

MOVING FROM TRANSACTIONAL ACTION TO RELATIONAL GATHERING:  
TOWARDS MOBILIZING COMMUNITIES FOR THE COMMON GOOD

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Advisors: Dr. Gary Simpson and Dr. Leonard Sweet

Alton Craig Dunn  
Drew University  
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## ABSTRACT

### MOVING FROM TRANSACTIONAL ACTION TO RELATIONAL GATHERING: TOWARDS MOBILIZING COMMUNITIES FOR THE COMMON GOOD

Alton Craig Dunn

The First Baptist Church of Madison

Madison, New Jersey

In this paper, I explored the impact of relational gathering over transactional action in mobilizing communities for the common through conversations between the First Baptist Church of Madison and the Presbyterian Church of Chatham Township. Our dialogues moved towards more relational than transactional through four Zoom meetings as we learned more about one another. We learned that there is strength in being relational versus being transactional. Transactional actions lack the foundational integrity to sustain relationally and effect lasting change.

We realized the value in listening and questioning to move beyond stereotypes and preconceived notions based on rumor and hearsay through our four dialogues. The open and honest discussion takes time, and one must be patient in the process to not rush to prove a hypothesis. In rushing to conclusions, one will miss the opportunity to learn about oneself and others. Through open dialogue, one can risk becoming vulnerable and thus allowing one authentic self to come through.

In moving from transactional action to a relational gathering, one must be patient in creating a brave space for people to feel comfortable with one another. Moreover, as people become more relaxed, sharing becomes less guarded.

Mobilizing the community towards the common good is a lesson in patience and perseverance. The common good ought to be centered on shared values with the church and the community. It

takes time to assess the common good through conversation with people outside of your usual circle of people.

This project opened our congregation up to new possibilities of relationships with other church communities and our local community

## DEDICATION

To my parents Marlene and Newby “Chick” Dunn, my grandfather Nuby Dunn, and my ancestors on both sides of the family, thank you for your love and guidance over the years. Your love pulled me through many a dark day and made me laugh on most days.

To Deacon Eddie Sallie of First Baptist, you seemed to always show up when I was stuck on a thought, our conversations and your friendship are greatly appreciated.

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## INTRODUCTION

### MOVING FROM TRANSACTIONAL ACTION TO RELATIONAL GATHERING: TOWARDS MOBILIZING COMMUNITIES FOR THE COMMON GOOD

The outbreak of the COVID-19 virus took the world, the nation, and our community by storm. March 15, 2020 was the last time the First Baptist Church of Madison gathered together for worship in our sanctuary. The uncertainty and lack of information regarding COVID-19 caused some people to continue to live everyday lives. The number of infections continued to rise and altering our daily lives dramatically. Supermarkets and convenient local stores were overrun by shoppers frantically seeking to buy toilet paper and other necessities. With the store shelves barren, the new grocery shopping experience now included a list of regulations. Masks, gloves, hand sanitizer, anti-bacterial wipes, and Lysol spray a priority list as sought-after items. The pandemic reveals issues of food insecurity, health, and safety concerns. We knew we had to assess the community's needs both inside the church and the community.

Mobilizing communities for the common good began to emerge as a theme for my calling, our ministry, and our church. To meet the community's needs, we felt a calling to move beyond transactional actions to a relational gathering—a relational gathering of the community beyond our local church extending to the Madison community. First Baptist Church sought to mobilize the community for the common good, believing that as a community of faith and my call as pastor; it is where we see God leading us in the present moment.

During the pandemic, the common good, I believe, is found in moving from transactional action to a relational gathering. Transactional action is when one seeks to gain an advantage through a one-sided interaction. Transactions are what we do when we make a deal. In transactions, one does not need to build a relationship; one only needs to obtain their objective

and goal. Alternatively, a relational gathering requires people to risk getting to know one another and being vulnerable to the process. In relational communities, there are shared goals and values while allowing for ambiguity and fluidity. In the relational gathering, there is the temptation to focus on rushing to problem-solving while not fully understanding how the problem began or why it still exists. Moreover, moving from transactional action to relational gathering leads the conversation towards seeking understanding one another before addressing issues.

My background and life experience growing up in an area that did its best to mobilize the community for the common good. As a child through adulthood, I continue to witness faith in action for the common good through everyday life. Arriving at The First Baptist Church, as pastor, and seeking to uncover the spirit of concern and care in the church and community.

What is a community? Why is it essential for First Baptist Church to mobilize the community toward the common good? Charles H. Vogel defines community as,

A group of individuals who share a mutual concern for one another's welfare. It is distinct from a group whose members may share ideas, interests, proximity, or any number of things but lack concern for one another.<sup>1</sup>

Establishing community is about building relationships, whereas groups are more transactional. With groups the fact that people lack concern for one another, is problematic for creating lasting and sustainable change because people only care for their issue. Once it is addressed people return to normal.

Moreover, Rabbi David A. Teutsch describes a real community as,

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<sup>1</sup> Charles H. Vogl, *The Art of Community: Seven Principals of Belonging, The Art of Community: Seven Principals of Belonging*, (Oakland: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.), 9.

A real community is that kind of home. Maintaining membership is a real community doesn't hinge on exams or measurable output. It does depend on accepting responsibility for citizenship within the community.<sup>2</sup>

We are staking our claim in Madison as our home. The First Baptist Church's story is deeply rooted in the narrative of the Borough of Madison. Our church is nearly as old as the town. There are families in First Baptist who only know Madison as their home for several generations.

Several First Baptist members working as domestics in the homes of wealthy residents. While others working for local contractors over the years to build their businesses. First Baptist members were skilled and dedicated people who did what they had to do to raise their families. Some working two and three jobs to do so. First Baptist for them is a place to worship in a faith community that sustained them through love, life, and loss. In moments of crisis, the church mobilized for the common good in relational gatherings to comfort and care for one another within the church community and the Madison community. We each live, move, and interact in several areas and as a result, there are times when those communities issue a summons to gather together to address the pressing needs of all people.

My project focuses on mobilizing communities for the common good: moving from transactional actions to a relational gathering. The objective is to have people come together in a neighborhood, area, or community around common interests addressing the people's needs, and establishing solid relationships. Forging these relationships with the community in mind to help eliminate safety concerns as we mobilize and attend to those issues. As we seek the common good, people tend to look out for one another's welfare and addressing health concerns.

In this project, the focus is on three areas of mobilization: health concerns, safety concerns, and developing relationships with people outside our immediate neighborhood to

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<sup>2</sup> Rabbi David A. Teutsch, *A Spiritual Community: The Power to Restore Hope, Commitment and Joy*, (Woodstock: Jewish Lights Publishing), 1.

create a new community. We will describe our response to the George Floyd killing in May 2020. We will also explain how we addressed the pandemic for the Madison community.

Finally, we will share how we invited the Presbyterian Church of Chatham Township to join us at the table to share in the conversation of mobilization of communities for the common good. Through four Zoom meetings we are laying the foundation for relational gatherings. The two churches are different in terms of denominational affiliation, socio-economic status and ethnicity and race. However, our common bond is that we are serving the same God and have different ministries that we focus on in our respective churches. The project will attempt to show the value in collaborating with a variety of churches outside of traditional denominational connections.

## CHAPTER 1

### THE FOUNDATION FOR THE CALL TOWARDS MOBILIZING COMMUNITIES FOR THE COMMON GOOD: THE FORMATION OF PASTORAL IDENTITY

Reflecting on the foundation of the call to this context and work for such a time as this, I relate to Psalm 133:1, "How good and pleasant it is when God's people live together in unity." Growing up in a community where people sought to support one another in raising and nurturing children. The bible describes it as everyone shared everything, and no one lacked anything. The people took care of and looked out for one another.

The community I speak of is the 4<sup>th</sup> Ward section of Montclair, New Jersey, a suburban area in Essex County. Although Montclair has a reputation for being an affluent town, the neighborhood where we lived was far from meeting that criterion. The community, mostly working-class people, blue-collar, clerical, and local business owners. The core of our neighborhood was a four-block radius from our house. The key streets were Fulton, Washington, and New Streets. It was here that I learned the value and commitment of what it took to be a community and the importance of mobilizing the community for the common good.

Most of the people in our community migrated to Montclair from either the southern United States or the Caribbean. My paternal grandparents moved to Montclair from North Carolina and rented a room from the Willoughby family. When they found their first apartment, they rented a room to another family until that family got settled in New Jersey. In the '40s and '50s, that is how people migrated to our community. My maternal grandparents arrived in Montclair from Jamaica on different ships and met here in the states. The people in the community worked well together. As Peter Block states, "the community offers the promise of belonging and calls for us to acknowledge our interdependence. To belong is to act as an investor, owner, and creator of this place. To be welcome, even if we are strangers."<sup>3</sup>

One of the neighbors would watch the local children in our community until our parents returned from work. Although that relationship began transactionally, it grew to be relational. Other relationships in the community started relationally. My friend, Bobby's uncle, drove a bus and would load the children on the bus and ride us around town. Other parents would take us to the park or Applegate's Ice Cream Farm. That was a real treat for us. When new families moved

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<sup>3</sup> Block, *Community*, 3.

into the neighborhood, the warm welcome people were not strangers, especially the children. In our community, raising the children was a shared responsibility.

We lived on Fulton Street, and two institutions were prominent on our block, St. Marks United Methodist Church and St. Vincent's Hospital. The pastor of St. Marks was Rev. Brown, he was part of the community, and he did not mind us playing football in the space between the church and the parsonage. Rev. Brown cared that we were safe playing behind the church. He would come out and watch us play; after the game, we would sit on his steps, and he would talk to my friends and me. Rev. Brown seemed always to make time for us. Rev. Brown exemplified the verse in Romans 12:16, "Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited." Rev. Brown was a humble servant and knew how to connect with both young and old alike. I will never forget Rev. Brown and his impact on my life through his gentle spirit and warm heart. Rev. Brown created a space for a relational gathering. He knew how to mobilize the community around sacred events at St. Mark's, especially around Easter. His witness and love were a model for how a minister ought to carry themselves in the community.

My parents represented the "promise of belonging" (Block) to all in our neighborhood. Our house was the hangout for many of the children in our area. We were one of the few families in the communities with both parents in the home. Our friends felt comfortable talking to my mother when they had issues and concerns. At times, my sister's friends would live with us if they were homeless or in transition. My mother would welcome them, and my father just went along with whatever the need was. My best friend, Mark, would feel comfortable coming to our house early in the morning before my mother left for work and would make himself home.

My mother worked in a bank until she retired and was active in her church. She sang in the choir and served several terms on the Vestry at Trinity Episcopal Church in Montclair, New Jersey. My mother was also a community activist. I did not learn that until after her passing. She was among the people in our community who fought for better resources for Glenfield School, the neighborhood school. Our area's parents fought against the system that would supply the predominantly African American schools with outdated textbooks and other materials. A group of parents came together to fight the school district for updated books and a better learning environment. My mother joined the fight with other parents to ensure that our neighborhood's children would have the same access to resources as the children in Upper Montclair, the more affluent town section. The mothers of our area were committed to mobilizing the community for the common good.

