

iBELONG
USING SERMON-BASED SMALL GROUPS AS A CATALYST FOR
BUILDING HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS THAT PROMOTE
COMMUNITY AND MEMBER RETENTION

A professional project submitted to the Theological School of
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Advisors: Dr. Donald Hilliard, D.Min.

Dr. Leonard Sweet, Ph.D

Dr. Robert Duncan, D.Min.

Kenneth M. Yelverton

Drew University

Madison, New Jersey

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ABSTRACT

iBELONG

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Kenneth M. Yelverton

The Temple of Refuge Church, Charlotte, NC

The iBelong project was designed to address the problem of revolving door membership within The Temple of Refuge Church in Charlotte, NC. The project will reveal that there is a correlation between church member retention and friendships/relationships within the same church congregation. Although in general, people maintain their church membership if they feel their spiritual needs are being met, I contend that friends who attend the same church are more than likely to maintain their membership because of meaningful relationships with those of the same church and faith. Small Group Ministry was introduced and implemented into the ministry life of the church as an incubator to develop and sustain healthy relationships as a means to combat member retention. Five sermons were designed and preached on Sundays around themes of belonging, community and relationships. Small Group curriculum was then developed from those messages for group discussion, which reinforced the messages preached, as well as provided a means of togetherness within the groups. One of the surveys conducted at the church revealed that over 43% of those surveyed cited the importance of

friends at the church being a major contributor in their affiliation with the church. The project was designed with the intent of using the power of healthy relationships and friendships as a positive influence on membership. For this project a team of laypeople from within the ministry were brought together to assist in gathering some of the stories before, during and after the project implementation. This project exposes the value of relationships within The Temple of Refuge Church membership, and the role that those relationships play in the growth of the church as well as membership stability.

The primary challenges that we are confronted with at The Temple of Refuge was not just moving people into membership, but creating an environment where relationships within the church could form and in turn produce belonging among the body. One of the greatest threats to accomplishing this task is the present culture in which we live that promotes independence and self-worth more than a commitment of togetherness. The sermons preached for the project, as well as the Small group lessons were formulated to combat the spirit of independence that is so pervasive in our world today, and has very much crept into the church. Genesis introduces us to a God who is very much relational and created us for relationship and belonging. The early church in the book of Acts reveals a faith community who were very much connected in a bond of oneness that promoted growth and stability of that thriving body of believers. The Apostle Paul further shares the importance of body unity and connectivity with each part of the body vital to the function of the overall body. The analysis of surveys and other data collected revealed the budding of new relationships, the strengthening of existing friendships and the development of an environment of belonging that produced cohesion in the church.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

One of the questions that constantly haunts me in regards to ministry is how do we stop the seemingly never ending cycle of people who join the church and slowly but surely become inconsistent and eventually stop attending altogether? Of course, I don't believe that this is something that is exclusive to the local church where I serve, but a matter that is probably more universal than we are willing to admit. Based on research of 557 churches from 2004 to 2010, Thom Rainer states "nine out of ten churches in America are declining or growing at a pace that is slower than that of their communities."¹ At some point of every Pastor's ministry assignment, they're faced with the challenge of building a close knit community of believers where healthy relationships are birthed and at the same time, close the proverbial revolving door of church membership. We will explore some of the many factors that play a role in the declining growth of the church and the inability to maintain a consistent vibrant membership later in this writing, but from the perspective of someone who has been in and around the church for most of my life, I offer some observations just in general comparison to the church of my youth.

Born into a ministry family that consisted of my father, who was a Pastor for over 55 years, and five of my six siblings were ordained ministers, you could say that church and ministry have been in my blood from day one. My father was born and raised in the

¹ Thom S. Rainer, *I Am A Church Member: Discovering the Attitude That Makes the Difference*

Baptist church until a Pentecostal experience at a local tent revival one night compelled him on journey of spirit-filled living that became the cornerstone of my family's faith and belief. I all too well remember the passionate and fiery messages preached by my father and the can't miss church experiences of those times in our Pentecostal Holiness Church in Durham, NC. During those times and in that context everything was centered on the church and it was the life-blood of my home and family. Sunday was literally a sacred day and God's Word to "remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy,"² was the standard rule of thumb. Sunday comprised of Sunday School, Morning Worship, then we would go home for Sunday dinner only to return a short while afterward for Afternoon Service and Y.P.H.A. (Young Peoples Holiness Association), and finally Sunday Night Service. We were basically in church on Sundays from 8:30am until 9:30/10:00pm. As I reflect over those times of the late 70's early 80's I must say that one of my first observations as to why the church has some declining numbers is the length of Sunday worship time. With a plethora of other things that consume the average persons time, church attendance and ministry participation many times unfortunately loses this competition. Times have most certainly changed and many within the African American church community feel as if they can work ministry like the 70's and 80's. I recently had a conversation with a Pastor who had moved into the area with his family to start a church plant. He informed me that he was going to begin with his service times Sunday night at 6:00pm at which I quickly replied that my prayers were with him but he may want to consider another time slot because Sunday night service times by and large no longer work, especially in the South. People want a moving church experience where they encounter the presence of God and they learn and grow in their biblical knowledge; they just want it as quick as

² Exodus 20:8.

possible and at a time best suited to their already busy schedules. It took me some time to adjust and succumb to this concept because of the 4-hour Sunday services of my upbringing. I could not comprehend the idea of no Sunday night church service, let alone an abbreviated Sunday morning service because I grew up with the understanding you had to wait or tarry until the Holy Spirit moved in our services. But just a casual glance of the religious community of Charlotte, NC you will quickly see that the churches with large Sunday attendance are usually the churches with multiple services that are short and concise.

Another general observation I would like to make in looking at some of the decline in church attendance and involvement is the lack of community within the local church. This is especially true within the African American church context, although it has not always been this way. During the Civil Rights Movement, the Black Church played a key role in the birth and sustainment of the movement. Many of the meetings and even the birthing of other Civil Rights organizations occurred in and through the Black Church. This is evident in the church background of many of the Civil Rights Leaders, and many of them were licensed ministers and Pastors. There was a great sense of community cohesiveness and bonding relationships that happened in the confines of the church. I remember as a child, there was a strong connectedness among the congregants to the degree that “when one suffered, all suffered.”³ There was no mantra to keep to your self and not be involved in the affairs of others, but everyone genuinely cared for one another. As a little boy, I fondly remember the food and fellowship that was constantly shared with other members of the church and even many of the church meetings involving food to some degree. There was great concern for one another’s

³ 1 Corinthians 12:26.

families and their well being that forged long lasting relationships that extended beyond the confines of the church. However, the sense of community that existed during the 60's and 70's, in my opinion, is almost non-existent. I believe there are many factors that contribute to this, namely the passing of Civil Rights laws and other legislation that gave African Americans access to other things previously not available to them. The church was primarily a rally point for the movement that was no longer utilized as such once some of the major objectives of equal rights were accomplished. The relationships birthed through the church community proved to be lasting relationships that bonded disciples together with little to no issues of member retention.

As the founding Pastor of The Temple of Refuge Church in Charlotte, NC, the issues of building healthy relationships and membership retention have seemingly always confronted us. Established in January of 1999 with approximately \$1,000.00 and no other church or organizational support, The Temple of Refuge was planted as a Non-Denominational ministry in the heart of the southern Bible Belt. We began in a small banquet room at the Holiday Inn Hotel and after 14 years of committed service, the church membership stands a little over 400 listed, however, less than 50% of the membership is actively involved in the life of the church and attend on a consistent basis. There seems to be a never ended cycle of persons who visit the church, come forth to connect as a church member and go through the new members orientation process, but then slowly drift off until they attend inconsistently or not at all. In the African American context, especially in the late 70's/80's, ministry and church membership was focused primarily on the personality of the Pastor and his/her ability to preach. If the preaching was good and created a sense of awe, people joined and committed themselves to

ministry. Of course times have changed and ministry must be addressed in the language and culture of today. In order to position The Temple of Refuge where the negative habit of lack of involvement and member loss can be broken, new concepts and routines must be implemented that will foster healthy relationships and thereby promote a greater sense of community. The philosophy of good preaching alone will grow a church is no longer apropos. The *Field of Dreams* strategy of church growth, “build it and they will come,”⁴ will not suffice for the 21st century church. I don’t believe that people are connecting with ministry based primarily on the preaching prowess of the Pastor, the energy of the music or the lovingly warm hospitality. Building community is more than appearance and deeper than the style of worship. I believe that we have an opportunity at The Temple of Refuge Church, to implement new routines within the life of the church that will encourage the development and growth of relationships that become foundational for community.

For this project, I pulled together a team of laypeople from within the ministry to assist in gathering some of the stories before, during and after the project implementation. In conjunction with this team we will show over the next few chapters the value of relationships within The Temple of Refuge Church membership, and the role that those relationships play in the growth of the church as well as member retention. We developed and implemented Small Group Ministry that we called *iBelong Small Groups*, to reinforce some of the principle highlights of the Sunday messages over a 5 week span, which created a means of dialogue and an incubator for budding relationships and community bonding.

⁴ Ray Kinsella, *Field of Dreams*, DVD, Directed by Phil Robinson, Los Angeles: Universal. 1989.

CHAPTER TWO

NARRATIVE OF CONCERN

Before addressing the details of the narrative of concern relative to The Temple of Refuge, it's important to make a few observations I believe are important to the culture of the last 10-12 years of the church's existence. My Pentecostal Holiness roots have had a tremendous impact in the formation of my understanding of ministry and how a Sunday order of worship should be shaped. My father use to say when you come to church, you just ought to have church, simply meaning that if there was no move of God, or some type of fiery Pentecostal experience, our gathering was in vain. That philosophy was embedded within me and played a key role in the beginning days of launching The Temple of Refuge. In those early stages, time was never a factor as it relates to the length of service times. Although I had no other support, I did everything with the intention of having our own Pentecostal experience, which equated in my mind to having church. I truly believed that people came to The Temple of Refuge because they wanted to experience God in what I understood that to be, i.e. hand clapping, foot stomping, tongue talking, joyful shouts of praise, adoration and dancing unto the Lord. The focus in those beginning days of ministry was not the convenience and accommodation of the service, but specifically on having church, once again as I understood that to be. Based solely on my background, how my father raised me and context of ministry, I believed that people should adjust their schedules to make church and worship a priority and not the church to

be accommodating to their schedules. After all, as my father would reiterate from time to time, God gave us seven days a week, surely we can at least give Him one day. For the first twelve years of the ministry existence, our services were scheduled to begin at 11:00am, and the service ending time was not a consideration at all, and often times would be three to four hours later. Once again, this was a non-issue in my estimation because from my Pentecostal context, you could not “quench the spirit”¹ and dictate to God when it was time for the benediction.

Not only did my Pentecostal upbringing have a significant impact on the church, but I also believe launching the church with no support did as well. My wife and I started in a hotel ballroom and I would perform all aspects of the order of service, while my wife performed all matters of hospitality. There was no launch team to dream with, plan or implement the work. There was no small group of people who launched with us to provide prayerful support, financial resources or to take the responsibility of handling the many aspects of starting a new church plant. Every Sunday, I would load the car with the small sound system we stored in our home and hauled it to the hotel to set up for the worship service, and then break it all down and place back in our home garage. Looking back retrospectively I believe this caused my wife and I to develop this mindset of doing things ourselves, which in turn also caused the people who joined ministry in those early days to sit back and observe us. The lack of staff and volunteer support that we experience now in ministry I believe can be directly connected to the routine my wife and I developed early on by taking ministry matters into our own hands. We adopted the sentiments that if you want something done right, you have to do it yourself. We’ve been able to do a considerable amount of ministry training so that individual persons can

¹ 1 Thessalonians 5:19.

utilize their gifts and talents in ministry, but even today, when things are not conducted in a spirit of excellence, we'll quickly jump in and walk people through. Some of the seeds of teaching and training that we have done a few years ago on team-based ministry are just now beginning to produce fruit. There is not much that transpires in the church that is not created and implemented by a team of people, instead of my wife and I. The early stages of the church however were greatly affected by the lack of group/team support. We witnessed persons who would connect with the ministry, but would soon begin to back away from their membership connection because they were not being utilized in the church.

A third observation I want to make about the early stages of The Temple of Refuge is the familiarity that I have with the city of Charlotte. This may seem to be minor in its significance, but nonetheless one that I feel carried a great deal of weight in the beginning. Prior to launching the church, my wife and I were a part of another church in the city that, at the time, would be considered a mega-church. The membership of Salem Baptist Church was well over 3,000, when I was brought onto the full-time staff as Minister of Christian Education, while simultaneously completing my Master of Divinity degree. I served in this position for seven years and my final two years as the Special Assistant to the Senior Pastor. The church was very popular in the city, known for the charisma and influence of the leader, and the high-energy Pentecostal-style of worship. Upon my departure from the church to begin the Temple of Refuge, I was led to believe that I had the approval and support of the Senior Pastor. However, not long after my wife and I left, his feelings toward us, as well as the launch of the church, quickly changed. I was accused of attempting to split the church, by taking members away from Salem to

begin Temple of Refuge. Although no one from the church departed with us, these initial allegations created a cloud over our launch and caused some in the city, mostly those from Salem Church, to view us in a bad light. In the early stages of the church, when someone would bring up the name Temple of Refuge or my name, I was referred to as the guy that came out of Salem. You would think that this would not be too terrible of a thing considering the popularity of the church, but little did we know that popularity was slowly beginning to tarnish. Some years after we departed the Federal Government conducted an official investigation of the church and the Pastor and sentenced him to 8 years in Federal Prison, and his wife to 6 years. Over the years with much prayer and leadership development, Temple of Refuge has established its own identity and broken free from the negative familiarity that we had in the city through my connection to Salem Church. We're beginning to reap some of the benefits of positive press as a ministry where the presence of God is at the forefront of everything that we do, and leadership that seeks to walk in integrity before God.

Current Narrative

The issue of church member retention is nothing new under the sun. At some point and time in the life of every church, Pastor and leadership have had to wrestle with the proverbial question of why people become aligned to ministry and then become inactive or no longer attend. Research conducted by the Barna Group's FRAMES Project cites that "although church involvement was once a cornerstone of American life, U.S. adults today are evenly divided on the importance of attending church. While half (49%) say it is "somewhat" or "very" important, the other 51% say it is "not too" or "nor at all"

important.”² Having done a great deal of personal reflection on my role as senior leader, and processing through the aforementioned observations that have played a role in shaping the culture of the church, various adjustments and changes have been attempted and made to affect attendance and member retention in a positive way. We have changed the length of service time to be more accommodating, trained our hospitality ministries to be warm and courteous, offered various ministry services to appeal to the varying taste and all ages, tweaked our new members intake process and a host of other things befitting a progressive ministry. In regards to attendance and member retention, it seems as if the changes we implemented and the plethora of ideas that we have injected have only had minimal affect. There is, however, a common thread that seems to weave it’s way through some of the stories gleaned from former and inactive members. When asked why they no longer attend Temple of Refuge, or are not as participatory as they should be, the theme of relationships was the common denominator in the majority of the narratives. It wasn’t the preaching style, length of service or the hospitality, but the overwhelming theme of relationships and the role it played in their ministry allegiance. A recent survey revealed that over 43% of those surveyed cited the importance of friends at the church being a major contributor in their affiliation with the church (see Appendix B). In story after story, we heard repeatedly, a friend or friends invited me to this church. I joined this church because my friends attend here, and the opposite held true as well. I no longer attend because my friends left and I’m not close with anyone else at the church. I recall some 10 years ago, our then Minister of Music resigned from his position at the church after several disciplinary actions. This was a very difficult time for the church

² Jon Tyson, *Sacred Roots: Why Church Still Matters In A Post-Religious Era* (Grand Rapids, MI Zondervan/Barna Group 2013), 22.

because he had developed some very close and personal relationships with some other key people within the ministry. It was not long after his departure that another musician resigned and left, along with several choir members and one of the young ladies on the Liturgical Dance team. I found this to be true not only in this case but also in almost every departure from the church, relationship with their departing friends was a key factor. The other musician that resigned and followed the Minister of Music returned to Temple of Refuge some years afterwards, apologized to me and confirmed that he was in fact heavily influenced by his relationship with the Minister of Music. Considering the power of influence in relationships became a major focal point in seeking to gain a greater understanding of the culture of the church and how that influence can be utilized in a positive way in creating belonging and member retention. When people connect in ministry as friends, develop and foster that relationship it helped to foster and fortify community, which became a deterrent to member departure. Most people feel a sense of connection to ministry when there has been an establishment of relationships within that ministry that signals for many people that *I Matter*. Without the formation of those relationships it gives the appearance that the church is cliquish and not receptive of outsiders invading their space, as one former member shared with me. She felt it was difficult to fit in because the members that were operating in a particular area of her interest, already had a set group of people that they utilized almost exclusively, which made her feel more like an intruder and less a part of The Temple church family. This desire for relationship and the power of those connections are not exclusive to Temple of Refuge, but a greater cry of the soul for community, belonging and family.

Joseph Myers, in his book, *The Search To Belong* states that “belonging happens when you identify with another entity—a person or organization, or perhaps a species, culture, or ethnic group. Belonging need not be reciprocal. You can feel a sense of belonging—and in fact, can belong—without the other party’s knowledge or sharing the experience.”³ Within our context, we have identified someone who *belonged* to The Temple of Refuge in the same manner in which the majority of churches traditionally viewed it; someone who came forth when the invitation was extended, completed the new members/disciples class, attended church on a regular basis and made regular financial contributions through tithes and offerings. However, we have had persons to participate in all formalities of joining the church, and yet feel as if they don’t belong to the church, but with the advent and growth of social media, we have had those who have not gone through any of the joining in process, and yet feel like they belong or are a part of the ministry. I too then asked the question posed by Myers, “could belonging be multidimensional? Might people belong to us on different levels?”⁴ This is something I plan to explore further in the project, but for now I specifically want to focus on the belonging and/or lack thereof of those who have assigned their names as members of the church in combating the problem of the revolving door. What I discovered is people were not so much joining the church, but were joining their friends at church. When their friends didn’t attend, they no longer attended. In almost every story I heard from departing members, their friends’ membership and participation played a key role in their remaining at the church. ***The central question for me with this project: Is there a direct***

³ Joseph R. Myers, *The Search To Belong: Rethinking Intimacy, Community, and Small Groups* (Grand Rapids, MI. Zondervan 2003), 25.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 20.

correlation between church member retention and friendships/relationships within the same church congregation? Although in general, people maintain their church membership if they feel their spiritual needs are being met, I contend that friends who attend the same church are more than likely to maintain their membership because of meaningful relationships with those of the same church and faith.

We recently went through somewhat of a negative situation at the church that speaks of the sentiments of the above statement:

We were in need of a new Minister of Music and prayerfully began a search and found a very talented and gifted young man from the Raleigh/Durham, NC area. We extended the position to him, he accepted and he and his wife relocated to Charlotte, NC. In order to make him feel welcome and make his transition as smooth as possible, I gave him free reign to make whatever changes he needed to make to accommodate the vision and direction he had for Music and Arts Ministry. He thanked me and said that initially he didn't want to change anything until after he took the time to make an assessment of where things presently were. After a month or two, he came to me and said he wanted to do a re-boot of the Worship team by holding open auditions for existing Worship team members, as well as anyone who wanted to become a part of Music ministry. I agreed with him, and he had the support of our two key Worship team leaders. He pulled together a team to assist him in making the determination of pass/fail during the auditions and set the date for this to happen. During the auditions, it was discovered that three of the current Worship team members were not so good singers and did not pass, which meant they could still sing in the choir, but not on the Worship team. Not to say the least, it left them a little upset and not wanting to participate any further in Music ministry and

so refused the invitation to sing on the choir. One of the young ladies who failed the audition, her mother was extremely upset to the degree she and her daughter began to withdraw from other areas of ministry they were involved in and eventually stopped attending the church. After this episode, one of the Ministers, who was not on the Worship team but close friends with the young lady and mother who had stopped attending, soon followed them and no longer attended the church as well. One of the church Elders gave them all phone calls and followed up after them to ascertain as to why they no longer attended Temple of Refuge, at which she was informed that she didn't agree with the audition process, nor did she care for the new Minister of Music. A few months after this, I had to speak at a local church in the city and the young lady that was on the Worship team, her mother and the Minister were all members of this church. This matter had no direct bearing on the Minister that departed the ministry, but when her friend left, she departed as well. When we did have opportunity to speak, she confirmed that she didn't have a problem with the church but remaining at The Temple was placing a strain on her other relationships. We can label it coincidence if so desired, but friends follow friends. There have been other similar situations of this nature to occur and really showed me the power of meaningful relationships.

