC provides a “home away from home” feeling for me that I can’t get from any other church in Richmond. I believe ACCC’s best feature is its worship – traditional, spiritually uplifting, biblically grounded and informal.

4. When you consider all of your experiences with the ACCC, what has contributed most to your spiritual growth? What relationships or programs or events have been most powerful and helpful in fostering the congregation’s relationship with God? Are there characteristics or traits of our congregation that are most valuable as we grow spiritually, both personally and as a church? Describe what made the difference and how that has happened. The “praise and worship” (PAW) and preaching. ACCC’s worship service often begins with a time of PAW that really gets a person in the mood for worship. As a result, you’re often in a better position to receive the “word” from the Pastor. Regarding relationships or programs, I think the community leadership that Pastor Birch continues to provide is invaluable. Personally, I discuss very confidential and important issues with him before either reaching a decision or sharing with the broader community.
5. When you think about how ACCC has related to our Liberian community of Richmond and to the world, what do you think has been most important? When we are at our best, how do we express God’s love and mercy and justice to others? What have been your own most important ministry and missional experiences in relating to others? ACCC is the “hub” around what everything we’ve been able to either accomplish or initiate in the Liberian community has sprung from. Primarily because most of the members in our community are either active members or affiliate members of ACCC. ACCC’s expression of God’s love and mercy can be seen in its programs (Barnabas Project), Summer Program for all children (but a great service to children of immigrant parents).
6. Don’t be humble, we really need this information: what are the most valuable ways you contribute to our church personally – your personality, your perspectives, your skills, your activities, and your character? Please cite some examples. As a community leader, I try to be a regular presence at ACCC to benefit from what it offers me spiritually but to also send a message to the broader Liberian community that it is important that we support (financial and talent when possible) the activities of ACCC. Most importantly, ACCC is a “constant” on my prayer list.

A. Ministry Questions

1. What are the most valuable aspects of our congregation’s worship? Share some thoughts about the best worship experience(s) you’ve had with the ACCC. How did this worship affect you? How is ACCC’s worship

shaping its members and the community of exiles in Richmond? How is ACCC's worship uplifting? See answers to questions 1 and 3 in the previous section.

2. Considering the following ACCC ministries– The Barnabas Project, a nonprofit ministry of our church (operates an after school tutoring program and a food pantry), monthly community meal, annual summer program, Women's/Men's Ministries, Deacons, Bible study, Coffee House – how are these ministries fulfilling God's call and promise for the immigrant church? Which of these ministries best fulfills God's call and promise for the immigrant church? Which ministry/ministries are missing? What are your best experiences with any of these ministries?
Based upon my experience, ACCC's most fulfilling expression of God's love, mercy and promise to the immigrant church can be seen in the Barnabas Project and Summer Program for all children (but a great service to children of immigrant parents). Overall, I believe these programs are not only a visible sign of a great vision, but its spiritual impact on our immigrant population is significant. Many of the families that attend or participate in these programs have very limited if any other options.
3. In support of this project, Pastor Birch completed a sermon series last month (January 2013); his messages were built upon the following biblical texts: Exodus 3: 1-13; Exodus 19: 1-6; Psalm 90: 1-12; and Joshua 20: 1-15. The general theme for these messages was, *where did we come from, and why are we here?* What did you glean from the sermons? State how your insights might influence this project (don't worry about being academic or sequential). N/A

B. Reorientation & Renovation

4. Explain how you (as an immigrant) place a balance between life in America and commitment to God/. I'm driven by the statement – “To whom much is given, much is expected.” Since moving to the United States in 1996(Fall), God has and continues to bless every aspect of my life (Spiritual, Professional, Personal, etc.) in immeasurable ways (even in the midst of challenges and shortcomings). Therefore, I see it as my obligation or commitment to God to identify with a local church family and use my talent(s) in my community to promote his Word.
5. Make three wishes for the future of ACCC
 - Sustained and committed leadership
 - Financial stability

- Membership growth based on substance, not just numbers

6. Make three wishes for the Liberian Community of Richmond

- Proactive involvement of the broader Liberian immigrant population in leadership and activities of the community
- That the community evolves into a Project/Initiative driven (i.e. mission driven) organization rather than an “Event” focused organization
- The members of the community becoming “financially blessed” that will enable them to in turn support projects/initiatives within their community

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