My father, on the other hand, worked evenings and overtime. We did not have a great relationship until later in life. When I was home, he was at work, and when I was at school, he was home. Our relationship began transforming as I grew older. I began to understand him as a man and my father by traveling to North Carolina with my father over the Labor Day weekend before my senior year in high school. It was on that trip that I saw a different side of my father. He was excited about our trip, and as we traveled, he was sharing stories about his childhood and his hometown.

As Charles H. Vogl states:

Members need opportunities to share their own stories, whether in formal or informal venues (or both). This helps them feel that they're seen and understood. It also helps members understand the shared values in the community. These stories share real values in the community. These stories share the real challenges people faced and how those challenges shaped the teller's current character. Consider the communities to which you feel most connected. My guess is that there were opportunities, even informal gatherings, where you got to learn and share personal stories. These stories may be the most important part of

your experience. They can include how members recovered from sickness, overcame grief, or simply got through a tough project. It's possible that sharing your stories is a way to make an investment in a particular community. This can radically change a community if the stories are dear cause you've entrusted it with a piece of yourself.<sup>4</sup>

Hearing my father's stories of his childhood and tales about my dad from my aunts and uncles in North Carolina offered deeper awareness of my father. Their stories provided insight into his personality and his values. As I met his childhood friends, they shared stories from my dad's childhood and their friendship. Also, on that trip, I met other family members, which added to my family narrative. After that trip, I felt more connected to my father and family than before the journey. The theme of coming together for the common good is part of our family's history.

Hearing stories about my father and mother from people who knew them outside of our home helped me understand my parents better. My parent were people who had dreams, and life happened and altered those dreams. My mother was on scholarship at the Rhode Island School of design when she became pregnant with my sister. Her parents being from the West Indies, pressured her to leave school and marry my father. My father was in the Air Force, stationed in Delaware, and would make the trek back to Montclair to see my mother. The stories of their lives did not reflect a straight line to their end goals. It took many twists and turns with the birth of my sister and me. As Dr. Sweet noted, "Moreover, everyone lives multi-storied lives; as our lives intersect, so do our stories, and new stories splinter our from each encounter."<sup>5</sup> The stories I knew and the stories I have learned about my parents even after their deaths have helped me gain perspective as First Baptist Church. People have more depth than we see and what they share on

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<sup>4</sup> Vogl, *The Art of Community*, 78-79.

<sup>5</sup> Leonard Sweet, *From Table to Table: Where Community is Found and Identity is Formed*, (Colorado Springs: NavPress), 33

the surface. Like an iceberg, much of their story is below the waterline. As I continue to learn about my parents, I am also learning my account and fit in the family narrative.

Family is important to me. Family is the foundation of my identity. In our home, there was love, laughter, support, encouragement, and guidance. In my family are my earliest memories of car rides to visit my aunt and uncle in Washington, DC each summer. In a family, life is lived in moments, not measured by minutes. In our family, we celebrate new life, and we grieve together over the death of a family member and people in the community.

Moreover, in our family, the sharing of stories aids in healing hurt and inspire us to pursue dreams. In the family, we also hold onto hope for the family member struggling with life issues. Moreover, we rarely lose the hope that things will turn around for that family member. We can gather together for prayer and sing praises to God. We believe that prodigals return to our family, and we welcome them back to the family fold without judgment and with open arms. Through the welcome home to our family, we share through our relational gatherings.

On both my mother's and my father's side of the family, we are very close-knit. However, my father's side of the family is closer in proximity. Every time we get together, it is a love fest. We are an affectionate family; there are many hugs and kisses and always hearing "I love you" from cousins. My parents' home was the central meeting place for family gatherings in New Jersey. Our house was the place where everyone felt welcome. On the last Saturday of the year, we would host a year-end dinner. Both my mother's and father's sides of the family, as well as an extended family, would attend. We would exchange grab bag gifts at the year-end dinner, and there was always plenty of food. Those gatherings are what I envision for our church and community, where we transcend the transactional and move to the relational—making the

transition by letting down our guards and walls and being open to new community possibilities for the common good.

In 2006, both of my parents passed. My mother died the day after their 48<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary in June, and my dad died five days before my mother's birthday in October. However, my parent's house was still the gathering place for our family. The house was a place to share stories and create a community because we were committed to one another as a family, whether blood-related or not. We were able to gather in an informal atmosphere, in which people felt heard, listened to, and valued. It was evident what we love as a family and what behavior was not acceptable at family gatherings. As mentioned before, at these family gatherings, we would pray for those going through difficult times and those embarking on new opportunities. We dedicated babies and affirmed our matriarchs and patriarchs to lead the family. As a family, we believe in celebrating those pursuing their dreams and encouraging them to overcome their struggles. We affirm that as a family, we are supporting them in love.

On Fulton Street, it seemed as if every house on the street had children living there. We did not have to go far to find something to do. We played football in the street and behind Saint Mark's United Methodist Church, baseball in the sandlot, and basketball in the backyard on a dirt court (with lights). My friends and I would go through the area, salvage bike parts, set out for trash, and rebuild the bikes so that every child in our neighborhood without a bike would have a bike. We felt a sense of belonging. We like the early church, in Acts 4:32b, "shared everything they had" (NIV).

Our neighborhood was a community dedicated to the welfare and wellbeing of all people living in the area. In our neighborhood as children, we felt safe. We knew our neighbors, and even the neighbors without children knew the children in the neighborhood. One woman in our

area that we affectionately called "Miss Juanita" on Halloween would host a party for all children in our community. Although she did not have children, she had all of us. We looked forward to the annual gathering. We also looked out for Miss Juanita.

Whenever a new family moved into the neighborhood, we welcomed their children into our network of friends. Most often, the new family had a connection to someone in our area already.

Charles Vogl states,

To ensure that the community is welcoming to new members, there must be a clear route across the boundary for outsiders with shared values who want to join the community without a boundary you'll face an everything-nothing conundrum."<sup>6</sup>

To avoid that problem, as a pastor, I take the lessons learned from my community, my parents and family. I seek to bring them forward to the ministry context and work at First Baptist Church of Madison. The boundaries must be exact, and they ought to allow people to cross the border. A community that is open to welcoming the stranger can mobilize for the common good because it is not about keeping all people out; instead, the neighborhood includes the stranger.

A church ought to a place that welcomes strangers and even those who have not attended in a long while. Rabbi David A. Teutsch noted that

Some come to community to overcome loneliness; others come for a shared cultural, social or spiritual life; still others are seeking support. Some come knowing they have much to give. But community transforms everyone often in unexpected ways; Teachers become students; students turn into teachers. Those poised to give themselves often find they desire more from community membership than they give.<sup>7</sup>

The welcomed stranger through the relationship becomes a friend. The lonely find family, and those who need support will find support as well. When we seek the common good of all through

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<sup>6</sup> Vogl, *Art of Community*, 34.

<sup>7</sup> Teutsch, *A Spiritual Community*, XI.

relationships, we add to the neighborhood more people who have the community's best interest at heart.

In our neighborhood, we acted more like brothers and sisters, and as we grew older and some started having children, their children became nieces and nephews, and we became aunts and uncles. We are fictive kin, not blood-related but related through love. When my mother died, her best friend called me and told me about a promise she made to my mother when we were babies, that should anything happen, and she would step in and raise us. She called and shared that vow she made to my mother, and I call her "Mom Silvera." Mom Silvera was also our Cub Scout Den Mother, and to this day, she keeps in touch with each of her scouts. Mom Silvera reached out to assure me that she would honor her commitment to my mother made years prior. Mom Silvera exemplified mobilizing communities for the common good. She adopted her son and brought him home from the hospital. What I admired about her was her determination to provide the best for her son. The reason we were cub scouts is that she wanted her son to be a scout. There was not a troop in our community so, she started one. She helped organize the Parent Teachers Association in our local school. Whatever she did for her son, she always included the rest of us to improve our life quality by exposing us to activities and new experiences.

My paternal grandfather was fun to be around. He would drop off my friends and me at Verona Lake to fish and pick us up at the end of the day. My grandfather took me to my first professional baseball game. On one occasion in July 1969, at the game between the Yankees and the Washington Senators, the game was interrupted by the first moon landing announcement. My grandfather said to me, "Remember where you were when they landed on the moon." I have never forgotten that day. My grandfather and I would have long conversations about life. He was

supportive and insightful. My grandfather was an innovative and creative man. He would fix anything with what he had on hand instead of going to the store first. For example, he would use an old garden hose to replace a busted hose on his car. I believe I picked that trait up from him, except my patchwork tool was a wire coat hanger. My grandfather rarely offered advice; instead, he would ask probing questions until I came to a solution to whatever issue I was dealing with at the time. After reading Peter Block's work, *Community: The Structure of Belonging*, reflecting on my grandfather's wisdom, I sure he would agree with Block:

Advice weakens related even if people ask for it. Urge citizens to ask one another instead, "Why does that mean so much to you?" When they answer, ask the same question again, "And why does that mean so much to you?" The goal is to replace advice with curiosity. The future hinges on this issue.<sup>8</sup>

My grandfather's wisdom in not providing advice to me when I had an issue helped me develop problem-solving and critical thinking skills. His gentle guidance forced me to think through problems to make decisions and choices that seemed best to me. On the other hand, if my grandfather felt that my decision was not in my best interest, he would raise additional questions.

While growing up in the 60s and remembering the Newark Riots, Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination, and their impact on our neighborhood, spillover from the riots made its way to our community. We noticed store windows smashed with garbage cans on our walk to school. My mother would make signs for store owners to declare that the store was "Black Owned" to prevent vandals from looting the stores. After the riots, stores in the community responded with more significant security measures. When Newark's riots began to calm, accordion gates with padlocks became the new storefronts on our walk to school. I believe that was the beginning of

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<sup>8</sup> Peter Block, *Community: The Structure of Belonging*, (Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.), 109.

the transition of black-owned businesses in my community. The business owners took measures to protect their businesses, and for me, it felt different going into those stores. We could build a resilient economy in our society, but the riots' aftermath began the local economy's decline. Once the stores installed gates over the storefronts, they seemed less welcoming. The newly gated stores were not minority-owned. The gates created a new "sign" for our community. What was once a place of commerce and employment for local people now seemed like the owners were no longer a part of the community.

As I reflect on those days before and after the Newark Riots, people mobilized during the night to express their frustration with Dr. King and the Newark riots' death. That was when the mobilization was not for the common good because no one could predict the aftermath. Businesses started to move out of the neighborhood. Local restaurants and clothing stores closed as the businesses closed, developers' properties and demolishing and replacing neighborhood landmarks. The redevelopment that began in the late 60s and early 70s is still going on in 2021. Today, it is much different; very few members of the community own those once gated stores.

In the years after Dr. King's assassination, there was a greater emphasis on the idea of black power and African traditions in our community. Afros and Dashikis were prevalent in our community, as well as Swahili greetings. Adults in our community began exposing us as children to African culture and the Black Power Movement. The events and activities in our community were contributions to my understanding of who I am as a black man in America. I am grateful for the community that anchored and instilled pride and love in us as children. That same pride and love are what guides me in my context and work at First Baptist Church.