CHAPTER THREE

BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS

The challenges that we are confronted with at The Temple of Refuge was not just moving people into membership, but creating an environment where relationships within the church could form and in turn produce belonging among the body along with member retention. One of the greatest threats to accomplishing this task is the present culture in which we live that promotes independence and self-worth more than a commitment of togetherness. When we observe the Holy Scriptures we quickly see much that is acceptable about current culture is strikingly different from the principles of God's Word. This approach that promotes self and individual notoriety is so unlike the God who reveals Himself in scripture as a God who is very much relational and communal. Although we instinctively have a desire for community and relationship, we struggle to have this desire channel through the larger body of our local congregations. With this in mind, there is a need to both examine and apply some theological concepts and truths of God's Word as it pertains to our togetherness, community and belonging.

Biblical Relationships and Belonging

When we look at the Genesis account of the creation we see first and foremost that we are designed, not for isolation or to be lonely but we were created for relationship; we are created to belong. Out of His own relationship, which is triune in nature, God said,

“Let Us make man in Our image, after Our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth” (Genesis 1:26).

From the onset, a relational God created mankind as relational beings. We know that “the Lord God is One,”¹ but He did not speak in a singular capacity as in I will create man in my image, but the writer uses the plural pronouns *let us, our image, and our likeness*. The traditional contention poses that the plural refers to a divine plurality. “The interpretation proposed by the Church Fathers and perpetuated by the Reformers was an intra-Trinity dialogue. Although the Christian Trinity cannot be derived solely from the use of the plural, a plurality within the unity of the Godhead may be derived from the passage.”² Out of His own divine plurality, this eternal and intra-related trinity, God then creates man in His image and likeness, with the desire, need and capacity for relationship. This multiple imagery is then seen in the plurality of man, “in the image of God he created him; male and female He created them” (Genesis 1:27). Furthermore, the writer then points out God’s own displeasure with the current status of man by declaring, “it is not good that man should be alone; I will make him a helper comparable to him” (Genesis 2:18). The verse should not be interpreted as Adam being lonely as in by himself, but speaks more to the fact of no one of his kind, or humankind to relate to. “God’s concern is that man is “alone.” Whether the man felt his aloneness at first is not stated; only the divine viewpoint is given. God has created human life to have fellowship with Him but also to be a social entity, building relationships with other human beings.

¹ Deuteronomy 6:4.

² K. A. Matthews, *The New American Commentary Vol. 1A: Genesis 1-11:26* (Nashville, TN Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1996), 162.

“Man will not live until he loves, giving himself away to another on his own level. Isolation is not the divine norm for human beings; community is the creation of God.”³

There’s a popular saying that declares dog as man’s best friend, but however loyal a dog maybe, he is not of humankind. Independence and isolation was never God’s intention, but the desire and need for relationship with others of humankind is innate within the creative design of God. It is then safe to conclude that we should not refrain from, be distant, or unwilling to connect with others because in so doing we deny the creative intention of God who placed His specific relational DNA on the inside of us when He both designed mankind, and “breathed into his nostrils the breath of life” (Genesis 2:7).

The reluctance for community to a certain degree sends the message that perhaps God was in error in creating us as relational beings, and our creation in His image is a falsehood. God’s call and assignment for Adam and Eve to “be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it; have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves on the earth,”⁴ gives us further evidence of God’s relational character. Plurality is expanded in the creation of mankind to be inclusive of the dominion granted by God over the earth. God specifically said, “let them have dominion,” and not “let him (singular) have dominion.” Singular or solo dominion would be akin to dictatorship, which leads to domination and the cultivation of selfishness. God’s assignment for mankind to increase in numbers is contrary to the concept of independence and self-centeredness popularized by today’s culture out of the need for building self-esteem and self worth, but we are a part of the increased number; we belong and are a part of mankind. We discover this common theme and storyline of

³ Matthews, 213.

⁴ Genesis 1:28.

family, community, belonging and relationship runs throughout both the Old and New Testament scriptures.

In many of the biblical stories, in what some may consider being significant points or moves of God are typically launched out of significant relationships. I don't believe these things to be mere coincidence, but in some small way adds validity to the community attribute of God. Not only was relationship the housing of shared dominion, but also many of the accounts of the miraculous display of God's power came through groups, families or units of people connected in relationship. Noah's instructions from God was to construct an ark whereby God would spare his family and two of every kind of animal in the flood He was bringing upon the earth. When the waters receded, Noah, his sons and their wives were told to "be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth."⁵ It was in the relationship of Abraham and Sarah that Isaac, the promised child, was born even when they tried to assist God with Hagar and the birth of Ishmael. Isaac begets Jacob whose twelve sons become the pillars for growth and expansion of the Israelite people. The list continues with Moses, Nehemiah, Gideon's 300, David and his band of misfits in the caves of Adullam who birth his mighty men of valor, Jesus and the 12 disciples all displaying a pattern of togetherness, unity and relationship that promoted growth and the continuity of God's plan in the earth. Now it becomes apparent the existence of opposing forces that come against the plans of God to undermine His intention for relational victory by causing division, confusion, separation and broken relational ties with the ultimate goal of bringing about a selfish and individualistic mentality. The Apostle Paul warned many of the early churches to be on guard against all manner of division that sought to stifle the cohesiveness of the church. Using the

⁵ Genesis 9:1.

metaphor of the human body, Paul paints the picture of a living organism that functions at its optimum level when all parts of the body operate in their respective places, as designed by God.⁶ There is a relational harmony to the human body, and stands as a wonderful analogy of the interconnectedness of the individual members of the one body. Each part should have equal care and concern for one another, and it is through that care where division is deterred and belonging is fortified. No one part of the body is more important or vital than any other part, but each part plays a specific role and purpose that in so fulfilling benefits the entire body. One thing that's been detrimental to healthy growth within our context directly ties into the lack of understanding the importance of being one body as opposed to individual members. There is this aura of every man for himself that permeates the church and stands in direct opposition to Paul's words to the Church at Rome:

“For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others” (Romans 12:4, 5).

This appeal by Paul in both Romans and 1 Corinthians is not a strike against individualism, because we are all uniquely gifted and talented by God, therefore knowing your worth and value, as an individual, is important to the entire body. However, our distinctiveness should not come to the demise of the whole. The more vital factor is the connectedness, belonging and functionality of the body, and not individual accolades. The working of the body becomes divided when the focus becomes the personality of the leader, and not the power and potential of the body, group or team. Some of the strife and division that occurred in the Church at Corinth was due in part to the separation of those who aligned themselves with Paul, versus those who were converted under Apollos

⁶ 1 Corinthians 12:11-27.

ministry. Paul's task was to move the people away from individual notoriety to the more glaring aspect of their unity and success as a body accredited to God and not the leaders.⁷ This alignment to the personality of the leader is especially true within the African American church and I have witnessed firsthand in my own context. We saw a significant number of people who were excited and registered for the iBelong Small Groups and yet there was a minority that held fast to their desire to receive preaching, teaching and instruction solely from the Pastor. This was one of the reasons I intentionally left myself out as a group leader in direct defiance to leadership focus vs. group togetherness. The goal was to create a greater cohesiveness within the church body, and not greater commendation for self. By no means does this take away from the importance of credible leadership, but the African American church in particular has flourished primarily in part to the charisma of the leader. The philosophy of good preaching will grow a church has come at the expense of the conjoining of the people, not to mention the celebrity culture the leader has created for him or herself. The primary role that the African American Church played in the civil rights movement of course brought further spotlight upon the clergy of the movement and yet the church had a stronger community due to the limited access resulting from segregation laws. The atmosphere of belonging is birthed out of the shared relationship of the individual members of the body and not the prowess of the leader.

New Testament Belonging - A Connected Community

The Early Church in the Book of Acts presents to us a literal prototype of a connected and belonging church. The challenge for our consideration would be how to

⁷ 1 Corinthians 3:4-7.

translate the principles that contributed to their explosive growth and stability into today's church environment that has a multiplicity of things that absorb the attention. Although there were none of the 21st century advancements for the Apostles to compete for the undivided attention of the people, we're able to glean from the birth of the early church some factors that ring true in the postmodern church.

Connected in God: On the day of Pentecost when Peter preached to the mixed multitude of people visiting Jerusalem for the Passover festival, Acts 2:41 records, "then they that gladly received His word were baptized: and the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls." It's amazing that 3,000 people from various nationalities and backgrounds commit their lives to God through Jesus Christ. From the bases of their newfound relationship with God, a bond is created among the 3,000 from the shared experience of "pricked hearts,"⁸ repentance and baptism. As stated earlier, a relational God created us to be relational, we witness in the early church a connection to each other, from the basis of their connection to God. Being connected to God brings into consideration a main principle of stewardship into belonging, which is ownership. David states, "The earth is the Lord's, and all its fullness, the world and those who dwell therein" (Psalm 24:1). We belong to God and as believers everything about our connections, relationships, and friendships should spring from the bases of God owning everything, including self! The Apostle Paul said that "we are not our own, but that we have been bought with a price,"⁹ therefore, since we don't own ourselves, we can't deny the owner that established us as a relational people, created to belong in relationship with the owner and everything owned by Him. God displays His ownership of us through His

⁸ Acts 2:37.

⁹ 1 Corinthians 6:19, 20.

love for us, in sending His only Son to pay the ultimate sacrifice, taking our place and dying on the cross. Therefore, because of our connection to God, we should possess the same type of sacrificial love. We easily disregard one another and give place for division when our relationships are governed by feelings and emotions, instead of God's sacrificial and unconditional love. The example established by the early church and their sacrificial love for one another must be included in the 21st century church and not togetherness based on the instability of social media likes and retweet. We are connected to a God that looks beyond our faults and sees our needs, and yet we seemingly struggle to embrace beyond a person's faults. That was one of the glaring issues that the Pharisees and religious leaders of Jesus' day had against Him. They had to contend with, and found it literally impossible to come to terms with Jesus who was often seen eating and spending considerable time with those deemed the unlikable. Our coming together and belonging cannot be shaped by mutual likable traits but from God's ownership of us rooted in His unconditional love.

Connected In Word: One of the most powerful components of the early church was when those 3,000 that were added to them "continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine..." (Acts 2:42). They maintained connection because they remained committed to the teaching and instruction of the Apostles. The common denominator among those early believers was the Apostles doctrine; the principles of the Gospel message as spelled out by Jesus Christ and infused by the Holy Spirit. Even with the commonality of God's Word, it's amazing to see relationships breakdown and terminate over disagreements in the interpretation of scripture. Many years later, with multiple church splits and the birthing of multiple denominations, there is still a great deal of scriptural disconnection

and divisive matters within the church universal. Although my background and denomination of my youth is Pentecostal Holiness, my time in the Baptist Church, and exposure to the Methodist Church has resulted, I believe, in a balanced approach as it pertains to the scriptures. There were no competing thoughts in the early church because they all dined from the same meal (the Word of God) that was prepared and served by the Apostles. I believe this to be one of the factors that caused the Church of the Book of Acts to be so powerful. “They continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers” (Acts 2:42). Growing up as a little boy in the south, one of the things I loved and miss even now about home was my mother’s cooking and family dinnertime. I believe what made the family unit so connected and unified was those times around the kitchen/dining table. The meal, where everyone is eating the same thing, and the conversation generated around the table created a time of intimacy, learning and laughter. Leonard Sweet in his book, *From Tablet To Table: Where Community Is Found And Identity Is Formed*, shares, “at the table we don’t just feed people; we build relationships-stories and memories.” He continues, “when I want to tell my kids about the grandfather they never met but am at a loss for words, I get out some graham crackers, serve them some cheesecake, and tell them about the cherry cheesecake their Grandpa Sweet made from graham cracker crust, Philadelphia cream cheese, and Del Monte canned cherries. In so doing, I’m enculturating them into the Sweet family; I am connecting the dots between their stories, his, and mine.”¹⁰ In the 1997 movie, *Soul Food*, “Matriarch Mama Joe, played by actress Irma P. Hall, has held her family together for 40 years around a Sunday dinner of soul

¹⁰ Leonard Sweet, *From Tablet To Table: Where Community Is Found And Identity Is Formed* (Colorado Springs, CO: Navpress, 2014), 6, 7.

food. When diabetes hospitalizes her, the dinners stop and tensions among her three daughters start to break the family apart.”¹¹ Mama’s Sunday dinner created a place of togetherness for the family regardless of their differences, but when she was no longer able to prepare that meal, the family no longer came together as they once did. I’ve watched the family unit erode because of the busyness of schedules and other things that compete for already limited time. During the holidays when my brothers and sisters come together, we sit around the table to eat and of course the stories of our youth began to be the subject of conversation. No matter how many times I’ve heard the stories, they never get old and the memories of my parents, now deceased, begin to fill my heart and mind. Even now while working on this project, my mind goes back to when I first left home for college. It was an awakening experience for me in that it exposed me to new people, new places and things, and more importantly it showed me how blessed and fortunate I was to be born in the Yelverton household. I remember in those difficult moments when I wanted to quit school and go back home, I would call and my mother would answer the phone. After crying out to her and sharing how tired, frustrated I was and unsure if college was for me, my mother in her sweet soft voice would tell me the same thing she use to say to me around the dinner table when sharing some of my school challenges, sacrifice now, enjoy later. That statement alone carried me through college, seminary and even now resonates in my spirit. The conversation around food and the dinner table seem to be the conversations that hold more weight and are easily recalled at moments needed the most. No doubt, the Apostles used the time of fellowship and the sharing of a meal to also share their stories of Jesus; His life, His miracles, and His Word.

¹¹ Fox Video, *Soul Food* (1997) accessed online February 13, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OijFtJ5iHzg>.

Very seldom would my father permit my siblings or I to eat dinner or spend the night over a friend's house when we were younger. He would often say we don't know those people and that you can't eat from everybody's table. Of course, that may be considered old school thought and even border on some phobia, but if you've experienced food poisoning, you do become a little more cautious about where and what you eat. The early church grew and experienced miracles in part because there was no competing doctrine (meal) for the people to partake of; they all ate the same thing. It becomes problematic and a threat to relationships and belonging if there is a centralized focus and thought, and there is another thought opposite that of the church. In our vernacular we labeled people *parking lot prophets*, who had an opposing word that was shared in the parking lot after church worship, that was different from the one just shared by the preacher. Paul declared a similar focus to the believers in Corinth, "now I plead with you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing, and that there be no division among you, but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment" (1 Corinthians 1:10). When we're eating the same thing, dining from the same table, remaining connected in the Word of God, we know that our spirit is subject to the leaders spirit, and division, confusion and offense is then minimized. You can have a different perspective or angle of interpretation and approach to a particular scripture, but the spirit should be the same. The iBelong Small Groups help to further drive home the point of being connected in the Word and speaking the same thing with curriculum derived from the Sunday messages.

Connected To One Another: Those early church believers were not only connected through the Apostles doctrine, but they were connected together through the

power of fellowship. Every time I read or hear the word fellowship, my mind quickly recalls my father's definition of the word. My dad, who only completed the 3rd grade and had to work as a youth to help support the family said, fellowship means more than one fellow in the ship! That definition requires no deep thought or contemplation, and yet it is profound in its simplicity. In the midst of our differences and disagreements, we were created and called to belong and connect with one another. In the New Testament alone, there are close to 60 one another references that serve as a conduit for community fellowship. Richard Meyers in *One Anothering: Building Blocks For Small Groups* says, "passages like 'love one another,' 'pray for one another,' and 'bear one another's burdens' were given as directives to the church concerning its life together. As the basic building blocks of Christian fellowship, they characterize the ways we should relate to one another within the Body of Christ."¹² We are not by ourselves, and it is the intent of the Lord, as displayed in the early church, that fellowship be more than one fellow in the ship, with genuine care, concern and togetherness with each other. We are encouraged to:

"Love one another" (John 13:34)

"Serve one another" (Galatians 5:13)

"Consider one another" (Hebrews 10:24)

"Be kindly affectionate one to another" (Romans 12:10)

"Admonish one another" (Romans 15:14)

"Greet one another with a holy kiss" (2 Corinthians 13:12)

"Forbearing one another" (Ephesians 4:2)

"Forgiving one another" (Colossians 3:13)

¹² Richard C. Myer, *One Anothering: Biblical Building Blocks For Small Groups* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2004), 181, Kindle.

“Comforting one another” (1 Thessalonians 4:18)

“Edifying one another” (1 Thessalonians 5:11)

...and on throughout the New Testament. I don't think this is a coincidence but a direct challenge to us in creating an atmosphere of belonging we must be concerned and have care for one another. We are instructed to “rejoice with them that rejoice, and weep with those that weep.”¹³ This holds a greater significance than just coming to church and looking to have a good time, but giving and receiving ministry, encouragement and strength to and from each other. Therefore, we don't merely attend church, but we belong because there is a connection to one another. On the Day of Pentecost, there were many people there in Jerusalem from various countries and nationalities. But through the power and presence of the Holy Spirit, they all heard the Gospel in their native language and 3,000 people, from various parts and regions, became the Church. I contend that there is not a great deal to learn from those who are like you. Our differences are not intended to divide us, but to strengthen us through everyone fulfilling their unique roll in the lives of each other. That's one of the points of reference in the “abiding in the vine” analogy that Jesus uses in John 15. Jesus says, “I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing” (John 15:5). He didn't say, I'm the vine and you are the branch – singular! He said “you are the branches,” and I will add that there are no two branches alike. We are connected to each other, not for the purpose of mimicking or cloning, but that through the vine, we can become uniquely what we have been called and designed to be. Branches die and are either pruned or fall off of the tree, not because there was a disagreement with the branch beside them or their refusal to conform to them, but because the branch is no longer

¹³ Romans 12:15.

abiding in the vine, receiving what it needs for life and growth! Although the branches are different, when they remain connected and abide in the vine, they produce something that causes the whole tree to look beautiful. We're connected to one another, and should care for each other because our foliage is beneficial to the beautification of the entire landscape. Gospel singer and Pastor Hezekiah Walker's choir sang a song that became very popular in Gospel music circles, and we sung it often at our church. The name of the song is *I Need You To Survive*, and the words are powerful and confirm the importance of our mutual connection and belonging in church:

"I need you
 You need me
 We're all a part of God's body
 Stand with me
 Agree with me
 We're all a part of God's body
 It is his will that every need be supplied
 You are important to me
 I need you to survive"¹⁴

Some years ago Donald Wilson, one of the men of the church, came to me and shared some of the struggles he felt he was having connecting with others in the church as a relatively new member. A great deal of his disconnection was due in part to some of his own insecurities centered around him feeling inadequate to others because of some of his socioeconomic challenges. He was unemployed and had been struggling to find permanent consistent work for some time. As a result, he often shied away from showing himself friendly in order to obtain friends, especially within the church family. However, when he became more proactive and made the commitment to let his guard down, he became more involved in the Men's ministry and fellowship. I watched the walls he had

¹⁴ David Frazier, *I Need You To Survive*, God's Music/Li'l Dave's Music, Inc. (ASCAP) 2003.