Along with our community's cultural awareness movement, there was a social justice movement on the rise. In our area, some men established a chapter of The Black Panthers. The

Black Panthers made sure that the neighborhood children were safe as drugs became more prevalent among those who had returned from Viet Nam. The Black Panthers taught martial arts classes. I took my first martial arts class at ten years old in the Montclair Neighborhood Development Corporation (MNDC) basement, a non-governmental agency that still provides services to the community. I am proud to say that I have had a connection to MNDC since then and currently serve on its board of directors. The organizations in the neighborhood that arose during this time were concerned for the community's common good.

The local school was a central place for the gathering of the community and family activity. During my elementary years, parents and children were in the school playing various games on Friday nights. The Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) was proactive at the school. The PTA held fashion shows and other events to raise money for the school. The PTA worked in partnership with the teachers in Glenfield School. The teachers in Glenfield expected all of the students to learn. The teachers had a vested interest in our academic success. It was not uncommon to have your teacher sitting at your kitchen table with your mom if you failed to complete assignments on time. Glenfield School at the time was K-5 and was foundational to our educational pursuits. Our schoolteachers were caring and inspiring for us to believe we could achieve and compete with anyone regardless of race, class, or gender. As students, we knew we were to learn and mature.

In third-grade, our teacher, Mrs. Eddy, understood how to mobilize the community for the common good and create an environment for us to build relationships with new students. Mrs. Eddy would assign the new student to several of us; when a new student arrived from Haiti or Jamaica. Reflecting on her wisdom and strategy, Mrs. Eddy was brilliant because by making us responsible for the new student. As a result, we would not tease him or her. By assigning several

of us to the new students became part of the Glenfield School community. Mrs. Eddy and the other teachers in Glenfield School were genuinely investing in the lives of the students. Mrs. Eddy embodied what a caring community looked like and felt like in her classroom. As Rabbi Teutsch stated, "To create a caring community, you begin by finding out what people think needs to be done."<sup>9</sup> Mrs. Eddy could assess each student's needs and get the best out of us. As a minister, the memories of those days in Glenfield helped shape my perspective of having expectations for people to rise to their highest potential. Looking back on those years, I learned that transactional actions would mature into relationships once the focus shifts to the common good.

In 6<sup>th</sup> grade, Mt Hebron Middle School in Upper Montclair, a predominantly white school. However, that was for only one year because Glenfield became a middle school the following year. Even though Glenfield was no longer the primarily black community school it once was, the one year at the predominantly white school prepared us for the "new" Glenfield. We made friends in the 6<sup>th</sup> grade, and those friendships carried over even to the present day. We embraced diversity long before we had heard of the word. There was still a remnant of the spirit of Glenfield before it became a middle school and many of my friends returned to Glenfield to have the feeling of being back home. Glenfield School was an important place in our community as an anchor in bringing the community together.

During the summers, most of the children in our neighborhood went to day camp at the St. Peter Claver Catholic Church with Father Brady. One of the nuns would play guitar in the morning and lead us in devotional songs each day. We went on trips twice a week; I do not remember permission slips or camp registration. Every summer, it was a given that every child

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<sup>9</sup> Teutsch, *Spiritual Community*, 93.

on our street and in the neighborhood was at St. Peter Claver. At St. Peter Claver, the camp ended with a talent show, and each age group had to perform a skit, dance routine, or song. On the days leading up to the talent show, each group would rehearse in "secret" locations to avoid spies. We had so much fun. Father Brady also organized a drill team for girls called the "Soul Stompers." The Soul Stompers were local celebrities, and they performed on television. Being a member of the Soul Stompers was a rite of passage for most girls in the neighborhood. The Soul Stompers also had male drummers who played the congas and timbales. Most of us wanted to be drummers.

The ministry of St. Peter Claver and Father Brady was foundational to my call to my current context and work. He knew how to gather the community relationally for the common good. Although Father Brady was a white priest in a Roman Catholic Church in a predominantly black neighborhood, he listened to the people's needs. Father Brady would actively recruit men and women in the community to work with the young people. Father Brady was a missional priest. As Reggie McNeal detailed:

Missional is a way of living, not an affiliation or activity. Its emergence springs from a belief that God is changing His conversation with the world and the church. Being missional involves an active engagement with this conversation to the point that it guides every aspect of the life of the missional believer. Thinking and living missionally means seeing all life as a way to be engaged with God's mission in the world.<sup>10</sup>

Father Brady displayed missional living. It did not matter that we were not Roman Catholic; what mattered was that the children had a safe place to go during the summer.

As children, it was a blessing to have men in the community who took an interest in us as we played sports. I remember when my friend Gary's uncle saw us playing baseball in the

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<sup>10</sup> Peter Block, *Community: The Structure of Belonging*, (Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.), 109.

sandlot (a plot of land where a house once stood). He invited us to his "social" club on Bloomfield Avenue, the main thoroughfare and local business district. He opened the pool tables and let us play pool and then asked if we liked baseball. The next thing we knew, we were at the Army and Navy store, and we were trying on uniforms, and we became the Black Angels baseball team. We played games against teams from other towns.

Another man in our community started teaching us martial arts in his backyard, and he eventually opened a school for us on the avenue. We were not charged tuition for the school. After my freshman year in high school, the dojo was closed because his job transferred him out of state. The men of the community also contributed to shaping my work as pastor of First Baptist Church.

After middle school, our family moved to the other side of town. For a few weeks during the summer, I would walk back to my old neighborhood; however, I began to make friends in my new area. The move was a good transition because my friends I used to hang out with back in the old neighborhood started getting high off marijuana and stealing cars. I had an uncle who was a heroin addict, and we had watched the heroin addicts in our neighborhood nod while walking up or down the avenue. Doing drugs and stealing cars was not the life for me.

There was a time when I had to take a stand against friends from my old neighborhood for not getting high and participating in beating up another person because of their race. The moment I stood up for myself and risked being ousted from the group of guys I hung out with previously; opened the door for new opportunities in my life. The moment I took a stance against drugs and theft, it was like Daniel and Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego; each one had to stand against the external pressures to conform. John Flowers and Karen Vannoy state, "Adaptive

leaders will encounter resistance."<sup>11</sup> The resistance faced is in response to those who are opposed to change and non-conformity. Standing up to my old friends was disruptive for our group but necessary for my growth and development.

After the summer and adjusting to my new neighborhood, it was time for high school. The introduction to high school began with football camp and two-a-day practices. That was the first time I had put on a complete set of football equipment. I did not know what went where. I began the season playing left tackle, however as the season progressed, we lost several running backs due to injury, and our coach Ed Lebeda had the linemen race. Coach Lebeda said that the fastest lineman would become the fullback. I won the race. He also stated that a high school did the same some years previous and that lineman turned fullback made N.J.'s All-State team (I did make first-team all-state my senior year after not playing football my junior year).

The Saturday of our last freshman football game was the first day of high school basketball tryouts that afternoon. Although I was tired from the game that morning, I made it to tryouts that afternoon. During basketball tryouts, I met two of my best friends, Steve Taylor and Darrow Robinson. Steve's mother was our kindergarten music teacher in Glenfield, and Darrow's father was the freshman boys' gym teacher. The three of us were together all through high school and still friends today. Our friendship has been a blessing to me. I was Steve's best man, and I officiated Darrow's wedding.

Basketball was my favorite sport, which led me to give up football in my junior year after playing on a summer traveling team and receiving a letter from the University of Michigan's

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<sup>11</sup> John Flowers, Karen Vannoy, *Adapt to Thrive: How Your Church Must Identify Itself as a Unique Species, Modify its Dysfunctional Behaviors, and Multiply its Transformational Influence in Your Community*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press), 40.

basketball program. However, our high school coach always built the team around the tallest player, which I was not. In my senior year, I returned to football with the encouragement of my track coach Mr. Spivey, a community leader Mr. Stamper and my friend Kevin Williams who was one of the team captains. These people were able to read the signs that I could not see at the time. Without their insight and challenges, I would not have been open to all the possibilities; they would avail themselves beyond my preference to play basketball. Their input and challenges motivated me to go beyond my fondness for basketball to expand my thought process and opened the door to new opportunities. Our team had a good season during that year, and I was offered a football scholarship to Villanova University.

While at Villanova, I remember our first day of training camp; I discovered that two of my new teammates were brothers from one of my opponents from Brick Township, NJ. I remembered immediately that during that game, all we heard from our opponents were the "N-word," and now I am teammates with two people from that school. At dinner time on the first day of camp, all the African American players sat together. The next day our coach, Dick Bedesem, split up our table, and we each had to sit at a table with our white teammates. I ended up at the table with my former high school opponents. As Crystal Downing states, "True hospitality must be hospitality: opening ourselves to those hostiles to us, to those foreign to us, both in lifestyle and in thought."<sup>12</sup> While conversing with the brothers and my other teammates, I understood that they were from a predominantly white town.

Racism was a factor in our game. The use of the "N-word" by our opponents and now my new teammates created a dilemma. Moreover, they were not the only teammates from

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<sup>12</sup> Crystal L. Downing, *The Changing Signs of Truth: A Christian Introduction to the Semiotics of Communication*, (Intervarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL), 185.

predominantly white towns. Many of my teammates from Bucks County, PA, had never played on a team with African Americans. We had to confront racism at Villanova; however, our coach brought us together as a team. While we understood that some of our teammates had never been around black people before, Coach Bedesem knew that most of my African American teammates from inner-city Philadelphia had never been around white people. We were all just young men in a new environment and a new community. My high school opponents and I ended up being close friends. As we as a team practiced, played, and ate together, we developed solid relationships.

Dr. Sweet states,

At the table, where food and stories are passed from one person to another and one generation to another, is where each of us learns who we are, where we come from, what we can be, to whom we belong, and to what we are called.<sup>13</sup>

Although it appeared that we overcame racism on the football team, in 1980, Villanova opened a new student center in the middle of the campus. It was during the era when video games were becoming popular. My friends and I would go to the student center frequently after dinner. However, we started noticing that we had to show our student identification each time we went to the student center while other students we not asked for identification. Usually, at the check-in desk were student workers that were there most of the time. Yet, we, as African American students, had to identify each time we visited the student center. One evening we decided to help the students do their job. We stood at the entrance table and asked every student who entered for identification. If they did not have identification, we asked them to get their identification admitted to the center. Finally, the student workers got the point and said they would stop asking us for identification.

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<sup>13</sup> Sweet, *From Table to Table*, 8.

Years later, Villanova's experience helped me in this context; pastoring in a predominantly white town was similar to attending a primarily white school and making friends without losing my identity. Also, to take the time to get to know people before passing judgment and being patient with people. As a football team, we were able to come together for the common goal of winning games. We understood that to win, we had to unite and play as one. We had our fights and arguments; however, on game day, we came together.

In 1981, Villanova disbanded the football program, and I was offered a scholarship to The Ohio State University and transferred to the Columbus, Ohio, campus in the fall of that year. During my time at Ohio State, I believe that the foundation of the call to ministry was further developing. My room was the hangout for the younger students. I was a counselor, big brother, to some of the young men and security for the young women who wanted to walk to the Acme store near the south campus where we lived. The blocks between the south campus and the Acme were not safe, even though it was not a long walk to accompany my "little sisters" to the store.

In my senior year, my final college game was the Holiday Bowl in San Diego, California. Most of my teammates nor I had never been to California. The seniors were assigned rental cars, along with a map and gas money to get around with the expectation that you had to have underclassmen in the car with you. The first night, I had my crew, and we were off to explore the city. However, some of the other guys said that they wanted to follow me around the town. So out we all went a caravan of Ohio State football players, driving around San Diego. I was surprised that they trusted me to guide them. My teammates, who allowed me to guide them through the streets of San Diego, were also "sign" readers. In the fall of 1998, when I finally returned to The Ohio State University to attend a football game, I was reunited with a former teammate, Orlando Lowery. As Orlando and I were updating each other on our lives since I had

last seen him at his wedding; I told him that I had accepted the call to ministry since then; Orlando's response shocked me. Orlando said, "I am not surprised; you were our pastor when you were here." Looking back on those years, I understood what he meant. While at Ohio State, I was the team barber, and many of the younger teammates would talk to me about their issues and concerns in life.

The college experience began to shape my call to ministry by letting me go through difficult times, disappointments, and many moments of celebration. Academically, I was focusing on graduation. As an athlete at Villanova, you were expected and required to attend class, study, and maintain a certain grade point average (GPA). At Ohio State, I noticed guys who had played years before of my arriving in Columbus, Ohio, still taking courses in order to graduate. I could not wrap my head around the fact that former players, after 4 or 5 years in college, were still a few years from completing their degree requirements. I knew that was not going to be my story.

During the season, we practiced and fought to earn playing time on Saturdays. However, I made a choice that impacted my playing time but positioned me for graduation. I had a class required for graduation that met on Monday evenings from 6:00-10:00 PM. Monday was when we watched the next opponent's film—missing those film sessions led to a reduction in my playing time. I knew the cost, and I was willing to pay the price. Football was a means to free education, but the sport did not consume my life. I focused on being able to graduate in the spring.

Overall, college proved to be an excellent experience for me through education, meeting new people, developing friendships for life. Transferring to Ohio State University opened doors and provided opportunities for a few post-college football experiences. I have met and

maintained great friendships, both on and off the field. I am grateful that my high school friends and my college friends are friends. My immediate circle of friends is a strong bond in which we are accountable to one another.

Before graduation, I was signed by the Detroit Lions as an undrafted free agent as a tight end after playing fullback in college. Learning a new position was challenging, but it was rewarding to be a part of the Detroit Lions, especially after not playing much my senior year. After a brief stint in Detroit, I became part of the New Jersey Generals of the now-defunct United States Football League. Although I did not play much at Ohio State my senior year, I made it to the professional level. Making it to the professional level was the affirmation I needed to prove that I was good enough to play the game aside from my lack of playing time at OSU. After the Generals season, I had my football fill once the season was over and the league folded.

After the league folded, I went to work in publishing on the newspaper industry's business side. First working for USA Today and then The New York Times. I began working with USA Today as a District Sales Manager shortly after the paper's launch. My first significant experience of responding to a news story was the space shuttle Challenger's disaster. I was there for Operation Desert Shield and then Desert Storm. However, the most exciting year was 1995. In April of 1995, the devastation in the aftermath of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building explosion by domestic terrorists. On October 2, 1995, the not guilty verdict in the O.J.Simpson trial.

The day the verdict was handed down, all who were in the office that day were in the conference room. I stood outside the room, separated by a glass wall. The other black person in the office that day was a sales rep named Tom. By that time, I was a Circulation Director, and I retreated to my office after I saw Tom throw his hands up as a sign of victory. However, for my

colleagues, the verdict was traumatic to come and angered others. It seemed that my office's threshold was the space that my colleagues came either by one or two by two to share their feelings and disgust regarding the trial's outcome. That day I was the sounding board for their pent-up rage and anger, while I felt as though I had to suppress my anger at the fact that they came to my office door in the first place. According to my office mates, the legal system had failed to provide justice. I wanted to remind them of the injustices for African descent people in this country. However, that was not the time nor right moment. The moment came a few weeks later; Timothy McVeigh was on the cover of USA Today. As I sat in our small cafeteria, I asked a simple question of my colleagues, "Where is your outrage for this man, Timothy McVeigh?" I reminded them that his terroristic act killed babies. I raised many other questions that day, as Block writes:

Questions are how we are all confronted with our freedom. In this sense, if you want to change the context, find powerful questions. Questions create the space for something new to emerge. Powerful questions are those that, in the answering, evoke a choice for accountability.<sup>14</sup>

At that moment, I believe that we all grew to a new level of understanding and respect. I say this because the undercurrent was seething anger that the justice system got it wrong by acquitting O.J. Simpson. As a result, I called them on their hypocrisy because the same vitriol was not displayed toward Timothy McVeigh.

After USA Today, I went to work for The New York Times in Education Sales. I was the National Sales Director for Education; I traveled the country with my sales reps, visiting schools and colleges across the country. The experience was rewarding and challenging. I could visit

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<sup>14</sup> Block, *Community: The Structure of Belonging*, 103.

places in America that allowed me to see that inner-city education concerns are the same as rural America. I recall a time I was in Globe, Arizona, and after hearing from the administrators in the school district, I heard similar issues in other school districts around the country. Through my travels, I began to see that access to resources and how people perceive their circumstances will impact how they view life. I was reminded of that experience when I arrived at First Baptist. As a church, we were in massive debt and had limited resources. However, being able to mobilize the church changes the situation in a relatively short time.

I spent 28 years in the newspaper industry before moving to a Singapore-based company digital education start-up in Tarrytown, New York. The company, Marshall Cavendish, was instrumental in creating the Singapore Math methodology, and my role was to establish the United States sales team. The company came to the United States with unrealistic expectations about how fast it would ramp up sales and turn a profit.

Having led The New York Times Education sales team for years, I understood that the sales cycle in K-12 education is at least 16 months. We had an unrealistic budget of \$3.6 million-dollar goal the first year while hiring the sales force, creating the infrastructure, and still in product development. The job's stress was ridiculous and led to hospitalization for me for the first time since the removal of my tonsils when I was five years old. I stayed for two years and left the company after accepting the call to pastor the First Baptist Church in Madison, New Jersey. Leaving a job that was highly stressful and harmful to my health was liberating as well as a leap of faith. I felt like Abraham, traveling to land that I did not know, but taking the leap of faith to leave corporate America to full-time ministry. The church's call to be the pastor became the lifeline I needed to resign and move to Madison's First Baptist Church.

### The Call to Ministry: The intersection of Pastoral Identity and Prophetic Fire

My Christian experience continues to be shaped, molded, and formed over the years. As I look back over my life, I can see how God guided me on my journey of faith. A faith journey began for me at Trinity Episcopal Church in Montclair. Trinity Church was a small congregation comprised of mostly Caribbean immigrants. The church was a split-off of a larger Episcopal church that did not want people of West Indian descent to worship. As a result, a group of people converted an abandoned armory into the Trinity Episcopal Church. My maternal grandparents were part of the group of people that planted the church. As Vogl noted, referring to the Temple Principle:

We all want a place where the community gathers, and we can do things that we long in our everyday lives. A temple is simply a place where people with shared values enact their community's rituals. Members know that it's where they'll find their community.<sup>15</sup>

Trinity Church was a place where people of Caribbean descent found a community that shared their values and culture. It was a place of worship for my grandparents, family members to call home.

During the winter months, I attended St. Paul Baptist Church with my friends to play on their basketball team in elementary and middle school. A requirement to play on the team was to go to church twice a month during the season. St. Paul was quite different from the church I attended with my mother. The music was more upbeat, and the sermons were longer, and it had a vibrant youth ministry. The pastor of St. Paul and a few of their associate ministers were visible and present in the community, especially in our part of the township. It was common to see the local ministers walking through our neighborhood or in the park reading. At the time, St. Paul

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<sup>15</sup> Vogl, *The Art of Community*, 67.

and the other churches were connected to the community because the ministers were a part of the community. St. Paul, on the other hand, was a missional church. According to McNeal, "The missional church engages the community beyond its walls because it believes that is why the church exists."<sup>16</sup>

In college, when on break, I would study Islam with a friend. We also had another friend, Theodore, who also studied with us. However, Theodore would always conclude the study with a declarative statement, "I am a Christian, this is interesting, but it will not change my faith." However, my conviction as a Christian was weak at best. I attended church but did not have a relationship with Jesus Christ. I can say my understanding and relationship with faith in Jesus was nearly non-existent because I grew up in a church that did not focus on teaching the bible. Trinity Church was more focused on the Episcopal church's traditions and practices than rooting and grounding its members in the word of God. As Joseph R. Washington stated in *Black Religion—the Negro and Christianity in the United States*, "Religion is always more immediately rewarding and glamorous than is faith, but religion is faith. Religion is concerned with neither justice nor love, but with technique."<sup>17</sup> Trinity Episcopal Church was more social than it was spiritual.

As Vogl asserts:

A community's values evolve as time, and people change. Moreover, as time passes and culture changes, it's imperative that the community values also change. This is how you stay relevant in a dynamic world.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> McNeal, *Missional Renaissance*, 6.

<sup>17</sup> Joseph R. Washington, *Black Religion—The Negro and Christianity in the United States*, (Boston: Beacon Press), 21-22.

<sup>18</sup> Vogl, *The Art of Community*, 13.

Trinity would organize trips to the dog races and Jai Lai. The church lost its sense of mission and spiritual direction, and relevance to the community and the Archdioceses of Newark.

Unfortunately for the members, the church evolved but in a direction counter to the gospel of Jesus Christ. Judges 21:25 states, "In those days *there was* no king in Israel; everyone did *what was right in his eye.*"

The members of Trinity lost sight of God, and in 2006 the Archdioceses of Newark closed the church. The Trinity church leaders were to share a sign to symbolize their ministry as an offering to the Archdioceses; they gave the bishop a deck of playing cards. Their ministry was in the social gatherings, not the Sabbath gatherings. Trinity gathered around shared opinions and preferences rather than convening around God.

McNeal further states, "Church activity is no sign of genuine spiritual vitality. The lifestyles and values of church members largely reflect those of the culture. Faith demands a fundamental change in the individual."<sup>19</sup> In corporate America, I learned that there is a difference between being productive and being active. The activity gives the appearance of being produced; on the other hand, being productive provides a yield. My experience growing up in Trinity is central to my call to ministry. The fact that the Trinity did not stress the importance of developing people to be more spiritual is why I want to ensure First Baptist people are maturing in the faith.

As a minister of the gospel, I focus on preaching, teaching, and serving. I believe that these are three areas crucial in the spiritual growth of the congregation. Through serving one another and others, we are moving towards becoming the church of Jesus Christ. Especially as we gather on the Sabbath for worship. A. J. Swoboda writes, "I am convinced that the kind of

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<sup>19</sup> McNeal, *Missional Renaissance*, 93.

community that we yearn for and need most is severely lacking in the church today—a place where we learn to love even the people we do not like."<sup>20</sup> We gather in worshipping communities to develop our capacity to love one another and the people in the world. For many people, the church is building in the community that some visit for funerals and weddings.