put up to remain arms length from people slowly but surely fall down, and he discovered for the things he felt insecure about, there were other men dealing with the same or similar circumstances. More importantly, one of the men he especially became close too specialized in Human Resources/Career Development, and in turn helped him put together a better resume, enhanced his job search techniques, and sharpened his interviewing skills. In short, he obtained a dream job, became a better provider for his family and a consistent steward of his resources. I've watched Brother Wilson grow and mature in ministry and his relationship with God, which perhaps would have never happened unless he made the decision to make a greater commitment to break out of his stand off posture and connect with fellow believers. One person, one part of the body who felt weak and inadequate, is built up and strengthened by and through his connection to others. Paul's teaching about the gifts in 1 Corinthians 12, using the body as a metaphor, is such a powerful example of the importance of our connection to one another. Because we are connected together as one body, the whole body is then hindered when the foot is jealous of the hand and no longer wants to operate in its God-given design and function because its always covered up by a sock and shoe and doesn't get the exposure the hand receives. Can you hear the foot complaining about the hand, say that he doesn't like that hand at all! The hand always gets to hold, touch and contact things. The hand gets to make the acquaintance of others, writes, drives, claps, pokes, punches, pushes and receives a washing multiple times throughout the day. Can you hear the foot proclaim his hatred of the hand and refusing to be the foot anymore? What the foot fails to realize is that the hand and the entire body needs the foot to be a foot or the whole body is going to suffer! If the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I am not of the body," is it

therefore not of the body? And if the ear should say, “Because I am not an eye, I am not of the body,” is it therefore not of the body? If the whole body were an eye, where would be the hearing? If the whole were hearing, where would be the smelling? But now God has set the members, each one of them, in the body just as He pleased. And if they were all one member, where would the body be? But now indeed there are many members, yet one body. And the eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you”; nor again the head to the feet, “I have no need of you.” No, much rather, those members of the body which seem to be weaker are necessary, that there should be no schism in the body, but that the members should have the same care for one another. And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; or if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it.”¹⁵

A Sharing And Caring Community

In Acts 2 as well as Acts 4, we see a people who have come together and created a faith community by and through their connection of Calvary’s Cross. Although they are from various backgrounds and nationalities, they connect as one in fellowship, and under the teaching and tutelage of the Apostles, they spend time together sharing a meal and in prayer. Acts 2:44 - 46 reveals to us a people so committed to the Gospel and each other, that not one need went unmet among them because they shared one with another. It was the mutual sharing exemplified in Acts 2 among those early church believers that created a sense of belonging and community. According to Acts 2:45, they shared “and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need.” The needs were met through the shared collective efforts of everyone. With every need met it

¹⁵ 1 Corinthians 12:15-22, 25, 26.

sends the message that everyone is important and everyone matters. When a person feels they matter, they share at a greater capacity and level, and from the various biblical examples given by Paul in both 1 Corinthians and Ephesians, caring and sharing are vital to body movement and growth. But what does it mean to share, and why does it seem like something so hard for many people to participate in? To share means, “a portion belonging to, due to, or contributed by an individual or group.”¹⁶ Immediately we see the reason why many people struggle with sharing with others because the lessons learned in our world teach us to look out for me, myself and I. We’re so quick to proclaim that we barely have enough for self, and/or what we have is so small and insignificant it’s not enough to share. However, sharing is not a possession issue, but it’s a heart issue that says, I know I don’t have as much as others, but whatever I have, if it will help or touch someone else, I’m willing to share it! After spending much of the day teaching the multitude, Jesus instructs the disciples to feed the people, at which time Phillip informs Him, “200 denarii worth of bread is not sufficient for them, that every one of them may have a little” (John 16:7). However, the story goes on to record a lad, a young boy, perhaps with his lunch for school, willingly shares it with Jesus, who in turn feeds over 5000 people with the two fish and five loaves of bread! Our gifts, talents and possessions matter and make a difference to the entire body. As stated earlier, although the foot is covered often by sock and shoe, what it offers to the body is just as valuable as what the exposed parts offer (see 1 Corinthians 12). Paul reinforces the point of body sharing in his letter to the believers in Ephesus when he said, “and He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the

¹⁶ Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, An Encyclopædia Britannica Company, accessed online March 14, 2015, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/share>.

equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ; that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting, but, speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head—Christ—from whom the whole body, joined and knit together **by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love.**¹⁷ Emphasis is placed on the end of the passage in v.16, “by what every joint supplies.” We are joined and knit together “by what every joint supplies.” What your part supplies or shares, benefits the other parts and the whole body! Belonging results from being a vital and important contributor to the entire body. The strength of a sharing and caring community lies in its inclusiveness of everyone. No one is isolated, left out or made to feel insignificant because of the potential impact that may have upon the body. After hundreds of years of slavery in Egypt the Lord brings the Children of Israel out of bondage with a mighty hand, under the leadership of Moses. It is worthy of note in reference to their deliverance, “*there was not one feeble person among their tribes*” (Psalm 105:37). In the same manner there was such an interconnectedness and belonging in the early church that no need went unmet. If there were present an unwillingness to share their possessions, that would in turn cause needs to not be fulfilled, and in turn become a threat to their togetherness. We see this threat begin to surface, not so much because of the lack of possessions but from the lack of able-bodied servants who would take care of the responsibility of getting services to

¹⁷ Ephesians 4:11-16.

those in need, “now in those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplying, there arose a **complaint** against the Hebrews by the Hellenists, because their **widows were neglected** in the daily distribution.”¹⁸ Seven men were chosen out from among the people to fulfill the task of making sure the widows were served, lest the complaint morphs into division and even of greater harm, become a threat to their belonging and togetherness. This meeting of needs in the faith community was part of the Apostles doctrine, built on the platform of what they learned in their time spent with Jesus who met the needs of people wherever He went, often moved with great compassion.

Biblical Foundations for Church Membership

Questions abound today about what it means to be a church member. Is church membership valid or necessary today? What are the historical, biblical and traditional implications of church membership? For just as many questions, there are various responses as well based on background and denominational affiliation, rooted in a biblical understanding as well as steeped in tradition.

From a biblical perspective, church membership is both warranted and valid. When one commits their life to Jesus Christ, they are automatically members of the church universal, the Body of Christ. In the early church account of Acts 2 after Peter shared his message to give further clarity about the outpouring of the Spirit on the Day of Pentecost, scripture records that “3000 souls were added to them,”¹⁹ meaning the Apostles and the 120 that had originally gathered in an upper room as instructed by Jesus. This number quickly increased to 5,000 souls (Acts 4:4) and then to a number that is not

¹⁸ Acts 6:1.

¹⁹ Acts 2:41.

specifically given, perhaps because it was too great to number (Acts 5:14). It's important to keep in mind that this was one church and one membership to speak of, that was granted simply through repentance, belief on the Word of the Lord and baptism (Acts 2:38, 41). As this one church continued to grow and spread, their time of coming together was primarily from house to house (Acts 2:46; 5:42), which means that there were no large gatherings or places where the entire 5,000 plus church could meet. So from house to house and city-to-city their growth continued and accordingly they became identified as the believers or "saints" that came together in those various locations. There was only one church, but there were local expressions of that one church who assembled in other cities. The New Testament writings of the Apostle Paul were written specifically to some of those churches in different locations (Rome, Corinth, Ephesus, Galatia, Thessalonica, etc.). John then shares, in the first part of Revelations, matters of concern in writing to the angel of the *seven churches* in Asia Minor. These are all local assemblies of the one church universal that Paul often addressed in his writings. There were many churches, but not many other churches separated from the one true church of Jesus Christ, which is universal. Notice how Paul spoke of the ONE church to the individual local assemblies as one body:

Romans 12:4, 5 – “For as we have many members in one body, but all the members do not have the same function, so we, [being] many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another.”

1 Corinthians 10:17 – “For we, [though] many, are one bread [and] one body; for we all partake of that one bread.”

1 Corinthians 12:12, 13 – “For as the body is one and has many members, but all the members of that one body, being many, are one body, so also [is] Christ. For by one

Spirit we were all baptized into one body--whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free--and have all been made to drink into one Spirit.”

1 Corinthians 12:20 – “But now indeed [there are] many members, yet one body.”

Ephesians 2:16 – “and that He might reconcile them both to God in one body through the cross, thereby putting to death the enmity.”

Ephesians 4:4 – “There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling;”

Colossians 1:18 – “And He is the head of the body, the church, who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in all things He may have the preeminence.”

Colossians 3:15 – “And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to which also you were called in one body; and be thankful.”

So there is only one body, or one church and it is comprised of all those who have surrendered their lives to God through Jesus Christ, who declared, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me” (John 14:6). Every person then, who have placed their hope, faith and belief in the Lord Jesus Christ are members of the One Body, Church universal, regardless of race, creed, nationality and denominational expression. Jesus speaks of the singularity of the one church in responding to Peter’s revelation in regards to who He is: “When Jesus came into the region of Caesarea Philippi, He asked His disciples, saying, “Who do men say that I, the Son of Man, am?” So they said, “Some [say] John the Baptist, some Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” Simon Peter answered and said, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” Jesus answered and said to him, “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed [this] to you, but My Father who is in heaven. “And I also say to you that

you are Peter, and on this rock I will build **My church**, (not churches) and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it” (Matthew 16:13 – 18). The one body universal church is referenced in scripture many times as a singular entity and not many, once again speaking to the fact of there being one church. The church is called “the body of Christ” (Ephesians 4:12), “the Bride of Christ” (Revelation 21:2), “God’s building” (1 Corinthians 3:9), “God’s temple” (Ephesians 2:21), “a royal priesthood” (1 Peter 2:9), “the salt of the earth” (Matthew 5:13), “the light of the world” (Matthew 5:14), and many other names that speak to the singular nature of the church.

What is the meaning of the term church? “Church is the English translation of the Greek word “*ekklesia*,” which means an assembly or gathering of called out ones.”²⁰ “When the early Christians understood themselves as constituting a church, no doubt exists that they perceived themselves as called out by God in Jesus Christ for a special purpose and that their status was a privileged one in Jesus Christ”²¹ (Ephesians 2:19). Once our lives are committed to the Lord, we repent of our sins, believe in the death, burial and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, we are then members of His church, called out to fulfill His specific purpose in the earth, which, according to Matthew 28:19, 20 is to “go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you...” We observe from the scriptures the one body universal church that has many members (local assemblies or gatherings) that is inclusive of that one body, called out of the world into fellowship with Christ and other believers. The Children of

²⁰ Vine’s Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words, accessed online March 14, 2015, <http://www.blueletterbible.org/search/Dictionary/viewTopic.cfm?topic=VT0000173>.

²¹ Trent C. Butler Editor. Entry for 'Church', Holman Bible Dictionary, 1991, accessed March 14, 2015, <http://www.studydrive.org/dictionaries/hbd/view.cgi?n=1295>.

Israel were a called out people from Egypt for the purposes of God, and the word “church” or “congregation” is used to describe them (see Acts 7:38). Even the model of leadership that Jethro gives Moses in the wilderness for serving the people, lest he wear himself out, (see Exodus 18) is patterned by many churches today with large congregations.

How do we join (become a part of) the church? We join the one body universal church through our commitment to Jesus Christ, and we join the local church based on that local churches determination of what it means *to join*. Although the Bible doesn’t speak specifically of church membership, it is safe to say that joining a local assembly entails participating in those things within a local church, that is reflective in the Holy Scriptures (consistent gatherings, teaching of the Apostle’s doctrine, baptism, fellowship, Communion, prayer, stewardship and the utilization of the gifts given by God). It is also safe to assume that joining a local church had a great deal to do with location, as believers convened in whatever gathering was in there vicinity. It’s very unlikely that a believer in Corinth attended or was a part of the local assembly in Rome. As aforementioned, membership in the local church varies from church to church, and/or denominational practices. I can only speak of those that I am familiar with and have had affiliated with; the Pentecostal Holiness Church of my youth, and the Missionary Baptist church I joined while in college.

Mt. Calvary Holy Church of America, Inc. – Founded in 1929 by the late Bishop Brumfield Johnson in Winston Salem, NC, the Mt. Calvary Holy Church of America has connectional churches in over fifteen states and many foreign countries throughout Europe, Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean. The Manual of The Mt. Calvary Holy Church of America, Inc. states:

a. Any individual expressing an experience of salvation as outlined in Scripture (Romans 10:9) and a willingness to abide by the doctrine and polity of the Mount Calvary Holy Church of America, Inc., may be accepted as a member of the Local Church.

b. Members of the Local Church must commit to being subject to the authority of those that have rule over them as taught by Scripture (Hebrews 13:17). This includes following the directives and supporting the vision of the Pastor and remaining faithful to the biblical edict of tithing.²²

Each affiliated church establishes their own process for how persons officially join its local membership. The Mt. Calvary Holy Church of Durham, NC was the local church that I was raised in and my father served as Pastor for 55 years. The membership process involved a person repenting of their sins and accepting Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. This was conducted through the Pastor or associate Minister leading the candidate through Romans 10:8 – 13, and the person would make a public declaration of their belief and acceptance of Jesus Christ as Lord. The candidate was then asked if they wanted to join the church and whether or not they had been baptized, if so, an abbreviated version of parliamentary procedure was used to petition the potential member and the congregation. My father would say something similar to “Brothers and sisters, we have with us today Brother John Doe, who comes to join the Mt. Calvary Holy Church. All those in favor of his joining, let it be known by saying “I” (pause for response). If there are any opposes let it be known now (pause for response). The I’s have it and so moved, Brother John Doe is a new member of Mt. Calvary Holy Church.” The first Sunday of

²² The Office of the Presiding Bishop, *The Official Discipline of The Mount Calvary Holy Church of America, Inc.* (Washington, DC: GMCHA, 2012), 7.

the month the new member would then receive the right hand of fellowship, where the church officials and key leaders would shake hands with the new members and they were then considered official members. There was no new members class or additional steps taken at that moment other than the person was encouraged to come to church, Sunday School, prayer, Bible study, as well as returning for church service that evening where specific prayer was prayed for persons to be filled with the Holy Spirit. Of course, this was the procedure I recall that was employed in the late 70's and 80's, at which time preaching weighed heavy as the catalyst for church growth.

Salem Missionary Baptist Church – During my time of membership at Salem Baptist Church (1990 – 1998), I was part of the church staff for the majority of this time. After the message was preached, the Pastor would give an Invitation to Discipleship, which was an appeal to surrender one's life to Jesus Christ, and become a member of the church. The Pastor would address each person individually that came forward, and ask him or her if they were born again or not. If they were, he would have them stand to the side, and those who were not would be given to someone from the Evangelism Team ministry. The Evangelism Team ministry consisted of persons who had completed a class on leading someone to Jesus Christ through the scriptures. They would take the person to a back room, lead them to Christ, have prayer with them, and then bring them back into the sanctuary and report to the Pastor of the person's acceptance of Jesus Christ. The Pastor would then ask them if they had ever been baptized and if not, he would take them in as members, candidates for baptism, or if so, members on their Christian Experience. He would then introduce them as new members of the church, present them to the congregation and encourage them to come to new members class on the following

Sunday. He would then turn them over to the Church Clerk who would take them to a separate back room and fill out the New Members information sheet for their official adding to the membership roll.

The Temple of Refuge Church – When The Temple of Refuge was launched in January 1999, the new members process fairly mimicked the process of Salem Baptist Church mainly because of the emphasis of trained people sharing the message of the Gospel with the candidates, and the importance of New Members class. Over the course of its 16-year history, the process has gone through a few adjustments. Upon completion of the Sunday message, two Elders stand up front to receive those that come forth, as I extend the Invitation to Christ. When persons come forth, the Elders ask them about their current status, if they have a personal relationship with Christ, if they have been baptized and what church were they a member of previously. If the person does not have a personal relationship with the Lord, the Elder calls one of the ministers to take the candidate into a back room, where they share the message of the Gospel with them, lead them to Christ, have prayer with them and return to the sanctuary to give a report as to what took place. The person is then presented to the congregation as a member of the church either as a candidate for baptism or on their Christian experience. They are then given instructions about their attendance to New Members class and then the Church Clerk takes them to the back office for them to fill out information sheets and additional information about New Members class. From that time they are considered a member of the church, but they can't become involved working with a particular ministry of the church until after they have completed New Members class. The New Members class is important because it gives the new member an introduction to the church, its history,

beliefs or doctrine, mission, ministries and how they connect as new additions to the church family. When the class is completed, they are publically acknowledged as completing the class and presented with a certificate. We have a hospitality suite setup where the new members eat and have an opportunity to meet the various ministry leaders and begin accessing what area of ministry they would like to become involved in.

Membership, Loneliness and Belonging

In looking at the church membership from a Biblical perspective we see that there was no formal method of joining a local church because accepting Jesus Christ as Savior brought one into the church universal, body of Christ. By no means does this take away from the validity of the local church because scripture supports its importance for several reasons. Just to name a few: as a place to administer water baptism (Matthew 28:18 – 20; Mark 16:15 – 17; 1 Corinthians 12:12, 13); a place to observe the Lord's Supper (1 Corinthians 11:23 – 34); as a place to focus the majority of our giving and utilization of spiritual gifts (1 Corinthians 16:1, 2; 2 Corinthians 8:1 – 5; 9:6 – 15; Ephesians 4:7 – 16). Just as there is scriptural evidence for the relevancy of local church membership, there are social and economic implications as well. Not to go in-depth in reference to those implications, I will simply state that you cannot talk about ministry advancement without coming to terms with the need for financial resources for ministry. Every commercial bank and lending agency that a church considers doing business with in any capacity talks specifically in numbers (membership) and finances (giving units/givers). Therefore a local church membership is important because you can't account for the membership of the one body universal church. Although local church membership is

warranted there are ever declining numbers of those who actually attend and become members of a church for various reasons. Thom S. Rainer in his book, *I Am A Church Member*, shares that the heart of the problem relative to declining numbers in church attendance and membership is primarily waning commitment, and a many have “lost the biblical understanding of what it means to be a part of the body of Christ.”²³ On a recent podcast, Thom S. Rainer then offers these five suggestions to implement to help in declining church attendance and membership:

- *Raise the expectations of membership.* You may be surprised how many church members don't really think it's that important to be an active part of the church. No one has ever told them differently.
- *Require an entry class for membership.* By doing so, the church makes a statement that membership is meaningful. The class should also be used to state the expectations of what a committed member looks like.
- *Encourage ministry involvement.* Many members become less frequent attendees because they have no ministry roles in the church. They do not feel like they are an integral part of the church.
- *Offer more options for worship times.* Our culture is now a 24/7 population. Some members have to work during the times of worship services. If possible, give them options. One businessman recently told me that he changed congregations to a church that offered a Saturday worship time because his job required him to catch a plane on Sunday morning.

²³ Thom S. Rainer, *I Am A Church Member* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2013), 210, Kindle.

- *Monitor attendance of each member.* This approach is often difficult, especially for worship attendance. That is why the traditional Sunday school approach of calling absentees was so effective. Perhaps churches can incorporate that approach in all groups. Members are less likely to be absent if they know someone misses them.²⁴

While these are very true and practical as it is suggestive and applicable in churches today, there are many who have applied most, if not all of these principles in one variation or another, and yet maintaining consistent attendance and member retention is a recurring issue. Jon Tyson, in his book *Sacred Roots: Why Church Still Matters In A Post-Religious Era* states, “while tens of millions of Americans attend church each weekend, the practice has declined in recent years. In fact, regular attenders used to be people who went to church three or more weekends each month. Now, a regular church attender is someone who shows up once a month.”²⁵ Someone who attends church once a month in my particular context would be considered either a visitor or an inactive member, which sounds somewhat like a misnomer. What is becoming even more frequent are those who are becoming members of a church are joining more on their Christian Experience (from other churches) than they are the unchurched or Candidates for Baptism. Jon Tyson states, in looking at the makeup of the church he serves, “the unchurched people had all but stopped coming. When we were smaller and focused on relationships, non-Christians had been both fascinated and compelled by the love and

²⁴ Thom S. Rainer, *Rainer on Leadership Podcast: The Number One Reason For The Decline In Church Attendance* (October 4, 2013), accessed online February 13, 2015, <http://thomrainer.com/2013/10/04/number-one-reason-for-the-decline-in-church-attendance-rainer-on-leadership-025/>.

²⁵ Tyson, 23.

practical servant hood they encountered.”²⁶ The desire for a relational church sounds a great deal like the early church book of Acts. The relationships create a sense of belonging because it further adds meaning and significance to who we are and what we do as a local church. With the alarming rise of the numbers of Americans who say they’re lonely continuing to rise, it would seem the local church would be one of the places looked upon to address this matter and combat this escalating rate.