As stated in Hebrews 10:24-25:

And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

In recent years it appears that churches are losing membership to social justice movements and other religions or no stated religious practice at all. Some young people have relatives in First Baptist Church that come on Easter and Christmas and will not attend the rest of the year. They would come for the Easter egg hunt that we used to host after service and the Christmas play. I agree with McNeal when he asserts that, "The program-driven church has produced a brand of Christianity that is despised, not just ignored, by the people outside the church."<sup>21</sup> Through worship, bible study, and ministry to the community at large, the people at First Baptist began to realize that we could no longer be program-driven.

Another pivotal moment in my life, contributing to shaping the call to this context, was the grandfather's death. I was 28 years old when my grandfather passed; as I mentioned before, he and I were close. I asked to speak at his funeral. I wanted to share with my family and community just how much I loved my grandfather. I wanted to share how he was always a voice

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<sup>20</sup> A. J. Swoboda, *Subversive Sabbath: The Surprising Power of Rest in a Nonstop World*, Grand Rapids: Brazos Press), 70.

<sup>21</sup> McNeal, *Missional Renaissance*, 93.

of reason for myself, my family, and my friends. I was allowed to speak from the pulpit at his service. After the service, the funeral directors came to my parents' home to collect the funeral service's remaining balance. I was the point person for the family in making the arrangements. My grandfather had an insurance policy; however, the beneficiary was his long-time friend. I called her outside to see when I could get the money from my grandfather's life insurance policy, and she said, "That is my money," and turned around and walked back into the house. I committed the directors to have the remaining balance by Wednesday of the upcoming week. Not knowing where the money was coming from, but God did provide. I still have the receipt in my grandmother's bible.

After my grandfather's death, I started going to church again with my girlfriend from Villanova, whom I had reconnected with several years apart. On April 1, 1990, I accepted Christ as Lord and Savior and participating in baptism at St. Paul Baptist Church. The church where I played youth basketball. St. Paul had a new pastor, and everyone was talking positively about him. I visited the church one Sunday, and afterward, I began to attend service faithfully, leading me to join the church. Before and after the baptism, I had a hunger for the Word of God and started serving in the church, first as an usher and later a Sunday school teacher for fourth and fifth grades. I loved teaching Sunday School and working with the children and the Sunday School staff. We had a fun class, and I learned a lot as a teacher as well. St. Paul, for me, was a new community and family. Being a member of the St. Paul community, as Rabbi Teutsch stated:

A real community is that kind of home. Maintaining membership in a real community doesn't hinge on exams or measurable output. It does depend on accepting responsibility for citizenship within the community.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Teutsch, *Spiritual Community*, 1.

The church community was where I found a place to develop my faith and deepen my relationship with Jesus Christ.

During this time, I worked for a major national newspaper, and the call to the ministry made its presence known again. My life at that time was as if everything was spiraling out of control, a broken engagement, problems at work, and financial troubles. Then one of my contracted delivery agents at USA Today, a woman named Anita Neal, who was a minister in her church, turned to me one day and said, "Nothing in your life is going to go right until you say "yes" to what God is calling you to do." I knew what she meant, but I still did not say "yes" to the ministry call.

In my mind, I was on my way to law school and while taking the Law School Admission Test (LSAT) at Montclair State University. During the test, I felt a tug at my heart, and I was conflicted during the test. After completing the exam, I went to St. Paul to see if my pastor was there. Church and spoke to our pastor. My pastor was there, and I asked to talk to him. I told Rev. Battle that I needed to talk to him. He knew I was taking the LSAT, and he asked how I thought I did on the test. I said, "I think I did okay, but that is not why I am here." We talked about my call to ministry—a call to the ministry that I could no longer run away from or put off. In September 1991, I started seminary pursuing the MDiv degree and preached my trial sermon two days after my 31<sup>st</sup> birthday.

I want to say that my call was from a child and that I could not see myself doing anything else. However, that would not be the truth, I was a Muslim in college, and I was antagonistic towards the Christians on campus. (Which is one of the reasons Orlando's comment years later shocked me). We would have religious debates at dinner, which would often end with me at the table feeling as if I had won some great victory. Looking back on those post-dinner debates, the

importance of always being ready to give a reason for the hope that I have. I also see now that it was all part of God's leading, not my own. I was like Saul before the Damascus Road experience. I had a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge.

Nevertheless, when I accepted Christ, I was being led to be a follower of Jesus. Unfortunately, the church did not have a followership culture. The pastor was the leader, and we were there to fulfill his vision. In a few short years, St. Paul had become a place where the pastor began to act like a dictator who was untouchable by the people in the congregation. As Dr. Sweet writes, "Leadership is a functional position of power and authority. Followership is a relational posture of love and trust."<sup>23</sup>

I recall one year for the pastor's anniversary. He and his family were in one of the meeting rooms, eating prime rib and roast turkey, while the congregation members were in the fellowship hall eating chicken salad and crackers. The memory of that one event has stayed with me. When we have meals at First Baptist, I will not eat first and have what everyone else is eating. I intend that our guests and senior members eat first, and then I will eat.

Although I continued to serve the church, my respite came from my supervised ministry assignment while in seminary. Leaving the church for a season to serve another church as part of the seminary curriculum was a blessing. I was able to stretch and grow as a minister, work with the youth and teaching bible study, and assist with the church's 75<sup>th</sup>-anniversary celebration. Watching New Hope people in Hackensack, New Jersey, pool their talents and resources together was an excellent experience. The people had a heart for God and a love for their church.

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<sup>23</sup> Leonard Sweet, *I am a Follower, The Way, Truth and Life of Following Jesus*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson) 40

However, my experience at New Hope in Hackensack would also be the beginning to the end of my tenure at St. Paul.

October 1995 was the summons of black men across the country to descend on our nation's capital for the Million Man March. A friend of mine and me organized two buses to attend the march. Controversy surrounded the rally because of the one who to the initiative to gather the people, Minister Louis Farrakhan of the Nation of Islam. My pastor had not planned to attend. However, his son attended with me. As we gathered together for prayer before our departure, the St Paul van pulled up the morning of March, and the pastor and several deacons met us at our buses. We had several pastors on our buses who led the prayer. I found out later that a local synagogue member was a writer for the Washington Post and wrote a March story. My pastor and the rabbi were sharing their perspectives before the march; that was why he attended. After the Million Man March, I was offered a position at another church to serve as an assistant pastor. I left St. Paul in November of 1995 and joined the New Hope Baptist Church in East Orange, NJ.

At New Hope in East Orange, there was more of a collaborative ministry. The pastor had a heart for the people. We did not measure success on the number of people in the church. However, instead, we used as Dr. Sweet explained,

The most important metrics we must rely on, the crucial "deliverables" we can present, must focus on the newly formed lives of the disciples we are making, the followers who are following Christ into a place of serving him by serving others.<sup>24</sup>

At New Hope, as a ministry team, we focused on developing new members and ensuring that they join Sunday school class after they completed new members' orientation. As new

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<sup>24</sup> Sweet, *I Am a Follower*, 83.

people joined the church, we sought to strengthen the bible study class as well. Soon the adult Sunday School class moved from under the balcony to the sanctuary. Eventually, we had to add chairs to the new members' classroom. As part of our outreach at New Hope, we started a ministry teaching Sunday school to incarcerated youth and the Essex County Juvenile Detention Center in Newark, NJ, under the direction of Joe Clark, former principal of Paterson Eastside High School.

I served at New Hope until I accepted an assignment as a Temporary Supply pastor at the Hillside and Valley Presbyterian Church in Orange, NJ. Hillside and Valley's appointment proved to be the most challenging up to that point in the ministry. Hillside and Valley had been without a pastor for ten years before my arrival. The public service bill was more than ten thousand dollars. The church was nineteen thousand dollars in debt, and the people were used to taking the summers off and closing the church down from the end of June to the Sunday after Labor Day. However, that year, we had a service every Sunday, and we were able to retire the debt in five months. Serving as Temporary Supply was humbling since, as a Baptist minister in a Presbyterian Church, I could not facilitate church meetings with the Session. I had to learn to be an adaptive leader and collaborate with the church elders to vote on initiatives that I wanted to implement in the church. As Flowers and Vannoy state:

Adaptive leaders think on their feet and respond creatively to the unique environment where they live and work. Adaptive leaders are courageous risk-takers. Therefore, when an environment presents a unique challenge to the organism's survival, the effective leader will adapt by whatever means necessary to ensure that survival.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Flowers, Vannoy, *Adapt to Thrive*, 40.

Being an adaptive leader, I also had to work with a pastor assigned to our church according to the Presbyterian polity. Fitting with their government, the Newark Presbytery appointed a pastor to moderate the Session meetings.

The church miring in controversy, and different factions within the church led the mess. The choir musician and her husband had split the church I grew up in over the church's refusal to purchase a new piano. Another woman was the church's ex-officio leader since her deceased husband was the former executive minister in the Newark Presbytery. The church continued to blame the previous pastor for their current situation. They were, as Downing described, "Denouncing the immediate past, while some people idealize the ancient past, others authenticate their present belief by vilifying their immediate predecessors."<sup>26</sup>

By vilifying the previous pastor, the church leaders did not assume the church's state's responsibility. It was a challenge, but we were able to eliminate the debt. One would think that was a good thing, and it was not. The past excuses were now gone, and there had to be a new person to attack, which turned out to be me. I must admit that in that context, I failed at conflict resolution. I was unable to relate with individual members with love. I fell in many ways, but I learned to celebrate the little victories. The failure in ministry was a humbling experience. I knew that it is easy to criticize others and boldly state what you would do in similar situations. The truth is, there is a distinct reality between the hypothetical and reality. I let particular people get to me, and I did not handle it well.

My time at Hillside and Valley was cut short of my contract term. I will honestly say I was relieved, but I was also hurt. As pastors and people, we were making great strides in bringing the church back to life, but I had uncovered a lie in the story unwittingly and did not

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<sup>26</sup> Downing, *Changing Signs of Truth*, 46.

know the church did not see the truth. It was over the parking lot's paving that the Newark Presbytery had bailed the church out of a lawsuit with the contractor. However, the church's narrative was that their "pennies for parking" campaign was a success, and that effort paid the debt. So, by telling the truth, I became the target. Thus, after Easter that year, I was terminated and returned to New Hope for another year or so before I left to join Calvary in Morristown. I served at Calvary until accepting a call to Rising Mt Zion Baptist Church in Montclair.

For me, Rising Mt. Zion was an exciting assignment. Rising Mt. Zion was the vision of Rev. Calvin and Rev. Myrtle Jackson. When Rev. Calvin Jackson died, his wife Myrtle took over as pastor, and when she died, their son-in-law, who was chair of the deacon board, ran the church until their daughter Elizabeth Campbell retired from a career in nursing to become the 3<sup>rd</sup> pastor of the church.

She and her Brother, Deacon Jackson, regularly visited my mother when she was hospitalized and prayed for her. They were with our family when my mother died in June of 2006. The two also visited my father nearly every day when he was also in the hospital simultaneously as my mother, although my parents were in different locations.