In a recent article for Slate.com entitled *Loneliness Is Deadly*, writer/illustrator Jessica Olien says, “social isolation kills more people than obesity does – and it’s just as stigmatized. Loneliness is not just making us sick, it is killing us. Social isolation impairs immune function and boosts inflammation, which can lead to arthritis, type II diabetes, and heart disease. Loneliness is breaking our hearts, but as a culture we rarely talk about it. Loneliness has doubled: 40 percent of adults in two recent surveys said they were lonely, up from 20 percent in the 1980’s.”²⁷ John T. Cacioppo and William Patrick, in their book, *Loneliness: Human Nature and the Need For Social Connection*, share “almost everyone feels the pangs of loneliness at certain amounts. It can be brief and superficial – being the last one chosen for a team on the playground – or it can be acute and severe – suffering the death of a spouse or a dear friend. Transient loneliness is so common, in fact, that we simply accept it as part of life. Humans are, after all, inherently social beings.”²⁸ They share the story of Katie Bishop:

²⁶ Tyson, 34.

²⁷ Jessica Olien, “Loneliness Is Dead,” Slate.Com (August 23, 2013), accessed online February 13, 2015, http://www.slate.com/articles/health_and_science/medical_examiner/2013/08/dangers_of_loneliness/social_isolation_is_deadlier_than_obesity.html.

²⁸ John T. Cacioppo and William Patrick, *Loneliness: Human Nature and the Need For Social Connection* (New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Co, 2008), 195, Kindle.

“While growing up in that tightly knit community, Katie never gave much thought to social connection one way or the other. As a kid she could be cranky at times, a little difficult, and sometimes her parents assumed she was depressed. One of her English teachers, assigning it almost as a badge of honor, described Katie as “alienated.” A more accurate description would have been that, even as a kid, even while surrounded by family and other friendly people, Katie had always felt a subjective sense of social isolation. She thought that being entirely on her own would be just what she needed. In fact, what she needed was not less social connection, but connection that felt more meaningful.”²⁹

Meaningful connections and relationships play a significant role in creating belonging more so than just having a persons name listed on a role as a member of a particular church. Therefore, one can be around other people, have their name included as a member of the church as well as an active participant in the life of the ministry and still be lonely. Because everything that God did relative to creation was done out of relationship, He created us relational, and thus the need and desire for meaningful connections that fulfill that creative desire instilled by God. Without those meaningful connections and relationships countless studies show the significant effect isolation and loneliness have on a persons health and wellness. “Loneliness shows up in measurements of stress hormones, immune function, and cardiovascular function. Over time, these changes in physiology are compounded in ways that may be hastening millions of people to an early grave.”³⁰

²⁹ Cacioppo and Patrick, 190 Kindle.

³⁰ Ibid., 212, Kindle.

"The opposite of addiction is not sobriety. It is human connection"³¹

This recent tweet by Dr. Leonard Sweet pointed to a recent Huffington Post article entitled *The Likely Cause of Addiction Has Been Discovered, And It's Not What You Think* by Johann Hari. In the article, he makes the following observation about addiction:

*"If you had asked me what causes drug addiction at the start, I would have looked at you as if you were an idiot, and said: "Drugs. Duh." It's not difficult to grasp. I thought I had seen it in my own life. We can all explain it. Imagine if you and I and the next twenty people to pass us on the street take a really potent drug for twenty days. There are strong chemical hooks in these drugs, so if we stopped on day twenty-one, our bodies would need the chemical. We would have a ferocious craving. We would be addicted. That's what addiction means. One of the ways this theory was first established is through rat experiments -- ones that were injected into the American psyche in the 1980s, in a famous advert by the Partnership for a Drug-Free America. You may remember it. The experiment is simple. Put a rat in a cage, alone, with two water bottles. One is just water. The other is water laced with heroin or cocaine. Almost every time you run this experiment, the rat will become obsessed with the drugged water, and keep coming back for more and more, until it kills itself. The advert explains: "Only one drug is so addictive, nine out of ten laboratory rats will use it. And use it. And use it. Until dead. It's called cocaine. And it can do the same thing to you." But in the 1970s, a professor of Psychology in Vancouver called Bruce Alexander noticed something odd about this experiment. The rat is put in the cage all alone. It has nothing to do but take the drugs. What would happen, he wondered, if we tried this differently? So Professor Alexander built Rat Park. It is a lush cage where the rats would have colored balls and the best rat-food and tunnels to scamper down and **plenty of friends**: everything a rat about town could want. What, Alexander wanted to know, will happen then? In Rat Park, all the rats obviously tried both water bottles, because they didn't know what was in them. But what happened next was startling. The rats with good lives didn't like the drugged water. They mostly shunned it, consuming less than a quarter of the drugs the isolated rats used. None of them*

³¹ Leonard Sweet, Twitter Post, January 22, 2015 (2:15p.m.), accessed online January 24, 2015, <https://twitter.com/lensweet/status/558342192692211712>.

*died. While **all the rats who were alone** and unhappy became heavy users, none of the rats who had a happy environment did.*³²

The cause of addiction is not because the drugs are so powerful. The cause of addiction in this case is the lack of connection with another rat! If you put a rat in a cage by itself with no other contact (relationship), according to the experiment, it will become addicted with nothing else to do (commune) but take the drugs. If the rat is placed with others, it will be fine. The opposite of addiction is human connection. What does God connect or create out of? God creates out of relationship. When you are not in relationship you are disjointed and not connected. “It’s not good that man should be alone; I will make him a helper comparable to him” (Genesis 2:18). When we are disconnected from meaningful relationships, we are fragmented and the end results are seldom favorable. Eve, created for Adam, to be with Adam, is in dialogue with the serpent and partakes (singularly) of the fruit she is not to eat of, then she gives to Adam and he eats (singularly) and then their eyes were opened and they knew they were naked (Genesis 3:6, 7). That brief moment of aloneness led to disobedience and brought the curse of sin and death to all of mankind. God, out of His own meaningful triune relationship, created mankind relational so that out of those connections significant matters (fruit) is produced as a result. You can be in a house full of people and still be alone. You can be in a church and still be alone. Which is partly why developing significant relationships and finding friends within the church is important to the one another fabric of the church as well as member retention. Recent research conducted by the Barna Group shows that although loneliness among Americans has risen, the desire to find one’s place among a few good friends has likewise

³² Johann Hari, “The Likely Cause of Addiction Has Been Discovered, And It’s Not What You Think” *Huffington Post* (January 20, 2015), accessed online February 13, 2015, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/johann-hari/the-real-cause-of-addicti_b_6506936.html.

increased—from 31% a decade ago to 37% today. Leading this charge today in finding friendship are Millennials (47%), Hispanics (47%) and never-married single adults (44%)—all higher than the national average.”³³ Greater connections among the congregation that grow into friendships prove to be a catalyst for relationships and church oneness. It is through those types of relationships and connections that create belonging and a sense of community within the church, therefore belonging and membership work in concert together.

Peter Block, in *Community: The Structure of Belonging* states, “we are in community each time we find a place where we belong. First and foremost, to belong is to be related to and a part of something. It is membership, the experience of being at home in the broadest sense of the phrase. The opposite of belonging is to feel isolated and always (all ways) on the margin, an outsider. To belong is to know, even in the middle of the night, that I am among friends.”³⁴ Feelings of isolation exist within the congregation, even though persons may be connected for common cause (the vision-mission of the church), belonging must also be inclusive of ownership. To claim ownership creates a sense of belonging because it enlarges a person’s sense of worth and importance. It does not mean that one’s ego is inflated but that they belong to something that considers them of value. Block writes, “the second meaning of the word belong has to do with being an owner: Something belongs to me. To belong to a community is to act as a creator and co-owner of that community. What I consider mine I will build and

³³ The Barna Group, “How The Last Decade Changed American Life,” *Barna Group* (July 31, 2013), accessed online February 13, 2015, <https://www.barna.org/barna-update/culture/624-how-the-last-decade-changed-american-life#.VQSuq0JU-E6>.

³⁴ Peter Block, *Community: The Structure of Belonging* (San Francisco, CA: BK Publishers, 2008), Loc. 62, Kindle.

nurture. The work, then, is to seek in our communities a wider and deeper sense of emotional ownership; it means fostering among all of a community's citizens a sense of ownership and accountability."³⁵ Both being related to, and being owner of becomes difficult in larger settings. The larger the community, the more fragmented the connection becomes and belonging literally becomes impossible. This is why the Small Group model is vital because it provides space for a few people to connect in conversation, cause and common interest, although Myers disagrees with this notion. "Almost every book I read on developing a successful church touts small groups as the key. But I have read that churches that provide small group opportunities can expect about a 30 percent involvement at best from the congregation. Why only 30 percent? Because small groups do not accomplish the promise of fulfilling all facets of a person's search for community. Small groups deliver only on one or two specific kinds of connection. A person's search for community is more complex than this. The truth is that people can experience belonging in groups ranging in size from two to 2,000 or more."³⁶ However, for a church plant newly implementing Small Group Ministry and presenting it as a means to generate and develop healthy relationships amongst the congregants, I would expect to see greater than 30 percent involvement. While I was a member of the then 3,000-member Salem Missionary Baptist Church, there was a feeling of belonging for me that I attribute primarily to my relationship with the Senior Pastor. Do I think everyone felt this belonging? No, and was one of the reasons I proposed doing some Small Group Ministry at the church because there was disconnection in the large

³⁵ Block, Loc. 71, Kindle.

³⁶ Myers, Loc. 422, Kindle.

crowd. Small Groups would present the opportunity for everyone to be heard, mentored and cared for in the nurturing cluster of smaller units. The larger group (3,000 members) sets up the scenario of learning from the Senior leader instead of the multiplicity of gifts that exist throughout the congregation. Block concurs, “most everything important happens in a small group. Which expresses another principle, that peer-to- peer interaction is where most learning takes place; it is the fertile earth out of which something new is produced. In this small group you place the maximum mix of people’s stories, values, and viewpoints, and in this way each group of 6 to 12 brings the whole system into that space.”³⁷ The small group does not take away from the unit (body) as a whole because body connection is apparent, but we have a unique advantage to really increase our effectiveness as one family ministering to the body in smaller units as opposed to the whole. “Belonging can occur through our membership in large groups, but this form of belonging reduces the power of citizens. Instead of surrendering our identity for the sake of belonging, we find in the small group a place that can value our uniqueness.”³⁸

³⁷ Block, 24, Kindle.

³⁸ Block, 31, Kindle.

CHAPTER FOUR

PROJECT FORMATION

After a time of prayer, consideration and consultation with my wife, the formation of this project began with the careful selection of those who would walk with me on this journey serving as a Lay Advisory Council (LAC). Considering that I have done a considerable amount of teaching and training of leaders in team-based ministry and leadership, I looked forward with great anticipation in working with a team on this project. I hand picked those who would give me a broad sweep of ideas, suggestions and recommendations. Persons that I knew would be good to work with and wouldn't be afraid to share with me honest feelings and thoughts concerning anything we where about to enter into. I did not want yes men, who considered only what was in my best interest, but to look beyond and see what was in the best interest of the church as a collective body. I selected five men (Minister Adrian Gainey, Brother Vincent Kelly, Minister Teddy Reeves, Deacon Henry Windham and Deacon Jeff Brantley) and three women (Sister Tonya Gainey, Sister Elizabeth Samuel and Sister Tesha Boyd) for a total of eight persons, nine including myself. After an initial meeting to access their willingness to join me in this project, one of the first things I wanted to establish was ownership of the project so that the work would be OURS and not mine. I believe having buy-in was key to the success of their working as a team so that, although my name was on the project, they would have a sense of worth, value and importance. During the course of my

Summer 2013 class with Dr. Chris Hammon developing the Prospectus, I had a basic idea of what I wanted the project to be. However, to have (LAC) buy-in to the project, I put my idea on the shelf and came to our initial meeting with a blank canvas. I wanted to discover if they would come to the same conclusion I came to about the narrative of concern or topic for the project. We met in my church office and began to dialogue about some of the matters of concern, real or perceived, about The Temple of Refuge. I really wanted to brainstorm and have everyone's ideas and thoughts out, with no answer being considered off the table. The following is a list of a few of those concerns that could possibly be topics:

- **Lack of Involvement (Few Volunteers)**
- **Lack of Communication among Ministries**
- **Lack of Pastoral Correction**
- **Member Retention (Revolving Door)**
- **Lack of Body Maturity**
- **Lack of Male Involvement (More men needed)**
- **Lack of Accountability**
- **Lack of Leadership commitment**

I shared with them the possibility of us looking to tackle some of the topics on the list in the near future, but for now we needed to select one that we could formulate into a project, that they felt was the most pressing at the time. We decided to go with member retention because there was a consensus among the team of that being to most troublesome concern on the list. I purchased a copy of *The Power of Habit* by Charles Duhigg for each of the (LAC) team members because (1) the book made a lasting impression on me from the 2013 Summer term Theological Methods and Practice class,

that I wanted the team to experience that as well, and (2) I knew implementing a new routine, as discussed in the book, would be the main factor of breaking the habitual revolving door of new members joining the church, and be the beginning of a new healthy habit.

Preliminary Research

We needed to establish a starting base or frame of reference for the project so one of the first tasks was to take a few Sundays before announcing and launching the project to monitor and make note of attendance. We had two team members with handheld clicker counters to track attendance as people came in the door. We counted adults only, males, and females. We also began to randomly have conversations with several of the church members about the church and the relationships, if any, that they had with fellow church members other than regular church attendance days (Sunday and Tuesday). A few of the team members also made contact with a few former church members just to get some feedback as it related to their thoughts on the church and their departure. The resulting information revealed to us people who had a genuine love for the church and was really blessed by the preaching and teaching ministry of the church. However, as the survey revealed and the conversations with former members, both those who departed as well as those that remain cite friendships as one of the main culprits for their decision to depart from ministry, as well as its influence on those that have remained. We developed a survey to gather some additional demographics, as well as give us some insight into why they joined the church, if they were actively involved in the life of the church, and how important did they regard having friends attend the same church. We took time at

the end of the Sunday worship service to personally hand out the survey for the people to complete and we collect simultaneously. This was done in hopes of obtaining greater numbers of the people taking the survey if we administered it in this fashion. We began having regular (LAC) team meetings to discuss exactly what new routine we could implement into the life of the church that would combat the revolving door of persons joining the church, remaining for a period of time and eventually leave the ministry or remain but not really become integrated into the life of the church. With the stories received from a few former members, relatively new members, as well as some of the feedback we were receiving from the initial surveys a correlation began to unfold between member retention/involvement and the relationships/friendships of those within the church. We discussed in our team meetings just from general observation those who took the time after the Sunday church service had ended, to greet others and carry on conversations in the church, as well as in the parking areas, versus those who made their way to their vehicles with little to no interaction. We wanted to implement something that didn't feel forced, but would create an environment for increased interaction that would spawn the natural development of relationships and cause a greater sense of connection among the membership. One of the male team members referenced the Men's Ministry and the greater overwhelming participation we have with the men over a football game and wings, as opposed to the regular men's monthly meetings. Of course, anytime you're involving food into a time of gathering, you're bound to have a more significant participation. At the time, the Men of the church were reading a book together, and meeting on a monthly basis to discuss and share among themselves about the book, what impression the book was making on them and how it was affecting them

as a man, husband and father. Sometimes they would meet on Monday nights at Wild Wings Café and watch the game over wings and halftime book discussion. The other times they would meet at the church and have what we called Round Table Discussion, with the men sitting in a circle, sharing their thoughts. One of the interesting benefits that came out of this were the connections that took place among some of the men that extended and grew outside of the regular men's meeting time. Some significant bonds begin to develop between the men and many of those relationships have grown into covenant brother relationships of mutual trust and accountability. The monthly meeting for the Men's ministry, with the book as the focal point was working in that smaller setting for them, so we thought, how would that work on a larger scale for the entire church? How could we bring in that element of meeting in Round Table Discussion format as a church-wide initiative? Immediately, my mind went to Small Group Ministry as a means to develop those discussions around a central topic, and at the same time create an avenue for people to develop new, closer and deeper connections with each other. The closer connections with people would in turn help to combat member retention, so that people didn't just remain at the church because of the preaching, music or ministries offered, but also because of the bond of relationship developed with those in the church within Small groups.

Development, Planning and Preparation

Sermon Series: To help convey the message of relationships, friendships, connections and belonging to the general church body, we had to develop a sermon series that would speak to some of these main concepts. Utilizing some of the key components

discussed earlier in Chapter 4 - Biblical Foundations, we first of all identified some topic areas of importance:

- Defining what it means to belong to the Temple of Refuge, it's more than physical, is it social?
- Everyone matters because they have a role (1 Corinthians 12). Everyone has something to add and offer, regardless of your past.
- Acts: they had all things in common – they had community.
- What is the church? What is our role as the body of Christ?
- Stewardship: you have something to offer: your time, talent and treasure.
- Defining what is meant by the terminology, church family
- The Dynamics of the family unit and the positive and negative role it plays on our understanding and shaping of relationships.
- Beyond the walls – this is what the church looks like - mending broken and fragmented families and relationships
- Dealing with the issues of the past church hurt. Why are you carrying that hurt from the past?
- The un-churched church – present with us, and how do we reach them? The role small groups may play in helping facilitate this.
- We're all imperfect - personalities as a source of broken relationships.

Using the topic ideas above and some of the biblical foundational concepts mentioned earlier, I proposed the title, *iBelong: Using Sermon-Based Small Groups As A Catalyst For Building Healthy Relationships That Promote Community and Member Retention.*

Springing out of this title came **five (5) sermons** that captured the topics at hand in a more concise manner:

- **Created to Belong** – (Genesis 1:26; 2:18) – God creates out of relationship and created us as relational beings to “belong” and be connected in relationship with others. God said, “it is not good that the man should be alone.”
- **iConnect** – (Acts 2:40 – 47) – The 3000 souls that were added to the 120 from the Upper Room where a connected people and those connections became the common denominator in creating an atmosphere of belonging.
- **iShare** – (Acts 2:40 – 47; 4:32 – 37) – Although the 3000 added to the church were from various backgrounds and nationalities, but because of their connections with each other and their commitment to the Gospel, there was not one need unmet as they shared with one another.
- **iGrow** – (Acts 2:42 – 47; Ephesians 4:16) – The 3000 continued steadfastly or devoted themselves. In several particular areas the early church was devoted, and growth (numerically and spiritually) was the result.
- **iBelong** – (Ephesians 2:14 – 22) – Our belonging is attributed to our reconciliation to God in ONE BODY through the cross! *“Now you who are not Jewish are not foreigners or strangers any longer, but are citizens together with God’s holy people. You belong to God’s family”* (Ephesians 2:19 NCV).

The Sermon Series began on Sunday March 9, 2014 for five Sundays concluding on April 6, 2014. Curriculum was produced from each of the sermons and utilized in the Small Groups that met on Tuesday nights, which is our regular Bible Study night. We planned it this way as not to add an additional something to already hectic schedules.

Small Groups: One of the keys for the project was having the Lay Advisory Council (LAC) all in the same frame of mind as it related to Small Group Ministry and the desired direction we needed to go in. Because the area of Church Small Group Ministry is such a large field, and for the brevity of time, we could by no stretch of the imagination possibly do a thorough research of this field for best practices for our church. What I did however was start a private community on Google+ that included a Google Cloud drive, where I loaded pertinent articles and information on Small Groups Ministry from a general introductory perspective; as a bonus, the Google+ allowed us to have private video hangout meetings online as well without always having to meet in person face-to-face.

On a personal note, Small Group Ministry is something that I have always been intrigued about and did quite a bit of study on in the early 90's during the explosion of the Cell Group Movement. I had actually developed a proposal to possibly implement Cell Groups into Salem Missionary Baptist Church during my time there on staff. At that time Salem Baptist was a 3,000 member church, but there was great disparity between the Sunday morning worship service attendance, and Sunday School/Wednesday Night Bible Study attendance, not to mention trying to best serve/shepherd 3,000 people as a single solo leader in the person of the Senior Pastor. When I presented the proposal to the Senior Pastor, he immediately said no because of what he considered at the time, lack of control measures. There was a genuine fear that he had, and I would discover later that many fellow African American Pastors have, of the Cell/Small Group becoming a break off splinter group that would eventually lead to division and the splitting of the church

with the Cell/Small Group leader migrating to form another church out of the main church. It became clear to me, as very little information is available on Small Group ministry within predominately African American churches, that this was perhaps something that was not exclusive to Salem Baptist Church and its Senior Pastor only. I will say that Sunday School in the Black church was identified as Small Group ministry and rightfully so because meeting on Sunday on the church campus, in their estimation, helped to provide the control measure to ward off possible division. Recently I shared this project concept with a local Pastor that I have been friends with for over 20 years and the first thing he said to me was his genuine fear of how I was going to control the small groups lest they divide and split the church. My reply to him was that the groups would only meet for 6 weeks, so I didn't foresee a group breaking out to start a church on their own out of this, and honestly that was not a fear or concern that I had at all. I only looked at Small Groups for the positive impact they could make on the church as a valuable tool for training and discipleship.

With a plethora of books, teachings and methods relative to Small Groups, I must confess that I felt very overwhelmed initially with the thought of this undertaking. The LAC quickly redirected me back to the example of the Men's Monthly meetings and model of the Round Table Discussions that were working and very powerful for them. We wanted to keep the Small Groups as less complicated as possible and we determined as a collective team that discussion-based curriculum for the Small Groups would be less cumbersome for the groups and yet provide maximum interaction in a short period of time. We decided to construct 5 – 6 questions from each of the Series Sunday morning

messages, which would be the basis of the sharing during the time of gathering the Small Groups.

The next critical step for the project was selecting who would facilitate the Small Groups, the training of those facilitators and the actual process as to how Tuesday night Small Groups would operate.

- **Who:** In identifying the potential Small Group Facilitators, we were very intentional about labeling them as facilitators or host, as opposed to teachers or leaders. I wanted to use people who would not normally be used in something of this nature, but also have the full confidence of the (LAC) of each person's ability. We purposely steered away from using Elders, Ministers and teachers, as the focus of the Small groups was more conversational than instruction. This would also help the potential facilitators not to be pressured into thinking this was something they could not do because they were not licensed ministers or teachers. Their sole responsibility was to facilitate the conversation, make sure it stayed on topic and that everyone in the groups had opportunity to share. As a team, we selected eleven (11) people total, four men and seven women.

- **What:** I sought to make the training of the Small Group Facilitators as less technical and more practical as possible. After all we intentionally shied away from Ministers (although we did use two that happened to be on the LAC) and chose to use laypeople instead, so I did not want to make them any more uncomfortable than they already were with teaching

methods and theory. Since we were using the discussion-based Small group method, it was fairly simple for me to train them in preparation of facilitating their own groups. Once they accepted the opportunity to be a facilitator, I set aside two days to train them in facilitating Small group discussion. We met on two consecutive Monday evenings and, using the Sermon they had just heard the previous Sunday, I conducted the training as a Small group, which allowed them to see just how the Small group sessions would operate on Tuesday nights. Based on Sunday's sermon, I pulled 5 – 6 questions derived from the sermon, posed the questions to them and facilitated the discussion. The two training sessions went extremely well and removed the barrier of fear that some of them had because their initial concept was of them teaching the groups, but asking the questions allowed for shared/group learning as opposed to teacher/lecture style. They had the chance to see how the facilitating should go, how I was able to pull everyone into the discussions, stayed on topic and let no one person or persons dominate the conversation time. Each training class went about 90 minutes total.

- **How:** After the messages were preached on Sunday morning, by Sunday evening the curriculum (discussion questions) were emailed out to the Small Group Facilitators. They were given several icebreakers or group starters just to give time for people to come in and get settled. As already stated, the 5 – 6 questions for the groups came directly from the Sunday

sermon so there was nothing that would cause them to do any in-depth study, plus the video of the sermon was available to them as well for refresher purposes. Tuesday nights iBelong Small Groups met for six weeks; three times at the church split off into their groups, and three times they met outside the church in third places (Starbucks, Dunkin Donuts, Panera Bread, etc.), which was really out the box for the church and members. The Small Groups started at 7:00pm and ended at 8:30pm, which is our normal Tuesday night Bible study time.

Marketing, Registration and Launch

For several of our (LAC) meetings, we brought in our media director to gain a greater understanding of the direction we wanted to go in with the project. Media, graphics and design have become a greater significance to The Temple of Refuge (and even greater since this Drew DMin), so we needed them fully on board with us. I had a vision of what I wanted the logo design to be. It had to ooze belonging, connectivity and project inclusiveness. I'm a big fan of graphic design, media and technology because I understand the power of capturing the attention and imagination of others through these mediums. After several drafts, they captured the look I wanted, the LAC loved it and signed off on it, and the media created a coming attractions teaser using a portion of the logo that they shared with the entire church during the Sunday announcement time. After this they completed an entire video trailer using a pre-recorded Small Groups trailer, and a message from me that help to stir thought and excitement at the same time. The logo and links to the trailers are included in the Appendix (Appendix E).

Three weeks prior to the launch, we had Small Group registration as a means to keep track of the numbers of participants and to help us determine the break down of the Small groups. Registration was held on Sunday's after church service, on Tuesday nights after Bible study and online. We created a registration form asked for age category, gender, marital status, number of children, hobbies, if they had close friends at church and their desired group preference (see Appendix B). After the registration process, the LAC and I met and looked over the registrations and began to formulate the groups. Most people checked No Preference for group desired, which gave us the leverage to be both flexible and experimental. We kept married couples together, but we mixed up the groups with both married and singles, age range and had a group comprised of those who put down reading as one of their hobbies. We started both an iBelong Facebook Group Page, as well as an iBelong Twitter account where people could share their feelings and ideas and we could capture some feedback that may not show up during the survey evaluations. Launch day was Sunday, March 9, 2014, with the iBelong Small Groups beginning Tuesday, March 11, 2014 with a lot of balloons, food and drink, and more importantly a great deal of excitement and uncertainty as this was the first time we've ever done something of this nature before.

CHAPTER FIVE

PROJECT REVIEW

Deciding to take on the issue of belonging and member retention was a challenging decision in and of itself, but the outcome far outweighed the challenge. The iBelong project was a success in my estimation and reading the data, and more importantly the excitement and momentum generated was eye opening for me.

Registration: We began registration for the iBelong Small Groups on Sunday February 16, 2014, a full three weeks before the iBelong Sermon series, and there were a little more than 100 persons who registered to participate in the iBelong Small Groups. We end up with nine groups comprised of 8 – 10 people of those who actually came out on Tuesday night for the iBelong Small Groups. Our normal Tuesday night attendance for Bible study is only 15-20 persons, so the iBelong Small groups were definitely a boost for Tuesday night church participation. In tracking the attendance on Sunday mornings, we did register roughly an 11% increase in attendance during the iBelong Sermon Series that I attribute to the interest of the subject matter and the overall way the project was presented. I believe people were actually interested and curious about hearing about belonging, because of a personal longing to belong. Samples of the registration form are including in the Appendix.

Launch and Project: The first Sunday of the Sermon Series was ministered as scheduled March 9, 2014. Attendance was up that Sunday and the first of the five

messages, “Created To Belong” was preached with great response. On that afternoon, the questions for that particular message were emailed to the small group facilitators for Tuesday night’s first iBelong Small Groups. The LAC team met at the church early and setup a check in table for the people as they entered the church. We had a few people that came, but did not register, so we were able to get them registered and placed in a group as well. They were given a color swatch when they checked in (red, blue, yellow, orange, purple, green, brown and black), and we had spaces in the sanctuary that was grouped by color code that persons go to match the color given at the check in table. When everyone was in their groups, I welcomed everyone and shared with them that this was a first for us, and what we were doing with Small groups was part of my doctoral project, at which they were excited to be a part of. For the next 90 minutes they had small groups and from what I was able to gauge, the people had a great time. For a total of six weeks, the Small groups met on Tuesday night. They met three times at the church; and three times they convened in places around the city (Starbucks, Panera Bread, Dunkin Donuts, McCalister’s), alternating between these places and the church. We had five sermons, but met in Small groups six times. The last Small group meeting time was a time of debriefing, evaluations and conversations of what they thought about the iBelong project. The entire evaluation is included in the Appendix (Appendix E), but I would like to highlight a few points of interest. Of those that participated in the evaluations/surveys, the iBelong Series and Small Groups were effective:

- Helped me to connect better with The Temple of Refuge Church 46%
- Helped in connecting me with members I did not know. 77%
- Allowed me to build deeper relationships with people. 66%

- Helped me to open up and be more transparent. 63%

Questions:

1. Do you feel that the Small Groups were effective and would you like to see the Small Groups continue? **99.9% responded YES**
2. In what way was it effective and why would you want them to continue? **57% stated, “because the groups helped me to connect better with people I would perhaps not even talk to. The groups helped to break down the barriers that keep many people from connecting with each other.”¹**

We had several of the newer members share that the groups provided a way for them to begin connecting and building relationships with some of the members who had been there for some time. It made them feel connected already, even though they had only been at the church for a few months. Here are a few of the stories and comments about the project that are also available in Appendix (Appendix E).

- Sister Jessica Drucker said:

*“I personally wanted to thank God for the people of God that I am now connected to on an extended more personal level than before the iBelong BLUE Small Group. I thank God for the personal stuff that was shared in our small group, that gave me another perspective of the lives of people in the Body of Jesus Christ that are of the same flesh, that did things that they also need to repent daily. Here at 61 & 1/2 years young I have learned that no matter where we came from, and what we may look like on the outside, we all have our own cross to bear. This now is a reality to me and not just words that we say. **iBelong! I Grow! I Share!** I thank God for I have seen the growth in each one of my new Blue iBelong family and for that I am grateful for. **I never realized that so many Christians are suffering from: not fitting in; not belonging to; they don't realize the***

¹ See Appendix E

plan God has for them in the Body of Christ. *I do feel this was a great way to get different age groups from all backgrounds together to learn from each other. Again thank you Bishop Kenneth Yelverton for listening to our fears our droughts and our need for knowledge on how to not only know the WORD of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, but how to live out this new way of living pure and holy in the eyes of God. Pleasing God not man and knowing we can't go wrong. Amen”*

- Brother Clement Telly said:

“Reflecting over the iBelong Small Group session from last night! Wow! Extremely grateful for every person in the group! It's always amazing to hear stories of triumph, breakthrough, restoration, and God's Keeping Power! Sharing is definitely helping us all to connect and grow! What a blessing!”

- Sister Pamela Larker said:

“Our group tonight was great! I'm learning so much about the people in my group that I would have not known if it were not for iBelong. My group is helping me to really, really share more of myself and break down these personal walls that I had up. I'm thanking God for placing me in this small group!” #ISHARE #ICONNECT #IBELONG

- Sister Josephine Lemuels said:

*“I thoroughly enjoyed our Small Group Session tonight! I just LOVE my group! Even though tonight was the final session, I can honestly say that these sessions have aided in building **STRONGER relationships** and creating **more UNITY** amongst our Church family! I find myself missing the people of my small group, and I'm thankful for the relationships we've developed and growing deeper in our connection. I hope it continues to GROW and foster **even healthier relationships** outside of our Church Walls!”*
#iBelong #iGrow #iShare and #iShowLove

- Sister Willistine Windham said:

“So excited about the iBelong series. It has been a prayer of mine to get out of my comfort zone, and let my guard down when it comes to building relationships with people. I am truly grateful for this experience and I know that we all will be one step closer to changing things we struggle with. Small group sessions are AWESOME!”

Of course, I can't share all of the stories, but we've included more in the Appendix. I think the best encouragement for me coming out of this project came from the members who have been at the church for less than 2 years. Many of them shared with me the challenge of feeling connected and belonging because it felt like the membership that's been there longer had some type of “inside track” and it made them feel like they were outsiders, even though they were all members of the church. They shared with me that the regular Sunday morning time of “meet and greet” is fine, but it doesn't provide opportunity to connect, and when the benediction is given, people either go straight to their cars or gravitate toward the people they already know and feel comfortable with. iBelong created space for sharing, connecting and relationship building.

Challenges

Overall I feel the project was a success, however, as is the case most of the time when implementing something new, there are a few challenges:

- ***Maintaining Momentum:*** We had a meeting with the Small Groups Facilitators after the first Small Group session, and after the fourth session. One of the challenges was maintaining the momentum of the people to be consistent in attendance for the entire

6 weeks. A few of the facilitators reported some in their groups missing a session or two, especially the times when they met outside of the church.

- **Communication:** There was some confusion with some of the older (seasoned) members as to exactly what the Small Groups were all about. I think this is something to be expected whenever you're implementing something new. We had a couple of people who thought I would be facilitating Small groups, so they (2 or 3) didn't return after the first Small group session. I intentionally left myself out of the Small group because I have worked untiringly NOT to have pastor-centered/pastor-personality driven church, not to mention that sitting in a group may impede the free flow of conversation with me sitting in a group. I did make my rounds at one session and sat in each group for 5 to 6 minutes. You will always have those that feel no one can teach them or they can't receive from anyone except the Pastor. We possibly could have done a better job in communicating that the Pastor would not be facilitating a Small Group.

- **Youth:** We were not accommodating for the Young People. They meet and have Bible study upstairs on Tuesday nights while the adults are in the sanctuary. On the nights that the Small groups met outside of the church, many of the young people remained at home because their parents were meeting in various places, and they could not get to church for their regular youth Bible study. We will have to work to develop a way for the young people to be involved in Small groups as well, in a way that does not require the parents to have to make multiple trips to church or other places.

CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSION

The impact that the iBelong project had on the ministry was overwhelming. Our Tuesday Night Bible Study averages between 20-25 regular attendees. We had a little over 100 persons who registered and participated in the Small Groups. The connecting of the individual members, birthing new relationships and creating a sense of belonging I believe was achieved. It was impossible to really gauge the impact that the project had on member retention because the project only ran for six weeks. To really determine the effect on member retention, we would have to run Small groups longer and examine the membership for that longer time frame. However, a 99.9% approval rating from the congregation reveals iBelong Small Groups as something that is both needed and necessary in the life of The Temple of Refuge. Considering that the key trigger for member retention was the relationships and friendships with those of the same church, we can say that the likelihood of a member maintaining their membership is greatly increased because of the relationships birthed because of Small groups.

There were several things that came out of the iBelong project that I would like to make note of that I consider changes in both mind and procedure. Due in part to beginning The Temple of Refuge with no outside assistance, as stated earlier, my wife and I were accustomed to handling ministry matters without the help of others. When someone would take upon themselves the opportunity to work in ministry but were

unable to see an assignment through to completion, my wife and I would usually step in, pick up where they left off and finish for them. For the entire life of the church our focus was to have things done the proper way, in a spirit of excellence and if it was not accomplished in this fashion we would take care of it ourselves. However, during the course of this project I witnessed the heart of the people change, as well as my wife and I need to step in and finish incomplete work. The team atmosphere that we established with the LAC permeated through to the leadership and the church. Some earlier principles of team-based leadership and ministry that we taught the people were beginning to blossom during this project. I accredit this directly to the working involvement of the LAC. I believe working in conjunction with the LAC with this project, from beginning to end, allowed them to actually see the team principles in practice. This teamwork then carried over into the Small Groups who worked together in making everyone feel connected and a part of each group. This whole transformation from solo/duo leadership to team leadership was a major transition as a result of this project.

The involvement from the LAC was vital to the success of this project. I wanted to have buy-in from them and I think that contributed heavily to their excitement and consistency. Coming out of the Summer Prospectus class with Dr. Hammon, I had an initial thought of what I wanted to focus on for the project. However, when I met with the LAC I came to them with a blank page because I wanted them to take ownership of the work we had to do and not view this as *my* project but as *our* project. Their buy-in, ownership and work was so instrumental to the project that it migrated throughout the entire church. In our initial meetings we came up with a list of about 18 items that could

easily have been the basis of our project, and now we are looking over the list and preparing to address them one by one for the betterment of the ministry. The connection, the love and the fellowship was so powerful, that I could not disband the LAC if I wanted to! All of the LAC social sites are still Live and active as we're continuing to use them as a source of communication among the LAC and a means of keeping the team posted of my writing progress, important dates and any challenges I had to face that they maybe of assistance. At times when I felt as if I would not be able to finish the work due to the demand on my time, or financial constraints with my tuition, the LAC refused to let me quit. They prayed with and for me, collected funds among themselves as well as went before the entire church on my behalf. I would not have made it to this point without the LAC. This also greatly impacted the entire church family as I witnessed the mindset of the people shift as well. The impact of team leadership for this project, coupled with the entire congregation excited for the budding of new relationships and the direct connection to the project was incredible. This project brought a sense of value and worth for the whole church as they witnessed their participation as a key component to the project success. The transformation of a church that began with no members, no launch team or other outside support to now sixteen years later boosted by a project that further connects them as family in covenant fellowship has greatly affected the entire church I believe in a permanent fashion. The teamwork relationship with the LAC has carried over into many other areas of ministry. Several ministries have even formed their own LAC type teams within the ministry in order to strengthen the team's relationship, build comradery and buy in for their planning of various functions and events. I attribute this to the iBelong project, the excitement that it brought to the church and the transformation that resulted

due to the success of the project. The entire church remains excited about iBelong and the what's next!

Interesting Matters

There were a few items or matters that came out of this project that I feel are worthy of note and possibly further consideration for future ministry design and implementation:

1. **Social Media** – The Social Media aspect of this project was both powerful and eye opening. In both the iBelong Facebook Page and the Twitter page, I witnessed a great deal of interaction and dialogue, outside of the regular Small Group meeting times. Many of the people shared with me that the time frame allotted for the Small groups was not enough, and for some of them the conversation was so good, that it spilled over to Facebook. Initially, the Facebook page was supposed to be a private group page just for those who had registered for iBelong Small groups, but we decided to make it public just to see if we would gain any traction from non-members. Not only did we receive traction, we had many non-members sharing on the page, commenting about some of the questions asked in the Small groups, as well as wanting to know more about what iBelong was all about. We had a few people that visited on Sunday morning because of the conversations that were taking place on Social media, and even a few that asked to come and participate in the Small groups. I knew of the power of Social media because we've seen some of the results in our ministry. I was shocked to discover that iBelong started trending locally on Twitter because of the tweets during the Sunday morning messages. I had an opportunity to converse with Brother Jermaine Becton who is one of

the members who is an avid fan of Twitter and literally tweets my entire message on Sunday, and has proclaimed to me that he has people who are members of the church, they belong to The Temple because of how blessed and impacted they are by the tweets.

- Brother Jermaine Becton said,

“Pastor, I enjoy sharing tweets of your message during Sunday service, and especially during the iBelong Series. There are people that I know who don’t go to church, who follow my tweets, so they say they go to Temple via the tweets. They don’t feel comfortable going to church, but feel a part because of what they’re receiving through Twitter. They come to me, especially on my job, and share with me how the tweets from the message blessed them and were on point with something taking place in their lives. They have come to me in times past and said to me ‘you didn’t go to church on Sunday,’ and I asked them how do they know and it’s because they missed the message on Twitter. There is one girl who lives in a shelter who can’t make it to the church, but she retweets everything you said and she told me that she felt like The Temple of Refuge was her church home. It literally brought me to tears...!”

I’m compelled to read and study further the writings of Edward T. Hall, Joseph Myers and Peter Block as it relates to belonging. This project exposed to me (1) Small Group ministry is viable, and (2) belonging is multi-level. Because of Social Media and technology, I’m challenged to re-define what it actually means to be a member and belong to the church. The media ministry reported during the iBelong Sermon Series, they even saw a spike in viewers online streaming the services. My mind is expanded by this project, beyond the usual parameters that define membership (giving units, numbers on roll, attendance charts and check ins). For a young lady living in a homeless shelter to say she belongs to Temple of Refuge has literally blown my mind. Maybe membership can’t be re-defined? Maybe we should explore the concept of Internet members who

connect with the ministry, but are not physically within the confines of the walls of the church? Maybe I should just keep my hands off of it and allow people to connect in a manner that feels right and connected to them. I believe this project created a greater sense of bonding and belonging for those already at the church, but it also promoted a to be continued in my mind also.