My mother died the day after their 48<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary, and my dad died four months later, five days before my mother's birthday. The Rising Mt Zion church family was there for my sister and me. So, when asked to assist, I said, "yes." While serving at Rising Mt. Zion, we started a clothes pantry and a food bank. We were doing what we could to connect with the community. The church was in the heart of the HUD eligible population of Montclair. The food bank proved to be a service to the members of the church. The church had members on public assistance as well as senior citizens on very fixed incomes.

Rising Mt. Zion was hostile to new ideas while remaining open to doing the old things that were not working nor developing people's faith and relationship with Jesus.

Rising Mt Zion had trouble "opening [themselves] to those hostile to us, to those foreign to us, both in lifestyle and in thought."<sup>27</sup> As long as people went along with that which people were comfortable with, everything was right. However, as soon as a thought or idea challenged the status quo, conflict arose. The conflict was not overt; it was more covert, almost passive-aggressive. One incident I remember is a 45-minute discussion and debate over purchasing new collection baskets. I could not believe how the church leadership stayed mired in the minutiae.

Rising Mt. Zion seemed to get in its way by preventing growth by holding on to its embedded theology. The church could not read the signs. Rising Mt. Zion and its leadership missed the point Downing made: "To stay on edge, Christians need to understand how signs make and change the meaning."<sup>28</sup> The people at Rising Mt Zion missed the edge by staying in the center. Jesus meets people on the fringes and the edges of life.

The leadership's focus was on ensuring that the leadership of the church remained in the family. The leaders were not able to mobilize the people for the common good. Although the people at Rising Mt. Zion and the pastor were supportive of my family during the loss of my parents, I could not stay there and serve. So, I began to seek a pastorate actively. A friend told me about the open pastoral position at First Baptist Church in Madison. I applied, and in April of 2014, I became the pastor of the First Baptist Church.

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<sup>27</sup> Downing, *Changing Signs of Truth*, 185.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 90-91.

## CHAPTER 2

### MINISTRY IN THE CONTEXT OF THE BOROUGH OF MADISON, N.J.

Arriving at the First Baptist Church of Madison in June of 2014, I embarked on a new venture and calling. I took the leap of faith when called to the church, left my corporate job, and committed to full-time ministry. Assuming First Baptist's pastorate, it was vital for me to understand the people, the church, and the community. While reflecting on my days of playing football, one of the most important lessons is to learn the language, culture, and terminology of each team and each coach. Transferring from Villanova to Ohio State, the terminology and culture were not the same in the football program. The goals were similar prepare each week to win. However, at Villanova, we hoped to win, whereas there was an expectation of winning at Ohio State. The fact of the matter is that the context of each program was different. In my professional life, working at various companies, each one had differing values and cultures—all relating to the context. Although I did not understand the lay of the land in each location, I realize how important learning the context is to ministry and leadership.

#### Ministry in the Context of the Borough of Madison, New Jersey

According to the Borough of Madison's website, the borough was established as Bottle Hill by Europe's settlers in 1715. The earliest settlers were typically Anglo-American Presbyterians who made their way to Madison from Long Island, Newark, and Elizabeth. The Presbyterian Church was the community's pillar until the early 19<sup>th</sup> century when French immigrants founded the Roman Catholic Church. The town established a private school for the education of young men called Madison Academy, after James Madison, the 4<sup>th</sup> president of the

United States. Shortly after, there was a movement to rename the town Madison from the now unpopular name "Bottle Hill."<sup>29</sup>

With a new name, progress came to the area with the railroad expansion, connecting Madison to Newark and New York. The naming led to the beginning of the commuter culture prevalent in Madison and Morris County today. Madison then became known as the "Rose City" since many residents-built greenhouses and hothouses on their property to extend the growing season. Madison became a significant supplier of flowers to New York.

Since 1920, Madison has grown from 5,523 residents to a peak of 16,710 in 1970. According to the 2010 Census, the population of Madison was 15,845. The revised Census data from April 2015 projects the people of Madison to rise to 16,033. The population breakdown by race of 15,845: White 12,840; African American 441; Asian 869; Hispanic/ Latino 614; Two or more races 261 and other 28. While the Asian population is 5.4%, and the Hispanic/Latino population is 9% of the total. A majority of the Hispanic/Latino population is Roman Catholic.<sup>30</sup> The history of Madison and the Census data are integral to the overview of the town. However, beyond the past and the data lies a community of people and stories that make up the community.

Since the early 19<sup>th</sup> century Madison has had an African American presence. However, in 1993, many Elmer Street houses were sold, displacing the predominantly African American neighborhood. A few families were able to move to apartments near Madison. Other families relocated to Morristown, Wharton, and Parsippany. Unfortunately, it appears that the

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<sup>29</sup> Borough of Madison, n.d.

<sup>30</sup> Madison Census, n.d.

African American presence in Madison will continue to dwindle as real estate prices rise since Madison is a highly sought-after location for commuters with school-aged children.

### Social Justice in Madison and The First Baptist Church

The African American community represents less than 3% of the total population. Although there is a diminishing African American population, there is a strong interest in the Madison community to work through the town's racial issues. Most recently, with the problems of police shootings of unarmed African Americans, the Muslim ban, and anti-Asian sentiments growing with the COVID-19 pandemic, there are people in Madison who are sincere in their desire to address these social justice issues.

The term social justice has different meanings in diverse settings. It seems to me that social justice is the In the Book of Micah 6:8 NIV, the prophet states, "He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God." In this passage, the writer list three requirements from the Lord, justice, mercy, and humility. In the context of social justice, these three qualities are foundational for mobilizing towards the common good.

In 2017, I led an initiative of convening community leaders, people, university administration, law enforcement, and local government officials around the concept of Dr. King's idea of the Beloved Community. Through community dialogues addressing race and racism will ultimately lead to our calling the "Big Talk." The goal was to lay the issues of race and culture on the table to get it out in the open. These dialogues were eye-opening to some of our sister churches. Few have begun to discuss 'white privilege' and how it has affected their thinking on the unconscious level. These talks have not only been eye-opening but have also started to unify

the community and the churches. The local pastors are more unified and stepping up to leadership. The local colleges are collaborating more with the town officials.

However, what I learned from the discussions and the Peace March is that social justice is not a thing. It is not something you do. Social justice has to come from who you are as a person and the values one holds dear. I know that I will be on the front lines of the new social justice movement. Not with protest marches but to develop a new strategy that moves from transactional action to relational gatherings. The Borough of Madison has a long way to go with respect to social justice. However, at least there is an on-going conversation taking place within the community.

Madison's heart is a core group of people whose birth, life, and careers are part of the community. Other people came to Madison for the school system, the community's quaintness, and the quality of life. The current mayor was born and raised in Madison and recently retired from the Madison YMCA, his employment place since his youth. Most of them are owned and operated by people by people from Madison and their owners and are committed to the town. For example, C.J.'s Deli on Main Street is a local hangout. Before COVID-19, the lunch counter at C.J.'s was like the bar on the television show Cheers. One visit, and it was clear each regular had their seat, their coffee cup, and their drink of choice on display behind the lunch counter. CJ's is just one example. Each local restaurant, sandwich shop, and bagel place have their regulars.

### The Madison Police Department

Leading the Madison Police Department is Chief Darren Dachisen. Meeting Chief Daschisen and the leadership team in 2014 was the beginning of a new relationship between police and First Baptist Church. The meeting's timing was during the national protest height in

response to the August 2014 killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri. The conversation is centering on how we as a church could support the police department. I knew that the people of First Baptist Church were suspicious of the police in Madison. One of the deacons sharing a story of how the church marched on the Madison Police Department in response to an incident of police brutality. However, upon discovering the details and the protest's date, the march took place in 1997, seventeen years prior.

It was essential to shift the narrative to a new and healthy relationship with the police in Madison. The relationship with the law grew through a crisis among the police officers. One of the captains, battling cancer, asked for me to visit him in the hospital. Those daily visits to the captain and his family and being present when the captain took his last breath were instrumental in solidifying our relationship. After the captain's death, we, as a church, continued reaching out to the police and the captain's family.

The Madison Police and the Borough of Madison's government-appointed four local clerics as police chaplains. The relationship continues to enable the church to support and receive support from the Madison Police Department. The Madison Police provide active shooter training, converse with the college students in our church, and attend our church functions. I recently had the privilege of being a co-officiant at the chief's wedding.

### Key Organizations and Events in Madison

The Thursday Morning Club, which owns and operates the Madison Community House, offers before and aftercare for children, camps in the summer, and houses a Dress for Success location. The Madison Community House often rents space to local people for wedding

receptions, birthday parties, and other family functions. The Madison Community House is across the street from our church. Our church has held events at the community house.

Madison Senior Center is a place where the seniors gather daily to play cards and just hang out. It is one of the locations that the senior citizens are missing during the pandemic. The Senior Center gave the people something to look forward to each day. I had the privilege of an invitation from one of our church seniors to hang out with the seniors one day, watch the card games, and chat with the people. That day was quite a bonding experience for me.

The Madison YMCA is the central meeting place and offers a variety of programs for people in Madison. The Madison Y is the original convenor of the Madison Interfaith Council. The Madison Y underwrites the monthly breakfast gatherings of the Madison clergy at the Park Avenue Club. The monthly breakfasts facilitate relationships among the local clergy and campus chaplains.

Each October, in years before the pandemic, Madison Borough celebrates Bottle Hill Day. Bottle Hill Day is a day for Madison Borough to promote local businesses, local organizations, and churches. The day fills the streets with people from all walks of life. Just about every company in Madison participates in the festivities. Bottle Hill Day was a traditional day for First Baptist Church to sell food and raise money for its expenses. First Baptist, known for its fried fish, pulled pork, spare-ribs, and always sells food. People would line up for the church's food and the baked goods.

#### The College Community in and Around Madison

There are three colleges near Madison, Fairleigh Dickinson University, Saint Elizabeth University, and Drew University. Drew University is the closest to the borough. However, there

is very little interaction between Drew University and the local government. Madison does not claim to be a college town, even though students from the colleges work at the Stop and Shop, Whole Foods, Chipotle, and other local businesses. African American college students that I have spoken with have shared stories of discomfort in Madison. One store in particular, according to the students, is notorious for profiling African American students. I can believe it since one night, the manager accusing a deacon from First Baptist of stealing razor blades for the store. The story and accusation did not make sense since the deacon works at Stop and Shop and standing on the platform to catch the train back to Morristown. There was no way he could have left work, walked down a hill, steal razor blades, walk back up a hill, climb stairs and reach the Madison train station platform while breathing normally. When police sought to question him, and thankfully because of our relationship with the police department, they let him go. Since that incident, we have taken the initiative to invite college students to a dialogue with the police and local political officials.

Each August on a Sunday afternoon, except during the pandemic, we host the first-year students from the Saint Elizabeth University's Fast Track Program as part of orientation. The students travel to Madison to shop and learn about the community. We invite the police to come and speak with the students and share in the dialogue. There are usually 70-75 students who are part of the Fast-Track Program, and our time ends with singing and praising God.

Each Sunday, we have college students in worship. We seek to support the students during the school year by providing them with food from the pantry. We host dinners around mid-terms and the end of the semester. The students often share how they feel at home and often bring their parents to the church when visiting their child at college. There are students at Saint Elizabeth University that see First Baptist as a home away from home.