2. **Third Place Ministry:** Several of the reports that came out of this project touched on a point of interest when the groups met outside the church in Starbucks, Dunkin Donuts, Panera Bread, etc. There were people who approached the groups and inquired as to who they were and what they were doing. The group facilitators, fully knowing my heart, invited them to pull up a chair and join in the conversation. Not only did they join in the conversation, but they also wanted to come visit the church and inquired as to if they would be back the following week. Once again, I was not anticipating this type of response, especially from those who have not frequented the church. The idea of Small Groups meeting throughout the city and connecting with people who are not members of the church has expanded my mind yet again to many possibilities for ministry on different levels because of this project.

3. **Expansion:** There was such excitement over the Small groups we had many that were interested in facilitating groups themselves. We are definitely looking into expanding Small Group ministry but I want to make sure that expanding does not take away from creating a culture of belonging. The feedback we received from the Small groups meeting in third places, expanding the groups to cover more areas in the city is something we are exploring the possibilities of currently. I'm also considering the Small group model for our Sunday Morning Manna, which is our Sunday School. Using the

Sunday School curriculum in a Small group format I believe will greatly increase participation in Morning Manna. In preparation for the expansion of the iBelong Small Groups, we have started training class for those that are interested in becoming group facilitators. The classes are open to everyone but we are leaning heavily upon existing Group host to recommend potential leaders from among their Small groups. Those who are already acclimated toward Small groups, and who already have the consistency of attendance and participation will be considered first when it comes to launching additional groups.

The Follow Up

In one of the LAC meetings after the iBelong project, we came together to discuss follow up and next steps. I also pulled the group facilitators into this meeting as well so that we could get a first hand perception of what took place in the groups that could be vital information relative to what our next move would be. One of the common points of interest were the many people who were somewhat reluctant to open up in Small group discussion for fear of people passing judgment on them. There was this wall of separation that was up and prevented some from bearing their true selves, afraid the members of their group would view them differently. With this in mind, we developed another series of messages to preach on Sunday's as a follow-up to iBelong, and used Small groups on Tuesday nights to reinforce the primary principles of the message and create an avenue for belonging to occur and friendships to develop. The name of the series was, *Don't Judge Me*, and it ran for four weeks with Small groups convening on Tuesday nights. It was a great follow-up to the iBelong Series and brought people

together by tearing down the barriers that prohibited them from opening up in conversation. Through this series people really began to see that we are all flawed by nature and have no right to pass judgment on anyone because of past or present struggles. It further instilled the message of iBelong because in conversation with those that participated in the Small groups, the feeling on aloneness and isolation greatly diminished for many of them through being able to identify with people of like passions and difficulties. We have not right to judge one another because we have all been through some things that we regret and are not proud of, but through the love of God and the strength we receive from each other, we're maturing in our journey in Him.

After the *Don't Judge Me* Series, we followed that up a few weeks later with *One Another*. We addressed several of the over 59 one another sayings of the New Testament in a series that went for six weeks. Once again, we had the Small groups that accompanied the series on Tuesday nights and the response was significant. We had to launch additional Small groups as more people came out for fellowship, dialogue and to take part in the groups. The iBelong series and the series that followed after have produced a means for the members of the church to connect with each other, and I have witnessed new friendships begin, and existing relationships strengthened as a result. I'm looking forward to the continued growth of the iBelong Small Groups Ministry and to the evolving of what it means to belong to a local church.

APPENDIX A

Church Survey

Gender:

- A. Male**
- B. Female**

Age Group:

- A. 18-25**
- B. 26-35**
- C. 36-45**
- D. 45-55**
- E. 56+**

Why did you join the Temple of Refuge?

- A. Location**
- B. The Worship and Praise Team**
- C. Ministries that are offered**
- D. Family/Friends are members**
- E. Other _____**

How important is it for you to have family/friends attending the same church?

- A. Very Important**
- B. Somewhat Important**
- C. Not Important**

Are you currently involved in any ministries?

- A. Yes, if so, which ones? _____**
- B. No**

I feel connected/a part of the ministry?

- A. Yes**
- B. No**

How long have you been a member of the Temple of Refuge?

- A. Less than 1 year**
- B. 1-5 years**
- C. 5+years**

How much interaction do you have with members outside of Sunday service?

- A. 0-1 hour**
- B. 1-5 hours**
- C. 5+ hours**

APPENDIX B

Church Survey - RESULTS

Gender:

- A. Male – 29%**
- B. Female – 71%**

Age Group:

- A. 18-25 – 7%**
- B. 26-35 – 31%**
- C. 36-45 – 26%**
- D. 45-55 – 29%**
- E. 56+ - 7%**

Why did you join the Temple of Refuge?

- A. Location – 16%**
- B. The Worship and Praise Team – 29%**
- C. Ministries that are offered – 29%**
- D. Family/Friends are members – 20%**
- E. Other – 6%** _____

How important is it for you to have family/friends attending the same church?

- A. Very Important – 43%**
- B. Somewhat Important – 38%**
- C. Not Important – 20%**

Are you currently involved in any ministries?

- A. Yes, if so, which ones? __63%_____**
- B. No – 36%**

I feel connected/a part of the ministry?

- A. Yes – 87%**
- B. No – 13%**

How long have you been a member of the Temple of Refuge?

- A. Less than 1 year – 16%**
- B. 1-5 years – 38%**
- C. 5+years – 46%**

How much interaction do you have with members outside of Sunday service?

- A. 0-1 hour – 48%**
- B. 1-5 hours – 40%**
- C. 5+ hours – 13%**

APPENDIX C

SERMON 1

Sunday, March 9, 2014

Text: Genesis 1:26, 2:18

Title: "I'm Created To Belong" (Message #1 of iBelong Series)

Jessica Oleion, a Writer/Illustrator who resides in the city of Brooklyn, NY, recently wrote an article entitled "Loneliness Is Deadly." In this article she states that social isolation kills more people than obesity and that it is just as stigmatizing. In her research on loneliness she came across several alarming recent studies. She discovered that loneliness is not just making us sick, but loneliness is literally killing us. Loneliness is a serious health risk because it contributes additional factors to one's life. Studies of elderly people and social isolation concluded that those without adequate social interaction were twice as likely to die prematurely. Social isolation impairs immune function and boosts inflammation which leads to arthritis, type 2 diabetes and heart disease. She goes on to state that loneliness is breaking our hearts. But as a culture we rarely talk about it. Forty percent of adults in two recent surveys said that they are lonely. That is up 20 percent from when the survey was first conducted in the 1980's. Which means that there has been a double-digit increase of persons who have declared loneliness as a current state of their lives. Loneliness and feeling isolated is not just a problem in the world at large, but it is also the seldom spoken issue even within the church. Churches across the length and breadth of this country gather together collectively to hear the word of the Lord and to worship the Lord together in spirit and truth, and yet as we do that somebody sitting around you right now feels as if they are all by themselves. Having friends and relational connections is important to one's continual life journey. Not only that, it is also a deterrent to help us ward off the spirit of loneliness that comes to isolate us from building and developing wholesome relations. The truth of our existence speaks loud and clear this morning. God did not put us on the earth to go at life solo but to connect, to relate and to belong. I'm not here by myself. This iBelong series was birthed out of some issues that I've observed even within our ministry as well as the voices of membership who joined this church and somewhat feel disconnected. We are around each other on a weekly basis and some feel that they are just another name on the role. There are those that feel that they don't have adequate connections within their

church family and therefore declare that they are just another face in the crowd. Real connections and real relationships rarely happen. You can be in a crowded room and still feel lonely. You can be in the sold out panther football stadium and still have a sense of isolation. You can be around people all day and yet feel that you are by yourself. It's my prayer and my desire that before this series is over that the combination of the messages preached and the iBelong small groups would break down some of the walls of separation around our lives that cause us to not develop Godly authentic friendships.

It was the legendary Hip Hop group Houdini who declared "Friends, how many of us have them, friends, ones we can depend on, friends how many of us have them; before we go any further, let's be friends".

At the conclusion of this series, it's my prayer that everyone individually will be able to declare that I don't merely attend Temple of Refuge. I'm not just a part of the church; I'm more than a member. But iConnect, iShare, iGrow because iBelong.

I call our attention to the book of Genesis in the beginning of this series because in reading the creative story, we are able to quickly see that we are designed for relationship, we are all created to belong.

1. First of all a Relational God created us relational beings! - From the very dawn of existence we quickly discover that God is relational. And He created us to be relational as well. The bible says in Gen 1:26 God said "let us make man in our image." God never said I will make man in my image. You will not find in that verse God saying I will make man in my image. In other words, God did not speak of himself singularly, as if he were operating in a solo capacity.

God spoke from a plurality, "Let US make man in our image." This speaks of the mystery of the trinity. God reveals Himself as God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. These three are in a wonderful relationship called oneness. Even before time began, God has always existed in an eternal relationship. The Father, Son and the Holy Spirit three characters expressions in the God head who exists in such a relationship with each other they are one. And out of His on eternal relationship He created man to be relational as well. If God is relational, if God has created us in His image then that means that the need for, the desire for, and the longing for relationship is a part of who we are. We can not refrain, be aloof, act distant and unwilling to connect with others because when we do that we are denying the creative intention of God, who place His specific DNA on the inside of us when He blew himself into man and man became a living soul. We were created to be relational like God. God put is DNA, his stamp on us. God gave us that intent that we will be together in relationship. We would not deny or refrain from

relationship from others because when we do that we are denying the relational intention of God.

God created us with the capacity for relationship. He created us with that type of DNA. Therefore to deny, to refrain from that type of relationship says that you believe that God was in error when He was in the creative process. God was wrong. He should have considered the personality test that I took that revealed that I was an introvert. God should have taken into consideration that when I took that personality test to discover what kind of person I was, I'm just shy, I do my best when I roll solo, that's part of my personality. I don't mean any harm, but that's just part of my personality. I just like to be by myself. The reality is many people just don't want to develop any authentic relationships. God should have listened to me. God should have listened to the countless people who proclaim they function best by themselves.

I question God living on the inside of any believer who has an issue with relationships and friendships with other people. I question if God really lives on the inside of you, if you have a problem developing friendships and relationships with other believers. How can you say that God, who is eternally relational lives on the inside of you and you confessed your sins and yet you refuse to build relationship with anybody, how can you say I got God but don't display His character? How can you say that God lives on the inside of me and He is relational, but refuse to be relational?

God created Adam first but not only. That explains God's declaration "Let them have dominion" Who is them? When all he did was create Adam. It says that he is talking about mankind. Genesis 5:1, 2 states, "this is the book of the genealogy of Adam. In the day that God created man, He made him in the likeness of God. He created them male and female, and blessed them and called them Mankind in the day they were created." God blessed them God said to them have dominion.

2. Independence and isolation was never God's idea! - If in fact God is relational, and created us relational beings then independence and isolation is not of Him. Out of the need to motivate out of the need to motivate and self worth, we have created a culture that screams and declares, "I can do it all by myself." The reality is because you are a part of mankind, you will never be by yourself. If you lock all your doors and shut all your windows and stay in your house you are still not by your self. Nor can you solely depend on self. Lord if I had to depend on me I'd be in a mess. The only real reason I'm here is because I'm connected to somebody bigger than me. And I got friends and relationships that I connect with and hold me up when the devil sits on my shoulder and tells me you're not worthy to declare the word. I got friends who pray for me and tell me to stand and preach like it's your last time. I can't depend on myself

God looked at Adam in Genesis 2:18 and said “It is not good that man should be alone, I will make him a helper comparable to him.” Now when we look at that verse, we mostly deal with the male/female, husband/wife romantic relationship and marriage. However when we consider Adam’s assignment to name the animals we also discover that God was saying to Adam it is not good to be the only one like you. I don’t care how much popular culture declares, that a dog is man’s best friend. You are not like a dog. God said it was not good for man to be alone, there was no other like him. God made this decision because Adam is naming the animals, and when he starts naming the animals God says there is no other kind like you, I’m going to make somebody like him.

Popular culture has crept into our spiritual walk and we mistakenly take worldly concepts and try to pass them over as God and Godly. The American culture increasingly tries to isolate individuals from one another.

We find ourselves now isolated from one another and as a result, many people have pseudo relationships with characters on TV. So we relate to Olivia Pope, we relate to Mary Jane, we like and are fans NeNe Leaks and folk in the movies. We like to sit back and enjoy watching other people interact while we sit back and take notes of how they interact and post and talk about what happened on certain shows. We refuse to relate to with other people but we want to relate to characters on TV who are putting on a facade to get ratings so you will tune in every week. That is not the authentic relationship that God has ordained for our lives.

We don’t call people anymore. We send them a text message. We’re so informal. When was the last time you picked up the phone and just called somebody just to find out how they are doing, what is going on with them, and if they are doing alright? We have majored in keeping people arms length away from us. So we chat on our computers we interact with other people on the other side of the country with a fake Facebook page and creating false identities so we can interact with people. You sitting in your home interacting in relationship with folk in Africa and you can’t speak to your next-door neighbor.

Much of the new housing development has literally abandoned the design of the front porch. You don’t see many houses with front porches anymore. When I was growing up as a little boy they had houses with large front porches and we had a swing that was connected to the ceiling in the front porch and momma would sit on the swing and daddy would sit in the rocking chair and watch people go by. We would sit on the steps of the porch and play these games, and people would walk around in the neighborhood and wave at you and you wave back and say how you doing baby? I’m doing good Mother so

and so, or sister so and so I just pulled a pie out of the oven. You sit on the porch and eat pie, drink coffee and have a conversation. We need more front porches. We don't interact with each other any more. Folk around neighborhood and wont even speak to each other. We are not made to be exclusive. Were not made to be informal, we are not made to be by ourselves and go at life alone without relational assistance.

I wish I had a real church. I wish I had some people that can be honest and not sit up in here and pretend like you got it all together. So let me just talk about me. I need relational assistance. He created us for relationship. He created us to encourage each other. He created us to belong.

When God said let us make man in our image he also said let them have dominion. He didn't say let him, singular, have dominion, but he said let them, mankind have dominion. In other words, you cannot have solo dominion. You cannot have dominion by yourself. Out of our mankind relationship we have dominion. Solo dominion is better known as dictatorship that will eventually result in domination and cultivates a spirit of selfishness. That explains why some folk are incapable of having authentic friendships because you don't want to share in dominion you want to dominate over people and stand up over them. You want to dominant the relationship, even when you feel isolated, even when you feel lonely and by yourself. There are some unseen relationships, there's an unseen crowd that you belong to. I remember the bible says the enemy came out against Elisha and the servant ran in the house and said Master, the enemy is out here and they have us surrounded. Elisha prayed, "God I pray that you open his eyes" because he's having a panic attack cause he think we are isolated, he think we are by ourselves. God I pray that you will open his eyes. The bible says and when he opened his eyes he discovered that was a host, the armies of the Lord that were surrounding their area. At your loneliest time it the time when you have the most support that you ever knew you had before. Again, you are not by yourself. You are connected and not by yourself.

3. Significant moves are always birthed from significant relationships! - We see throughout many biblical stories that not only were relationships the housing of dominion, but many of our biblical accounts of miraculous displays of power were birthed out of groups, families, or units of people in relationship. Now it comes clear to me and it becomes apparent that the enemies plan to undermine God's intention for relational victory by causing division, causing confusion and separation and eventually we have a falling out so that ultimately we will be isolated. The enemy knows that your blessing is connected in relationship. Yes, what God has for you is for you, but what He has for you is typically connected to somebody else. In other words, it's not intended for you to consume by yourself. But it is intended to flow through you so that it can be a blessing to other people. Relationships are the corridors that God runs major blessings in and moves of God through. We so busy being upset with folks and don't want to let

nobody in. I can't let anybody in to my heart. I can't let anybody into my life. Were so inanimate about being in relationships that we missing out on relationships that God has for us. You've been waiting on God to manifest something blessings and the reason some of them have not come to pass yet is because you are unwilling to open yourself up to other relationships. I'm not talking about boyfriend girlfriend relationships, I'm not talking about marriage. I'm talking about friendship connects that God uses to promote his will and send His blessings through. Your blessing is connected to somebody else. And until you open your heart to be in relationship, you will miss what God has for you. Relationships are the corridors that God runs the blessing through. When God proclaimed that it was not good for Adam to be alone, He said I'm going to make him a helper, somebody to help him. Which implies that Adam needed assistance to accomplish his garden assignment. He needed help managing the Garden. He needed help managing the affairs of the garden. Adam needed help taking care of that in which God had placed under Adam's care. God said, there is something I want to accomplish and I'm going to place Adam in a relationship in order to make it happen. A major component of that relationship was to be fruitful and multiply. Yes you are wonderful, but you can't reproduce by yourself. That was never God's intention. Throughout the bible we see God at work and mostly we see God working through relationships. God's plan to populate the earth began with a pronouncement over Adam and Eve to be fruitful and multiply. Which says to us that growth is through relationship and belonging.

God's desire to repopulate the earth after the great flood purged the earth of mankind's wickedness started with Noah, his sons and their families. In other words, your recovery from total wipe out comes through relationships and belonging. God's plan to redeem mankind to himself manifested a beginning with a promise made to Abraham that through you all the families of the earth would be blessed. This promise was made manifest by and through his offspring which gave rise to the 12 tribes who would birth a chosen people and the channel by which eventually the Messiah would come. All of this brought to pass through relationships and belonging. In order for Jesus's earthly ministry to be the most impactful, he assembled a group of 12 others that he had close relationship with. And as a result of that relationship, and that sense of belonging, the report was that the whole world was following after Him. In Acts, the bible says when 120 persons gathered together in the upper room on one accord. In other words, when their relationships were no longer broken, when their relationships were no longer separated. When somebody came out from around the corner upset because Jesus was no longer around no more. As soon as they made up their mind not to remain isolated they came together and they were on one accord they had a sense of belonging for a greater purpose. There came a sound of a mighty rushing wind. See you got to understand the reason the enemy always attacks relationships is because every relationship has a unique purpose for greater. And the enemy is trying to destroy the

relationship because there is something greater that God is about to do through your connection. Until we open up our eyes and see what is really going on we are going to miss out on some authentic relationships that we ought to have one with another. The bible says that when those 120 came together on one accord there came sound as of a mighty rushing wind. Cloven tongues of fire fell on them. And they began to speak in other tongues as the spirit gave them utterance. And through the filling of the Holy Spirit, they were then able to go ye therefore and teach all nations baptize them in the name of the Father, the Son, and The Holy Ghost. You must understand that there is a greater purpose for your relationship. The enemy is trying to make you believe that it is not of God to be connected to other people.

SERMON 2

Sunday March 16, 2014

Text: Acts 2:40 – 47 (*v.42)

Title: “iConnect” (Message #2 of “iBelong” Sermon Series)

One of the central questions that burns in my spirit and at the heart of this particular Sermon Series is, do I really belong and feel like I belong to The Temple of Refuge Church? We learned from the first message in this series, on last week that God did not create us for isolation or independence, but He “created us to belong.” A relational God created us relational beings that we might develop wholesome and meaningful relationships and friendships with one another. So then, a vital ingredient to me having a sense of belonging becomes the friendships that I’m able to develop and maintain within the ministry. It then becomes apparent that if I feel like I don’t belong, it could be perhaps because I have not done according to Proverbs 18:24 and “shown myself friendly,” in order to have friends. I will admit that there are other factors to consider that play a role in people not feeling connected to the church or those within the ministry. To name a few:

***I’m An Introvert – “I’m relatively shy and do my best when I have space to myself.”* An introvert is a person who is energized by being alone and whose energy is drained being around other people. I’m not going to say anything about what is considered a legitimate personality type, but I will say that even being an introvert should not stop one from having healthy relationships that DON’T drain you of your energy.

***My life is already complicated with my own issues. I don’t have time to embrace others with theirs! -* We miss the fact that one of the reasons we were created relational is so that we be a blessing by bearing and carrying the burdens of others.

*** “I went through severe church hurt and spiritual abuse, and as a result I don’t do church people. I will make it a point not to befriend fellow church members. That’s why you see me come in, get what I need, and jet out!”* By no means do I want to take away from the legitimacy of church hurt, having gone through it myself. But isn’t it strange that people are hurt on their job by co-workers, but don’t label it “job hurt?” Many people experience all kinds of hurt at work, and show up the very next day! We

can't allow church hurt to win out and keep us from opening ourselves to what could be some great friendships. See the hand of the enemy attempting to separate and isolate you from fellow believers. Release that hurt to God and allow Him to do the healing that's needed so that you can once again, freely open your heart to others.

*** "I have plenty of friends already and we have a lot in common, whereas at my church I don't have a lot of common interest with others." - This is probably one of the more popular reasons against developing friendships within the local church. Although common interest should not be the "deal breaker" on friendships, we actually have more in common than what we are willing to admit.*

When we look at the very beginnings of the early church in the Book of Acts we see several things that validate the fact of our commonality with others in ministry. When those 120 that were gathered in the Upper Room on the Day of Pentecost were filled with the presence and power of the Holy Spirit, the Bible says that about 3,000 people were added to them at that time. Scripture then gives us a snap shot of their lives together as a community of believers. What we quickly discover is that they were a "connected" people and connections become the common denominator in creating an atmosphere of belonging. After these 3,000 people "were added to them," the 120, v.42 records that *"they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers."* Notice the things that they had in common that proved to be sources of their belonging, and important factors for us as well.

(1). iBelong because we're connected in God...! – v.40, 41 informs us that those who gladly received Peter's word, those who were saved, were baptized and added to them. 3,000 people from all walks of life and nationalities committed their lives to God through Jesus Christ. As stated on last week, we were created to belong; therefore our intimate connections with each other should come from the base of an intimate connection to God. iBelong because I'm connected! Being connected to God brings into play a larger point of belonging, which is ownership. The Psalmist declared in Psalm 24:1, *"the earth is the Lord's, and all it's fullness, the world and those who dwell therein."* We belong to God and as believers everything about our connections, relationships, and friendships spring from the bases of God owning everything, including self...! Paul said that *"we are not our own, but that we have been bought with a price..."* Therefore, since we don't own ourselves, we can't deny the instructions of the owner's manual that clearly states that we are a relational people, created to belong in relationship with the owner and everything owned by Him. God displays His ownership of us through His love for us, in sending His only Son to pay the ultimate sacrifice, taking our place and dying on the cross. Therefore, because of our connection to God, we should love and that love should also be sacrificial. Too many of our relationships are governed by our feelings and

emotions, instead of God's sacrificial love, which is unconditional. That's why we so easily disregard and cut people off because it's motivated by "like" and not love...! We are connected to a God that "looks beyond our faults and sees our needs," but yet we struggle to embrace beyond a person's fault! That's what messed the Pharisees and religious leaders up about Jesus... Every time they turned around, Jesus was eating and spending time with those that were deemed "the unlikable...!" I'm glad He still major's in dining with the "unlikable" because I do a lot of things God doesn't "like" but yet through His grace, He doesn't cut me off, and disconnect His relationship with me.

(2). iBelong Because we're Connected in the Word...! – Acts 2:42 records that those 3,000 that were added to them *"continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine..."* In other words, they remained connected because they remained committed to the teaching and instruction of the Apostles. I'm always intrigued with a breakdown in relationship among believers who have the Word of God as a common denominator. But all throughout the history of the Christian Church, wars have been fought, lives have been sacrificed, and relationships terminated because of disagreement in the interpretation of scripture. The thing that connected those early believers was the Apostles' teaching/doctrine... Thousands of years later, with multiple church splits and the birthing of multiple denominations, there is still a great deal of scriptural disconnection that should not be, and it has done severe harm in many relationships. This holds true within the confines of the local church as well. I will simply speak in terms of this local church; ***we do our relationships and belonging a disservice when we miss meals...!*** What made the early church so powerful was that they sat under the same teaching, and fellowshiped with each other in breaking bread together... What made the family unit so powerful was the kitchen/dining table...! The meal (we're all eating the same), and the conversation that created a time of intimacy, learning and laughter... *When was the last time you prepared a meal and the family sat down and ate together... It's slowly fading away from our culture...

It becomes problematic and a threat to relationships and belonging if one saying, "Pastor said," and the other saying, "well, I wasn't there, but Pastor Somebody Else said..." It becomes problematic when one says, "Pastor said..." and out in the parking lot somebody saying, "well I tuned him out cause in my opinion..." It becomes problematic and a threat to wholesome relationships within the church when one says, "Pastor said..." and the other says, "well God told me...!" Our young people are confused when they hear me say one thing, and saw you shouting about it, but then at home declaring, "I don't care what Pastor said, and he can't tell me what to do!" Look at what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 1:10, *"Now I plead with you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment."* We're doing small group ministry and meeting out in our groups around the

city this week, which is really unheard of and most African American churches will not do because of fear of division and church splits. When we're eating the same thing, dining from the same table, remaining connected in the Word of God, we know that our spirit is subject to the leaders spirit, and division, confusion and offense is minimized...! You can have a different perspective or angle of which you see a particular word, but the spirit should be the same...! Please don't take me the wrong way, by no means I'm I stating that you should not have friends who are non-members of this church... But there ought to be some concern if there are no relationships with those in whom you eat with... those you attend church with and feed off the same teaching...!

(3). iBelong because we're connected to one another...! – Acts 2:42 states again that *“they continued steadfastly in the Apostles' doctrine and fellowship...”* My daddy told me that fellowship means “more than one fellow in the ship...!” In the midst of our falling out and disagreements, we were created to belong and connect with one another. **YOU ARE NOT BY YOURSELF...!** The term “one another” is a dominant theme throughout the NT. We are encouraged to:

Love one another

Serve one another

Consider one another

Be kindly affectionate one to another; in honor preferring one another...

Admonish one another...

Greet one another with a holy kiss...

Forbearing one another...

Forgiving one another...

Comforting one another...

Edifying one another...

...and on and on and on throughout the NT... I don't think this is a coincidence but a direct challenge to us in creating an atmosphere of belonging we must be concerned and have care for one another. We are instructed to rejoice with them that rejoice, and weep with those that weep...! This is bigger than me just coming to church and looking to have a good time, but giving and receiving ministry, encouragement and strength from one another...! Therefore, we don't merely attend... I'm not just a part... I'm more than just a member... but iConnect because iBelong...! I am/we are connected to one another.

**Remember, on the Day of Pentecost, there were many people there from various countries and nationalities. But through the power and presence of the Holy Spirit, they all heard the Gospel in their native language and 3,000 people from various parts and regions became the church...! There is not a great deal to learn from those who are like you... Our differences are not intended to divide us, but to strengthen us through everyone fulfilling their unique roll in the lives of one another. That's one of the points

of reference in the “abiding in the vine” analogy that Jesus uses in John 15. In v.5 Jesus says, *“I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing.”* He didn’t say, I’m the vine and you are the branch – singular...! He said you are the branches... and I will say here that there are no two branches alike...! We are connected to each other, not for the purpose of mimicking or cloning, but that through the vine, we can become uniquely what we have been called and designed to be. Branches die and fall off of the tree, not because they had a falling out with the branch beside them refusal to conform to them, but because they are not abiding in the vine...! Although the branches are different, when they remain connected and abide in the vine, they produce something that causes the whole tree to look beautiful... We’re connected to one another, and should care for one another because your foliage is beneficial to the beautification of the entire landscape. One dying branch can mess up the whole tree...! That’s why Jesus said the Gardener takes away the dead disconnected branch...! We see the similar analogy in Paul’s teaching about the gifts in the body in 1 Corinthians 12. Because we are connected together as ONE body, I don’t have time, and the whole body is hindered when the foot is jealous of the hand and no longer wants to operate in its God-given design and function because its always covered up by a sock and shoe and doesn’t get the exposure the hand receives... “That hand makes me sick... always get to hold stuff, make the acquaintance of others, writes, drives, claps, pokes, punches, pushes and receives a washing multiple times throughout the day...!” I refuse to be a foot anymore... Not fully understanding that the hand needs to the foot to be a foot or the whole body is going to suffer... Can you see the greater plan of the enemy...? So devil forces are working non-stop to disrupt, divide, plant discourse and contrary thoughts in the minds of people that keeps us from connecting in fellowship one to another...!

SERMON 3

Sunday March 23, 2014

Text: Acts 2:40 – 47; 4:32 – 37 **** (Acts 2:44 – 46).**

Title: “iShare” – Message #3 of the iBelong Sermon Series

Over the course of the last two Sunday’s, we have sought to convey the message of belonging as a key component to the life and very heart of the Lord’s Church. Through the blood of His Son, God has so forged and knitted us together to fulfill His agenda of spreading the message of the Gospel to the masses. The very nature and magnitude of that assignment calls for a people who understand who they are, and their place in God’s Kingdom. We’ve discovered that God has not called and created us to be separatists who flourish best in isolation, but we were created and designed to fitly join together and connect in a manner that goes against the very spirit of our present world. For in this life, our culture doesn’t seek to celebrate those who promote belonging, togetherness and teamwork, but rather promotes individualism, division and self-centeredness. This series has been my feeble attempt at the daunting task of pointing us Godward as it pertains to belonging, in the midst of a Godless world.

Here in our text, Acts 2, as well as Acts 4, we see a people who have come together and created a faith community by and through their connection through the cross of Calvary. Although they are from various backgrounds and nationalities, they connect as one in fellowship, and under the teaching and tutelage of the Apostles, they spend time together breaking bread and in prayer. Not only that, but more specifically, vs. 44-46 of Acts 2 show us a people so committed to the Gospel and each other, that not one need went unmet among them because they shared one with another. *One of the signs of true connection is mutual sharing...! You can’t truly be connected and remain unwilling to share. You can’t proclaim “iBelong,” and remain a casual observer from the outside and unwilling to participate in sharing the gift of YOU with others...!*

******What does it mean to share, and why does it seem like something so hard for many people to participate in...? To share means, *to allow someone to have, use or enjoy something that one possesses; to use or enjoy something jointly or in turns.* We see right away the reason why many people struggle with sharing because the lessons learned in our world teach us to look out for me, myself and I. We’re so quick to proclaim, “I barely have enough for me, and/or what I have is so small it’s not enough to go around and share.” Understand that sharing is not a possession issue, but it’s a heart issue that

says, I know I don't have perhaps as much as others, but whatever I have, if it will help or bless someone else, I'm willing to share it...!

**After spending much of the day teaching the multitude, Jesus instructs the disciples to feed the people, at which they announce 200 denarii is not enough to feed the people. But the Bible says that a lad, a young boy, perhaps with his lunch for school, willingly shares it with Jesus, who in turn feeds over 5000 people with 2 fish and 5 loaves...! **Note a few things from our text in Acts 2:40 – 47:

(1). iShare because I'm Needed and Necessary...! (*v.44) – In other words, **“iShare because iMatter...!”** The text says, “all who believed were together...! *Understand that as part of the body, you have something to offer, and it has always been the devil's agenda to keep us in the dark as it relates to our overall worth and value to the Body of Christ...! Paul said to the saints in 1 Corinthians 12, “for as the body is one and has many members, but all the members of that body, being many, are one body, so also is Christ. For in fact the body is not one member but many.” Understand that there is NO part of your body that does not serve a specific purpose or function in some capacity. And if a part of your body cease to operate in the manner in which it was designed, the whole body would then suffer...! Your foot can't say to the hand, “I have no need for you...” The fact of the matter is, both the foot and the hand are needed and necessary to the overall functionality of the body. We need each other to share in the overall movement and progression of the body by being and sharing who God created us to be. Thank God for prosthetic limbs, by why settle for a fake appendage when the real you is so readily available...? We can't share what we have to offer because we're too busy trying to offer and share who we are not...! So the hand offers foot responsibility... the foot gets offended because his authenticity is rejected, and once offended he checks out of his role as the foot, declaring that since the hand know so much about being a foot, let him do it...! Now the whole body is jacked up with parts sharing in functions they were not designed to flow in...! TOR, I need you to share you because you matter...!

**Paul further expands this thought in Ephesians 4 in sharing the importance of 5-fold body ministry (Ephesians 4:11-16)

*11And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, 12for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, 13till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ; 14that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting, 15but, speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head—Christ— 16from whom **the whole body, joined and knit together by***

what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love.

Notice v.16, highlight, “what every joint supplies...” We are joined and knit together by what every joint supplies... What your part supplies or shares, benefits the other parts and the whole body...! What has God invested in you to share in flowing through the whole body...? This is why we should never allow anyone to make us feel less than... feel like we’re not important... make us feel like because we haven’t been here as long as others... make us feel like what we bring to the body is not significant... iShare because iMatter....!!!! Stop allowing trivial matters to hinder our togetherness... The early church was powerful because Acts 2:44 says that they were TOGETHER...! Not isolated... separated... stand-offish... aloof... and unwilling to develop relationships and friendships among themselves...

(2). iShare because I have all things in common with others...! (v.44, 45) –

The early church believers “had all things in common...” The word “common” in the Greek is the word, “koinos,” which means “ordinary and/or belonging to generality.” We see the same word in Acts 4:32, “*now the multitude of those who believed were of one heart and one soul; neither did anyone say that any of the things he possessed was his own, but they had all things in common.*” What does it actually mean to have “all things in common?” Well, commonality is two-fold:

(1). *All things in common means what’s mine is yours, and what’s yours is mine...!* We should readily make resources available for those in need. The early church “sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need...” This should be the mind-set of every church, and every individual believer who knows in particular, where their blessings come from. As it stands, most churches are limited in this area with less than 15% of the membership carrying the financial load. It’s sad that we can’t do more in assistance than what we do, not just our church, but also the majority of churches. As individuals, who have all things in common, we ought to do a better job in making resources and information available to others in time of need.

**There was a time you didn’t hear of anyone in our communities being evicted because we would rally around folk and support them. We had “rent parties” and home-made talent shows in the community to raise money to help folk pay rent... In our communities now, it’s every man for himself...! Not to mention the plethora of “don’t wanna-work deadbeats,” who seek to feed off of the good intentions of others and hustle folk out of their benevolence. As a result, those who are in serious need are hampered by those who running a hustle game...

(2). *All things in common also speaks of something that we all truly “have in common,” that being the commonality of sin.* Because “ALL have sinned and come short of the glory of God,” we should even the more, seek to be a little bit more

transparent in sharing our life stories. When we share with each other, we provide strength to others in facing the same or similar trials and challenges. What encouragement we would provide for each other if we would but only share the commonality of our past and present struggles and circumstances. More of our authentic selves would be revealed, making us touchable, human and even vulnerable and in need of the “prayers of the righteous.” Instead, we come to church every week, and leave the way we came in because the enemy got us fooled into believing that what we’re going through is exclusive to us...! For every person in here, what you are dealing with now, look around you because there are 5-6 others in your vicinity who have been through the same thing, and worse...! We are content to hear the Word, but not share how the Word worked through your life when you were at your lowest and worse...! Thank God for what Paul said, but what did it mean to you when it was filtered through a life of clubbing, fornication, lust, and all manner of evil...? **When we are unwilling to share the REAL authentic story of past deliverance and present struggle, we create a false allusion that presents us as a people who have arrived and been in church all our lives! My sin may not be your sin, but we got something in common... I’M A SINNER, SAVED BY GRACE AND IN DEPERATE NEED OF TODAY’S NEW MERCY...!

SERMON 4

Sunday, March 30, 2014

Text: Acts 2:42 – 47 (*vs.46, 47); Ephesians 4:16

Title: “iGrow” – Message #4 of the iBelong Sermon Series

Over the last several weeks, we have watched and gleaned from the establishment of the early church and their ability to create an atmosphere of belonging. As a result, we see an assembly of people who grew spiritually as individuals and numerically as a church body. Even today, it should be at the forefront of every believer, a desire to experience growth in their lives spiritually, and for their particular church family to grow and expand their borders. The interesting thing about growing spiritually is that many believers are not really concerned about whether they grow or not...! The average believer today it seems, is not so much concerned about growth, but in church attendance to fulfill religious duty. However, you ought to be able to take a reflective look over your life and see how you have grown in Christ; to see areas of your life where you have made changes for the better and sought to improve in difficult areas where you know some changes and growth are required. *It's very easy today to become comfortable with hard places of our lives and surrender to, “well, that's just the way it is,” and not put for the effort to make needed adjustments that promote change and growth in those areas. Just because it's been a certain way with you for all of your life, does not mean continue to “roll with the punches” and accept things as permanent, with no hope of change. Understand that even the hard places, the struggles, the issues, the heartbreak and season of brokenness, if gleaned through the lens of God's Word, become pathways for God to usher growth into one's life. By no means am I taking away from the severity of your experiences, I'm simply saying that if it is as major as you feel it is, it should have then utterly taken you out. But your survival of it is a clear indication that God desires to use the thing you labeled a setback as a setup...!

I want us to be clear in understanding that all growth, individually and collectively, is attributed to the Lord. Acts 2:47 closes by stating, “and the Lord added to the church daily those that were being saved.” It is the Lord Himself that adds to, the church body, the local assembly, causing it to grow. People are attracted to churches for all type of reasons; the preaching, the music, what's offered for children and youth, community involvement, facilities, ministry programs and services, style of worship service, and the list goes on. But the Psalmist declared, “unless the Lord build the house, they labor in vain who build it.” The Lord adds to the church...! One of the reasons people bounce around from place to place is because they are joining places they have not been added to by the Lord...! **Individual growth occurs primarily from “abiding in the Vine” as Jesus notes in John 15. When we abide, remain in the Vine (Christ), we bear fruit (we grow), and the Vinedresser (God) then cuts and prunes us to bear more fruit. The fruit that the heavenly vinedresser looks for in His people is Christlikeness, according to Galatians 5:22, 23. One of the main barometers we use to validate our individual growth is money and possessions. However, you can have all the wealth in the world and be stagnate in

your spiritual life. But real growth is expressed through more of Christ life and character coming through your life. If I am abiding in the Vine, then what's in the Vine should be permeating through my life...! You can't be connected to an orange tree and produce prunes... When we look at our lives we ought to see more of Christ coming through and out of us.

**One of the main key factors that we read in our main scripture passage, Acts 2:42-47 is in v.42 where it simply states, "they continued steadfastly..." Another version says, "they devoted themselves..." Whatever we are devoted to becomes the dominate area of our lives... So then in order for us to experience growth and that growth be an important part of our lives, our level of devotion must be turned up...! In our text, I note several particular areas where the early church was devoted, and where I feel we should devote ourselves if we expect growth individually and collectively.

(1) The Apostles' Teaching and Doctrine – The early church experienced growth because they were devoted to the Apostles' doctrine. What was the Apostles' doctrine comprised of? The text does not say, but further reading in the Book of Acts and Paul's Epistles reveal what encompassed the Apostles' doctrine. "It primarily included a compilation of the words of Jesus (cf. 20:35), some account of His earthly ministry, His passion and resurrection (cf. 2:22–24), and a declaration of what all this meant for man's redemption (cf. 1 Cor 15:3–5)." Just as the Apostles had been instructed by Jesus, they pass along that instruction to new believers. The Apostles' doctrine therefore is considered sound and balanced teaching. I believe we are living in the fulfillment of Paul's warning to Timothy in 2 Timothy 4:3, 4, "*for the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables.*" Preaching and teaching today must have the "wow factor...!" It must be heavy in revelation and steeped in mystery, and it most certainly and absolutely must make us feel good...! However, if we expect to grow in our spiritual walk with the Lord, we must have sound, balanced teaching!