### Ministry in the Context of First Baptist Church, Madison, New Jersey

The First Baptist Church of Madison was organized in 1895 by a small group of people who wanted to have a Baptist fellowship in Madison. one year. In June of 1901, the church broke ground on the land at its current location on Cook Avenue. The First Baptist Church has known twenty-four pastors for over 125 years.<sup>31</sup>

The church is a stable location for several African American people in and from Madison. Over the years, the First Baptist Church, a gathering place for baby dedications, weddings, funerals, and family events for the congregation. First Baptist Church has several large families that are members of the church. One family, the Burroughs family, is one of the charter member families of the church. The family connections and relationships provide a deep and rich history regarding the life of the church. The church, when experiencing a traumatic loss, supports one another through prayer and presence. When someone dies, it is not just the loss of a church member. It is also the loss of a family member. With that in mind, relationships are significant in and to the life of our church. The closeness of the connections is on full display when the need to support a family arises, and the church mobilizes toward the common good for the family.

I could not fully understand the church's context and failed to ask if there were any outstanding issues, legal or otherwise, that I should know. After assuming the duties as pastor, my second week, I was in court. The church in previous years installed a beautiful garden on the church grounds. However, the landscaper did not receive the full payment, and the church had to

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<sup>31</sup> History of First Baptist Church provided as part of my interview process., n.d.

appear in court. The previous pastor led a significant renovation to the church and property. However, the balance due on the garden was close to \$10,000.00 for the garden. Through the generosity of the landscaper, we were able to settle for \$7,900.00. The court appearance was one of my first official introductions to church business with First Baptist.

Imagine the garden, which was a place for the community to gather, become a place of conflict. People in the town would come and meditate or have events in the garden. It was also people in the community and family and helped our church retire the debt. The garden was the place of the Fall and even the place of the Resurrection. In the garden, Adam ate the fruit, and his eyes were open, and he and Eve knew they were naked. The church's nakedness during the court appearance. The leadership was afraid I would leave after the court case. However, the court case was an opportunity for us to experience the resurrection moment as well. Jesus encountering Mary in the garden with the message of the resurrection, our church's garden was a moment of the resurrection of our church's spirit. The landscaper agreed to a \$200.00 a month payment plan. However, after sharing the court appearance outcome, members rose to work together to retire the debt within a few months.

On a previous occasion, the Saturday before my first Sunday as a pastor, our church members were hosting a birthday party for our oldest member at the time, Mrs. Cora Jiggetts, celebrating 108 years of life. On that day, I had the pleasure of meeting and talking to her and sharing that she was happy to meet the pastor. I watched as the First Baptist women prepared the food and decorated the party's yard during the party. The people indeed showed love for Mrs. Jiggetts that day. It was evident that their expression of love for Mrs. Jiggetts was genuine. The following Monday, Mrs. Jiggetts died. Mrs. Jiggetts's funeral was my first in First Baptist Church. In preparation for her funeral, I experienced the members' grief at losing a long-time

member and influential leader in the church. Mrs. Jiggetts' leadership was evident at her birthday party and leading up to her funeral. Her affirmation of my presence to those closest to her was inspirational to me. Those closest to her said to me that Mrs. Jiggetts was waiting for the pastor.

In reading First Baptist's context, there were remnants of a failed business venture that was impacting the church. My predecessor established a 501 c-3 non-profit at the church called the Chef's Smokehouse. The Chef's Smokehouse was a catering business that served the Madison community. Members of the Madison Rotary Club shared how they would hold an event in the garden each year. At the same time, church members serving the Rotarians, and their guests but were never allowed to eat.

I heard the Rotarians' stories in Madison, reminding me of a scene in the movie, *The Help*. The setting is depicting a banquet to raise money for African relief. The maids were standing around the wall while the hostess for the evening, stating that the benefit is something near and dear to the maids' hearts. From that moment on, it became essential that the church's narrative known for its catering had to change.

Several of the church members, like Mrs. Jiggetts, were domestics and raised white children in Madison. The members of First Baptist, who were not domestics, also worked for white people in Madison. Many First Baptist members were reluctant to engage the larger community beyond selling or catering food during Bottle Hill Day. We had to change that mindset and the context that caused its creation. The catering business and the garden were two initiatives of the previous pastor that contributed to First Baptist's perception in the Madison community's eyes.

After hearing the people's stories, it was essential to shift the narrative from serving the table to gathering around the table. We started by hosting potluck dinners for the community. We

invited the other churches, local officials, Rotarians, and the police. As these dinners grew, the interaction between the church family and the community began to transform. People were talking to one another, learning one another's names. The transactional action of selling and catering was not moving toward the relational gathering. We began the discussions around the common good. What can we do to improve the quality of life within the Madison community?

The people in the borough who knew the church from eating food in the garden; have come to know as the church gathering the community. In recent years, the garden is a focal point of the ministry to go out of the building and invite the community to the garden. The table became a place of gathering together, not just a space where we were merely spectators. The garden is where we invite the community to our church family dinners, where each is invited to contribute to the meal and the conversation. At our first community gathering in the garden, people enjoyed our guests and their guests without taking shifts in collecting money. There was plenty of food and people could relax in the garden. Our church was beginning to understand the need for convening the community to the table. As a result, our mantra as a church is, "We are not just serving the table; we are convening guests to join us at the table with us as we seek to serve Jesus."

Understanding and learning the context, it is important to watch people and listen to their stories. In the process of understanding the context of the church, one must be patient. One cannot rush through the process; it will evolve and become apparent over time. There will be a few things that are clear and many not so apparent. For example, a few members were paying critical bills in the church and felt that they had control over the church. Rabbi Teutsch noted,

Despite best intentions, many kinds of corruption may creep into community life. Leaders lose sight of their sacred trust and place personal gain ahead of community welfare. The community itself may dissolve into factionalism, become mired in routine, or fail to adapt to changing conditions, eroding

community life's fabric from within. When that happens, the community does not fully become a community again until it renews its vision and recommits itself to its core values.<sup>32</sup>

Another example, the church secretary would tell the pastor what she was and was not going to do. She stated that she was to receive the bulletin's information before the middle of the week, she would not produce the bulletin for Sunday's service. She has since been relieved of her duties and has left the church.

As a pastor, it was necessary to refocus the church's vision and mission on what the people did well and what I heard them say as their mission. We began by scheduling a retreat at the Lutheran Church in Florham Park. We started the retreat with two human timelines, the first timeline, people lined up according to chronological order, the second timeline, lining the people up according to when they accepted Christ. The image was an opening to a rich discussion at the retreat. The human timeline shifted the perspective of people in the church. We often assume that someone older has been a Christian for a long time when younger people accepted Christ before the older person. After discussing the human timeline, we spent time crafting a new narrative for the church and focusing on the church's ministry in the community.

Another pivotal transformational moment in First Baptist was a few years ago. Key leaders in the church and me attended a Drew lecture with John Flowers and Karen Vanoy; the topic was "Churches Wired for Decline." As the speakers shared their experiences, one of the critical followers leaned over to me and said, "they are talking about our church." We were able to share that with the congregation in a church meeting and make progress to transform our church from one wired for a decline to showing signs of life. We went from having one or two children in the church to have about 14 or so, with four newborns.

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<sup>32</sup> Teutsch, *Spiritual Community*, 75.

As we mobilize the community for the common good, people have grown, the ministries in the church are reaching out beyond our church's walls. Seeking the common good, we work with Family Promise, housing homeless families at least two weeks a year. Young people and women in church organized a liturgical dance and mime ministry that ministers our church and the community. In partnership with Atlantic Health Systems, we host first aid training and CPR certification training. Working with the Mental Health Association of Morris and Essex, we offer mental health, mental health first aid, and suicide prevention training. The National Organization of Black Law Enforcement (NOBLE) accepted our invitation to train the community on safe stops. Dr. Dean Trulear of Healing Communities facilitated a workshop on prison reentry programs.

By offering the various training and seminars, the church's narrative began to change, "for the life of the church," and loving our neighbor enabled the transition from our embedded theology to a more deliberative theology. As a church, we are raising questions of context about "where God is leading us?" and "how open are we to God's leading?" We are (re)signing the church among ourselves and in the Madison community.

### First Baptist Church's Ministry in the Global Community

The previous election of Donald Trump as the 45<sup>th</sup> president in 2016 had an impact on our congregation. We had one white member who was a staunch Trump supporter, and the night after the election, he came to bible study fresh from a victory dinner to gloat. They believe that Trump is doing a great job. They do not quite understand what people feel in the church at the murder of an unarmed black person. They fail to see the trauma we as a community feel when a police officer takes a young, unarmed life. Although they belong to a predominantly black

church, their attitude is one of disconnection from the black experience in America. That is why this work is essential. Many people who are insensitive to their neighbors do not recognize micro-aggression, implicit biases, and racism.

In First Baptist, we have older members from the south who remember living through the "Jim Crow" era and the Civil Rights movement. So, we have to speak up for those who may not yet feel capable or confident to do so to white people for those members. Some of those members are lifetime residents of Madison and know the racism in town firsthand. Through developing relationships, we can shift the narrative. Moreover, as a church, we are responsible for loving our neighbors—mostly the Trump supporter in our congregation.

We are working as a congregation to move past "understanding God according to the language – the traditional signs – of the culture."<sup>33</sup> As an African American church, and we are in a predominantly white community, we must be open to the leading of God and minister to the community and beyond. We strive to reach out to the community when mobilization for the common good calls us to gather the people. As we open our doors to all ethnic groups, we hope to create a faith community where all feel welcome and encounter Jesus Christ in worship and service. As A. J. Swoboda describes, "God's intention for the Sabbath was and is, that we would be drawn into the richness of community."<sup>34</sup>

We also seek to expand our reach, and we have members from outside of Morris County from towns such as Englewood, East Orange, and Union. We ought to look at all the cities between Madison and those cities as part of our reach.

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<sup>33</sup> Downing, *Changing Signs of Truth*, 67

<sup>34</sup> Swoboda, *Subversive Sabbath*, 67.

The future for First Baptist looks bright as we move and transform our culture to mobilize the communities for the common good, moving from transactional actions to a relational gathering. The language and the images in our church are leading us toward this mission. Our ministry's goal is to take the lead to (re)-sign the church as we help one another see the community's needs and look toward God to lead our efforts.

The First Baptist Church has to be on the front lines of the new social justice movement. Not with protest marches, preferably by developing new strategies that incorporate the past values with the technology of the present and future. We will focus on social justice as we identify the community's needs and reach out to people on the margins of life. Our desire is to (re)-sign social justice for our church and community as we move forward.

The church must remain open to sensing the shift in context to expand innovation and creativity as we grow to develop our church's current capacity to mobilize the community. Efforts in that direction, I believe, will only help shape First Baptist with practical, innovative, and creative approaches to social action and justice.