**The FDA puts out nutritional guidelines for healthy balanced eating. Plates of food with balanced portion controls of various food groups are essential for a healthy lifestyle. Plates full of Carbs and Saturated fats, coupled with the fast foods industry of processed hormone injected junk, have led to obesity being a national epidemic... We see the same issue within the Body of Christ... A steady diet of prosperity teaching, coupled with the pseudo-gospel fast food "name it, claim" teaching, has led to the dulling of our spiritual senses, and the closing of our spiritual ears. Paul said, in 2 Timothy 3:16, "*all Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness.*" What made the early church so powerful was that they "gave themselves up to the instructions of the Apostles." In other words, they were teachable and remained teachable...! As much as I like Social Media, I say often that the downside of Social Media is that it has given power to opinion...! So much so, that many people think that their opinion, their opinion and misinterpretation of God's Word, is the standard and not the balanced sound Word of God. Just because someone posted something inspirational does not mean "God said...!"

(2). Fellowship Is Essential...! – The Greek word there for fellowship is the word, “koinonia,” which means “association, communion or close relationship.” Their fellowship was expressed (1) in the breaking of bread (sharing a meal), and (2) in prayers. Prayer is an expression of complete dependence on the Lord for worship, guidance, preservation and service. When we don’t pray, we are literally sending the message that we are depending on ourselves for worship, guidance, preservation and service. We don’t pray because we are doing things on our own, of our own accord, and in our own strength... They also shared in a meal together. I like how Luke says they shared in “breaking of bread.” That’s important because the majority of Jesus teaching was done either as He walked along the way and over a meal. It’s something special about breaking bread with each other... It’s akin to after the resurrection, the Bible says that 2 of the disciples were on the road of Emmaus, and Jesus came walking along side of them, but they didn’t know it was Him....

**Fellowship is important because it reminds us of our need for each other... Our success in this walk is greatly increased when we have fellowship with fellow believers, because of the importance of encouragement, accountability, and strength received from one another. Solomon said in Proverbs 27:17, “*as iron sharpens iron, so a man sharpens the countenance of his friend.*” People, friends who hold you accountable sharpen you... People who require “extra grace” sharpen you...! Every person that antagonize you does not merit being cut off, but they merit extra grace because they may carry the assignment to sharpen you...! As God has been extra and extremely gracious toward us, let us be gracious toward others... **Our fellowship, our togetherness causes the body to grow. Paul concluded his discourse on the five-fold ministry gifts by stating in Ephesians 4:16, “*from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love.*”

(3). Worship Was Primary...! – (v.46). The early church was powerful because they were devoted to corporate worship, and to “small group ministry.” The early believers met daily in the Temple for worship together, and then they met from “house to house,” which means that they were in smaller units for time of sharing a meal and worship together. This is the basis for this iBelong project and Series... We worship together corporately as a church family, and over the last 4 weeks, we have been meeting in smaller units as a “small group family.” In the smaller groups, we have a wonderful opportunity to learn from each other, to make viable connections, to share our experiences and to grow and serve the purposes of God together...! Many of you missed this 6-weeks period of iBelong Small Groups, but never fear, this is not the final time, but because of the blessing it has been thus far, I see it as a permanent part of the ministry of Temple of Refuge.

**Now, there is a movement afoot that is coming against the validity of the local church, and the need to come together for corporate worship... They say it's outdated... They say it doesn't matter... They say technology is of such that I can stay home, watch it on TV or stream it online. Now, we stream our services every Sunday, not as an option to stay home, but for those times when you are out of town, at home sick or other viable reasons. But it's not to take the place of coming together for corporate worship...! The local church is here to stay, and Jesus validates His Church. The writer of Hebrews said,

"And let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works: Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some [is]; but exhorting [one another]: and so much the more, as you see the day approaching." We need the corporate experience because we share in partaking of God's glory together... TV is wonderful, but you miss the impact of God's presence... Streaming is very 21st century, but you miss the flow of God's spirit from heart to heart... I need the corporate experience because the enemy would have you to feel that what you are going through, nobody else is dealing with. When we come to worship together, we encourage each other... You can't stay down in the dumps in corporate worship... You can't remain depressed in corporate worship... You can't feel alone in corporate worship... You can't feel defeated in corporate worship.... When I come to church, I partner with others on my row in celebrating the victory God has granted us together....!

"Upon this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail...!"

SERMON 5

Sunday April 6, 2014

Text: Ephesians 2:14 – 22 (*v.19)

Title: **“iBelong”** – Message #5 of the iBelong Series

(1). We’ve Been Reconciled To God IN ONE BODY Through the Cross...! - There was a (v.14), “wall of separation,” between Jews and Gentiles (insiders/family and outsiders/foreigners). But through Christ death on the cross, there is no separation. Paul said in Galatians 3:26, 28, “for you are ALL sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; you are all one in Christ Jesus.

No matter where we come from or what we have been through. In spite of the various sins we have committed in the past, Christ death makes us ONE...! That’s good news because for centuries mankind has sought to rank sins and make one sin worse than the other. (1) There is no such thing as “good sin, and (2) ALL of us have sinned and come short of the glory of God. It doesn’t say, some have fornicated... some have lied... some have stole... ALL HAVE SINNED...! But through Christ death on the cross we both, Jew and Gentile, have access by one Spirit to the Father. Paul says in v.19, “now therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God.” The NCV says, “*now you who are not Jewish are not foreigners or strangers any longer, but are citizens together with God’s holy people. You belong to God’s family.*”

(2). We Belong to The Historic Church of God...! – v.20 – “*Apostolic succession is the method whereby the ministry of the Christian Church is derived from the apostles by a continuous succession, which has usually been associated with a claim that the succession is through a series of bishops.*” Jesus – Paul – Timothy – Titus – on so forth and so on...! When we think about Apostolic Succession most of the time we think of it in terms of Bishops and whether or not they can claim true episcopal lineage traced back to the Apostles and Jesus Christ, but there is another valid part of Apostolic Succession. *Apostolic succession "may also be understood as a continuity in doctrinal teaching from the time of the apostles to the present.*” When there is a continuous in “the Apostle’s Doctrine” of Acts 2, it connects us with the historic Church of Jesus Christ. When we remain true to sound doctrine and balanced teaching, we’re receiving the same teaching and instruction that the saints who have gone on before us received. There should be a sense of awe, perhaps pride, and maybe unworthiness to reflect on the fact that what Paul

received, he got it from Jesus, what Timothy received, he got it from Paul, who got it from Jesus. What Titus received, he got it from Timothy, who got it from Paul, who got it from Jesus. What Kenneth received and teaches, he got it from Frizelle, who got it from Broomfield, who got it from his father, who got it from his father, and so on who got it from Titus, who got it from Timothy, who got it from Paul, who got it from Jesus. **What you receive, you receive from Kenneth, who received it from Frizelle, who got it from Broomfield, who received it from his father, who received it from his spiritual father, and so on who received it from Titus, who got it from Timothy, who received it from Paul, who received it from Jesus. Thank God for Temple of Refuge and I'm glad you are here, but your connection, your membership, your belonging is greater and more foundational than this church. We are tied to the historic church of Jesus Christ. **Paul said in v.20, "Jesus Christ Himself being the Chief Cornerstone...!" Christ is the most important stone in the building, and the One that holds the building in place... The Apostle's Doctrine passed down from one generation to the next; solid Bible instruction is the mortar, the cement that holds us together, for we are the bricks placed together to form the building. **The problem we're seeing today is churches constructed on the popularity of the preacher... the eloquence of his/her words, and the "whooping" ability...! All the "name it, claim it" teaching, and imbalanced prosperity teaching is not built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets... The Historic Church of Jesus Christ is built on teaching and preaching the importance of living holy and sanctified for Christ...! The Historic Church of Jesus Christ is built on teaching and preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ, His life, His death, His burial, and His resurrection...! The Historic Church of Jesus Christ is built on the teaching of the soon coming return of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ....

(3). Our Belonging Creates a Place Where God Lives Through the Spirit...! (v.22)

– It's in our togetherness, our belonging where God seeks to live and dwell with us. Considering that we are no longer outsiders, but included and connected in the family of God, we join together as part of God's great building plan in which He Himself lives with us through His Spirit. The NCV puts it this way, "*in Christ you, too, are being built together with the Jews into a place where God lives through the Spirit.*" We see now the plan of the enemy then to keep us ignorant of our inclusion in what God is doing in the earth through His people. So he works through other people to condemn us and make us feel less than and unworthy because of past bad decisions and present struggles. The last thing the enemy wants you to know... the worst thing that could ever happen to the him is that you catch the revelation that GOD LIVES IN OUR TOGETHERNESS...! So then divide and conqueror has always been his agenda... His assignment is to keep us focused on our differences as a source of contention... Instead we should learn to celebrate our differences because somebody is bringing something to the table that I lack, that's going to add to the building that I'm apart of...! Therefore, we will not be jealous

or envious of each other because what you have and bring, benefits all of us...! Peter calls us, in 1 Peter 2:5, “living stones,” as part of the building of God. Stones are different from bricks in that stones have to be cut and shaped to fit in the wall that the builder is constructing... Bricks are mere copies, but stones are shaped and formed by God... It was never God’s intention for us to be carbon copies, and everybody looks and acts alike. Connecting and belonging together, WITH OUR DIFFERENCES, is what makes us powerful, and the devil upset...!

**The Word for Church in the Greek is the word “ekklesia” which means assembly or assembled body, but it also means, “called out ones.” In other words, as the Church, we’re not just called, but we are “called out...!” In other words, all of us have been “called out of something” to form God’s building and His house...! The church, the “ekklesia” is comprised of “x-somethings.” All of us are a former something... When Jesus asked the disciples, “who do men say that I am...?” They replied, “some say thou art Eliajh....” Thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my Church....

APPENDIX D

Small Group Lesson 1

Tuesday, March 11, 2014 - 7:00pm - 8:30pm.

Praise & Worship - 10-15 minutes

Welcome and Icebreaker - Welcome the people to their iBelong Small Group. Your icebreaker could be for each person to share their name, how long they have been at Temple of Refuge, and what are they hoping to gain from iBelong Small Groups (15 minutes).

Lesson Conversation and Application - Questions and Thoughts for Group Conversation (45 - 50 minutes).

Question #1 - God didn't put us on the earth to go at life alone, but to connect, relate and belong. In your opinion, what are some of the obstacles and challenges to developing relationships, and how can we overcome these?

Question #2 - How would you advise someone who remains distant because of past relationship hurt and broken trust?

Question #3 - According to Genesis 1:26, God has always existed in an eternal relationship (God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit). Our relationships are not eternal, but what are some of the key factors for making our friendships lasting?

Question #4 - In Genesis 1:26, God said, "...let THEM have dominion..." Pastor shared with us that we can't have solo dominion; dominion is intended for THEM, i.e., relationships. How does that statement make you feel and why? Is it upsetting to know that you can't be by yourself and have dominion? Why or why not? (this particular question, if they're honest, will help reveal the real self).

Question #5 - Read aloud Ecclesiastes 4:9-10 - Share your thoughts with your group and any particular stories that personally connect with the verses of scripture.

Closing Matters - (15 minutes) - Take some time to decide where your group will meet next Tuesday (home, Starbucks, Panarea Bread, etc.). The last part of this session should be focused on (a) specific personal prayer request and (b) Others/outreach - Praying for non-believers, and planning an outreach event for the group. Encourage them to take notes on Sunday's message and be prepared to discuss and share on Tuesday's.

****Homework Assignment:** Challenge the group to have a Front Porch experience. (1) Encourage them to walk the neighborhood with the intention of greeting and conversing with neighbors, or (2) take baked goods with you as a good deed, and go visit a neighbor that you don't know. Be prepared to share the experience with the group on next week.

****Side Note** - Please feel free to flow freely with the questions for maximum conversation and dialogue. Be sure to try and have as much involvement from as much of the group as possible.

Small Group Lesson 2

Tuesday March 18, 2014 7:00pm - 8:30pm.

Welcome and Ice Breaker - Welcome everyone to iBelong Small Groups and share feedback from the Front Porch Homework assignment as an Icebreaker. If no one did the homework, choose an Ice Breaker of your choosing (See tool kit for ideas) - 15 Minutes

Praise and Worship - Since you are meeting in a public place, this could be a time of sharing personal praise reports or testimonies along with an appropriate scripture or devotional thought - 10-15 minutes

Lesson Conversation and Application - Questions and Thoughts for Group Conversation (45 - 50 minutes).

Question #1 - Do you feel like you belong to The Temple of Refuge...? Why or why not...? What are some suggestions you have to create a better sense of belonging within the church...?

Question #2 - Have you ever experienced church hurt or spiritual abuse? Share the experience with the group if you don't mind being transparent.

Question #3 - Being connected to God brings into play the larger point of belonging which is God's ownership of everything. Name and discuss some of the ways you display God's ownership of you in your life and relationships.

Question #4 - According to Acts 2:42, one of the things that connected those early believers was the Apostles' doctrine/teaching. How important is it for us to sit under the same teaching? How does it impact our relationships within the church?

Question #5 - In order to create an atmosphere of belonging we must be concerned and have genuine care for one another. Name and discuss some practical ways of showing care and concern for one another?

Closing Matters - (15 minutes) - Remind the group that we will be meeting back at the church for next Tuesday's Sessions. The last part of this session should be focused on (a) specific personal prayer request and (b) Others/outreach - Praying for non-believers, and planning a outreach event for the group. Encourage them to take notes on Sunday's message and be prepared to discuss and share on Tuesday's.

Homework Assignment - Perform one random act of care and concern for someone in your group or church. Be prepared to share what you did and how it made you feel for next week's class.

**Side Note - Please feel free to flow freely with the questions for maximum conversation and dialogue. Be sure to try and have as much involvement from as much of the group as possible.

Small Group Lesson 3

Tuesday March 25, 2014 - 7:00pm.

Praise and Worship - 10 - 15 Minutes

Welcome and Icebreaker: (15 min.) - Welcome the people to iBelong Small Group Ministry. Your icebreaker could be for anyone that did the homework assignment to share the experience with the group. You may also use an icebreaker of your choosing.

Lesson Conversation and Application - Questions and Thoughts for Group Conversation (45 - 50 minutes).

Question #1 - Sharing is not a possession issue (as far as what I have), but sharing is a matter of the heart. Do you agree or disagree? Explain and share in conversation with the group.

Question #2 - Every part of your physical body serves a specific purpose or function in some capacity. Read 1 Corinthians 12:22 and give examples and discuss the importance of “weaker parts?”

Question #3 - Do you feel needed and necessary at Temple of Refuge? What can you do to connect and share more of who you are and your unique abilities you bring to the church?

Question #4 - The early church in the Book of Acts sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all as anyone had need. What can you do as an individual, and what suggestions do you offer to ensure that no needs among us go unmet?

Question #5 - Since we know ALL have sinned, how can we push past the fear and be more transparent in sharing our real testimony? Why is our real testimony important, and when was the last time you shared yours with a non-believer?

Closing Matters - (15 minutes) - Take some time to decide where your group will meet next Tuesday (home, Starbucks, Panarea Bread, etc.). The last part of this session should be focused on (a) specific personal prayer request and (b) Others/outreach - Praying for non-believers, and planning an outreach event for the group. Encourage them to take notes on Sunday's message and be prepared to discuss and share on Tuesday's.

Homework Assignment: Make it a point to share your testimony with a non-believer. Be prayerful and ask God to open the opportunity to share it, and that He gives you the boldness to share. Be prepared to share the experience with your group.

****Side Note** - Please feel free to flow freely with the questions for maximum conversation and dialogue. Be sure to try and have as much involvement from as much of the group as possible.

Small Group Lesson 4

Tuesday April 1, 2014 7:00pm - 8:30pm.

Welcome and Ice Breaker - Welcome everyone to iBelong Small Groups and share feedback from the “Sharing Your Testimony” Homework assignment as an Ice breaker. If no one did the homework, choose an Ice Breaker of your choosing (See tool kit for ideas) - 15 Minutes

Praise and Worship - Since you are meeting in a public place, this could be a time of sharing personal praise reports or testimonies along with an appropriate scripture or devotional thought - 10-15 minutes

Lesson Conversation and Application - Questions and Thoughts for Group Conversation (45 - 50 minutes).

Question #1 - Acts 2:47 shares with us that “the Lord added to the church...” Do you feel you have been added to The Temple of Refuge? Explain why or why not and share any stories that validate your “addition.”

Question #2 - According to John 15, individual growth occurs primarily from abiding in the vine. Share with the group the things that you do on a daily basis to ensure your vine abiding? What more do you feel you should be doing?

Question #3 - Discuss what you consider to be the Apostles’ doctrine? What part or area of the Apostles doctrine (sound teaching) do you lack and how has this perhaps affected your personal walk?

Question #4 - Fellowship with fellow believers is vitally important. Name and discuss some of the obstacles to fellowship and how can we overcome them.

Question #5 - There is a growing movement coming against the necessity of gathering for corporate worship. Our time of corporate worship is important. Share with each other how the corporate worship service with other believers has impacted your life. Share specific stories if time permits.

Closing Matters - (15 minutes) - Remind the group that we will be meeting back at the church for next Tuesday's Sessions. The last part of this session should be focused on (a) specific personal prayer request and (b) Others/outreach - Praying for non-believers, and planning a outreach event for the group. Encourage them to take notes on Sunday's message and be prepared to discuss and share on Tuesday's.

Homework Assignment - Create a timeline of your life over the last 10 years and note times of trial and what resulted though God and the church that caused growth in your life. Be prepared to share with the group.

****Side Note** - Please feel free to flow freely with the questions for maximum conversation and dialogue. Be sure to try and have as much involvement from as much of the group as possible.

Small Group Lesson 5

Tuesday April 7, 2014 - 7:00pm.

Praise and Worship - 10 - 15 Minutes

Welcome and Icebreaker: (15 min.) - Welcome the people to iBelong Small Group Ministry. Your icebreaker could be for anyone that did the homework assignment to share the experience with the group. You may also use an icebreaker of your choosing.

Lesson Conversation and Application - Questions and Thoughts for Group Conversation (45 - 50 minutes).

Question #1 - In New Testament times, Paul had to address the wall of separation between Jews and Gentiles in his Letter to the Church at Ephesus. Do you feel there is a wall of separation today between believers and non-believers; between tenured church members and newbies? If so, explain and discuss ways to tear the wall of separation down.

Question #2 - In what ways do you feel or believe that you belong to God's family? Be very specific and discuss in particulars other than general salvation.

Question #3 - Bishop talked about Apostolic Succession and mentioned one way to look at it was it may also be understood as a continuity in doctrinal teaching from the time of the apostles to the present. Do you feel you have Apostolic Succession through the taught Word at Temple of Refuge? What are some of the things you've learned since you've been here? What are some of the areas you would like to receive more teaching in?

Question #4 - Can a person actually be fitted together while certain doctrinal and balanced teaching is omitted? Reference Ephesian 2:20, 21.



Question #5 - Knowing that it's through our togetherness and belonging where the Lord seeks to dwell, why is it so challenging to embrace, belong and connect with those with different experiences and challenges? We say we believe our differences should not divide us, but in many instances they still do. How do we overcome our differences and come together for the betterment and service of God's Kingdom?

Closing Matters - (15 minutes) - Take some time to discuss ways of remaining connected until the next iBelong Small Group Topic. The last part of this session should be focused on (a) specific personal prayer request and (b) Others/outreach - Praying for non-believers, and planning a outreach event for the group. Encourage them to be present on next Tuesday for the final session of this subject matter.

****Side Note** - Please feel free to flow freely with the questions for maximum conversation and dialogue. Be sure to try and have as much involvement from as much of the group as possible.

APPENDIX E

SUPPORTING LINKS

Item	Links
iBelong Logo	
Pre Launch Trailers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8BTY-doKS_M • https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-fPnixY7LVg
Facebook Page	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • https://www.facebook.com/groups/iBelongTORIF/
Launch Video	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OxymxsULX2E
Evaluation Results	 <p>iBelong Small Group Evaluation Results</p>
Post Small Groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SaizW9PavwQ
Google Drive for hosts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • https://drive.google.com/folderview?id=0B7YIgHIPBrxWZG1JY0xMUmFKRk&usp=sharing_eid

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