## CHAPTER 3

## THE INTELLECTUAL WORK THAT GIVES RISE TO MOBILIZING COMMUNITIES FOR THE COMMON GOOD

The work of mobilizing communities for the common good resembles community organizing, social mobilization, and community development. The study of community organizing is often the subject of research by psychologists. Community organizing employs strategies to address community concerns such as substance abuse, crime, violence, housing, and other issues. Vanderbilt University professors Paul W. Speer and Brian D. Christen define community organizing as "a process through which people impacted by common concerns work together to build the social power necessary to achieve a series of partial solutions to those concerns."<sup>35</sup> Speer and Christens' definition of community organizing is similar to the work I am doing in mobilizing the community for the common good. While those concerns plague many communities, according to Speer and Christen, building relationships is crucial in addressing issues and matters that plague society. The professors share the importance for community organizers to building relationships as "organizers have to be capable of building relationships that entail honesty, trust, sharing, empathy, challenge, and acceptance. Building relationships is what organizers do."<sup>36</sup> The building of relationships is what I am seeking to do in mobilizing communities for the common good.

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<sup>35</sup> Paul W. Speer, Brian D. Christens, "Community Organizing," in *Community Psychology: Foundations for Practice*, Victoria Chien Scott, Susan M. Wolfe, (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2015), 222.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, 224.

Other authors whose works are shaping my work are Peter Block, John McKnight, and Charles H. Vogl. McKnight and Block's collaboration, *The Abundant Community: Awakening the Power of Families and Neighborhoods*, provides an insight into what they list as seven elements of satisfaction. Similarly, Charles H. Vogl's work, *The Art of Community: Seven Principles of Belonging*, describes community concerning shared values, morals, and sense of identity.

For Block and McKnight, the seven elements of satisfaction that produce the Abundant community:

1. Our neighborhoods are the primary source of our health.
2. Whether we are safe and secure in our neighborhood is mostly within our domain.
  - i. Two major determinants of our local safety:
    1. How many neighbors do we know by name?
    2. How often we are present and associated in public – outside our houses.
3. The future of our earth – the Environment—is a major local responsibility
4. In our neighborhoods and villages, we have the power to build a resilient economy.
5. We are coming to see that we have a profound local responsibility for the food we eat.
6. We are local people who must raise our Children
  - i. Paying others to be responsible to teach, to watch, to know our children, and to transport them to their paid child raisers.
7. Locally, we are the site of care<sup>37</sup>

Vogl's list of the seven principles are:

1. Boundary: the line between members and outsiders.
2. Initiative: the activities that mark a new member.
3. Rituals: the things we do that have meaning.
4. Temple: A place to set aside to find our community.
5. Stories: What we share that allows others and ourselves to know our values.
6. Symbols: The things that represent ideas that are important.

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<sup>37</sup> McKnight, Block, *The Abundant Community*, 2.

7. Inner Ring: A path to growth as we participate.<sup>38</sup>

The differences between the elements of satisfaction and the seven principles for belonging are Block and McKnight's central theme is from a macro level focusing on the community's sense of health, safety, the environment, and the raising of children. On the other hand, Vogl's seven principles for belonging deal with the individual concerning fitting in, values, and meaning. My goal is to combine the two perspectives by mobilizing communities for the common good through developing relationships.

One of the areas of focus for the World Health Organization is social mobilization, which is "the process of bringing together all societal and personal influences to raise awareness of and demand health care, assist in delivering resources, and cultivate sustainable individual and community involvement."<sup>39</sup> The World Health Organization's definition of social mobilization to cultivate sustainable individual and community involvement are two objectives that am I am seeking to accomplish in the Madison and First Baptist Church Communities.

In sociology, community development contributes to welfare and human development, including mobilizing people and communities. People's interests and human development in a community center on the quality of relationships between neighbors and others. The strength of mobilization lies in the depth of relationships among the people gathering around community concerns.

The psychological and sociological disciplines approach community involvement from different perspectives. The psychological perspective is micro in consideration of the individual,

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<sup>38</sup> Vogl, *The Art of Community*, 31.

<sup>39</sup> World Health Organization, website, n.d.

while the sociological perspective is macro and focuses on the larger community. I am seeking to bring the two together from a theological and biblical perspective.

### The Theological and Biblical Work That Gives Rise to the Work

The writer of Hebrews 10:24-25 states:

And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together as some are in the habit of doing; but encouraging one another –and all the more as you see the Day approaching. (NIV)

The impact of COVID-19 inspires our church to look at new ways of mobilizing our community.

The pandemic drew our church into the work where God was leading us. First Baptist has a history as a place of gathering for the church family and the Madison community. However, as stated prior, the church and community, although neighbors, rarely interacted socially; the relationship between the church and community was more of transactional action versus relational gathering. The spreading of COVID-19 creates an opportunity for a new paradigm for relating and gathering both in the church and in the community. As Charles Vogl states, "The act of creating community can look simple even mundane, but it can also be life-changing. Creating deep relationships that serve, support, and heal."<sup>40</sup> The trinity of service, support, and healing are tantamount to community mobilization.

The pandemic separated the community, revealing the community's needs that appear dormant on the surface, but, in reality, merely waiting for an opportunity to appear. The community raising questions such as:

1. How long will this last?
2. When will our children be able to return to school?

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<sup>40</sup> Vogl, *The Art of Community*, XV.

### 3. How are we going to educate our children and work from home?

These questions are often met with conflicting responses. In our church, the main question people ask is: "When will we return to the sanctuary?" For some church members, Sunday was about more than gathering for worship; it was a place to converse with friends, socialize and overcome a week's feelings of loneliness. As Rabbi Teutsch states, "Many of us live with a strong sense of isolation or frustration: life just isn't giving us the satisfaction that is supposed to come with living the American dream."<sup>41</sup> The need for communing with one another before and after service is missing since closing the building due to COVID-19. The abrupt ending of services in the sanctuary left the congregation without the opportunity for one last hug or sharing of laughter during a face-to-face conversation. Community activities, school plays, recitals, sports all shut down seemingly overnight.

The need for gathering amid the pandemic comes with its challenges. However, we as a church began asking, "How would we or could we as a church have an impact on the Madison community?" and "What fundamental changes would we need to make to impact the issues affecting our church family. As the pandemic spread across our community, infecting and affecting family members and friends, we knew we could do something by assessing our ministry focus. The call of God is a call to service. We began to look for opportunities to mobilize and gather the people to address the community's concerns.

#### The Conversation of Mobilizing Community Toward the Common Good

Since March 15, 2020, the last Sunday, we held worship in our sanctuary due to the national shut down due to the COVID-19 pandemic; it seems as though overnight life as we

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<sup>41</sup> Teutsch, *Spiritual Community*, X.

knew ceased. As a nation and community, we were shut in our houses and cut off from human interaction and touch. Fear gripped the country, and panic was the order of the day. Essential items such as toilet paper, paper towels, disinfectant, and food were in short supply as if a famine had come over the land and a plague had struck the first, second, and all born. Many people struggled to make sense of what was going on. Some act as if nothing is happening, and the pandemic is a hoax. However, the new order of the day is a variety of masks covering family, friends, and neighbors' faces. Hospitals overrun with the sick and death overwhelming funeral homes with the dead, the United States' Executive Branch denying the pandemic's severity. The call to mobilize the community toward the common good is a much-needed response to the pandemic now more than ever.

Due to the pandemic, the need for mobilization arises to find opportunities to address the community's needs, those in the church and outside the church. As a pastor, I believe the First Baptist Church's calling is to serve Jesus Christ in several contexts, within the church, the immediate Madison community, the college community, and those who travel from other areas to Madison. The pandemic forces us to shift the First Baptist narrative from the past and set a new course toward the future. As COVID-19 infections increase in number could no longer be a church stuck in traditions. As Leonard Sweet stated, "God has had it with CAWKI (church as we know it)."<sup>42</sup> Since March 2020, the church cannot afford any longer the physical space where we gather on Sunday; the church is the people of God gathering through new technology. For our church, Zoom is the preferred platform because we genuinely need to Sabbath on Sundays. As Swoboda shares:

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<sup>42</sup> Sweet, *I Am Follower*, 22

The Sabbath is a gift we do not know how to receive. In a world of doing, going, and producing, we have no use for a gift that invites us to stop. But that is the original gift, a gift of rest.<sup>43</sup>

In times like this with the pandemic, we need rest. A Sabbath rests from the stress, grief, uncertainty, potential long-term effects of COVID-19, and the threat of unknowingly having the virus.

Being open to the call of God, the work of mobilizing the community of the common good is always in response to opportunities that God presents. A few years ago, I noticed that every day during the warm weather months, a group of Hispanic women would sit on the steps of our Brown Center at the close of the workday. They did not speak English and would get up to leave every time I pulled up in my car. I did my best to communicate with the women that it was okay to rest on our steps and welcome to sit in the front porch chairs. I was feeling God calling us to do more to support the Hispanic community. We sought to establish a Spanish language service in our church. However, we did not have the people to begin such a service, but God did. Through a relationship with a pastor in Morristown, we started a Spanish language service.

Other opportunities arose for our church to mobilize for the common good. Before the pandemic, we serve soup in the winter and salads in the summer to the senior citizen residents at the Rexford Tucker Apartments in Madison. The seniors genuinely appreciate the food and the company. We also collaborate with the Madison YMCA to serve Thanksgiving dinners for the seniors, and there were singing and gifts and food. The Madison YMCA came with more than enough volunteers helping the food and providing the entertainment. As a church, we desire to share in the ministry with others in the community as we mobilize for the common good.

Unfortunately, due to COVID-19, our outreach to the seniors is part of our food pantry.

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<sup>43</sup> Swoboda, *Subversive Sabbath*, X.

At First Baptist, we do our best to show forth compassion, grace, and mercy. We seek to love the stranger and care for the neighbor without prejudice or judgment. We open our doors to families that are grieving due to the loss of a loved one.

Our relational gatherings aside from the workshops often center on our potluck dinners for the community in which we invite the police to come and the other churches. For example, in July 2019, the potluck barbeque with family, friends, and neighbors; filling the garden with people just enjoying one another's company. The get-together was the beginning of the church's shift, from hosting events to raise funds to pay church expenses to the relational gathering. Through the practice of generosity, gifts and blessings are coming to the church in sharing the food that day with the community.

During the summer of 2020, we worked with Interfaith Urgent Care to provide free testing to provide COVID-19 and Antibody Testing in Madison and Chatham Township. Since our space at the church is not adequate to host the testing safely, the Madison YMCA and Chatham Township Municipal Building provided the area and other resources to host the testing. Over the three days of testing, two in Madison and one in Chatham Township, 2,200 tests were administered. The people in both Madison and Chatham Township were thankful. As a result, people from both communities made donations to our church while registering on-site for the COVID-19 test.

The pandemic has had a more significant impact on our church's life than we could have imagined. As stated previously, we were known for preparing and selling food. However, during the pandemic, we are known as the church that distributes food—sharing with the congregation in five years food sales before the pandemic making close to \$9,000.00. However, since the

pandemic and the serving through giving, we have received over \$25,000 in cash donations, not including the value of the food donated.

As a result, we have expanded our list of community partners. We receive food donations from the Madison Honda Dealership, The Madison Girl Scouts, Panera Bread, Stop and Shop, Madison YMCA, Rotary End Hunger, the Interact Club of Madison High School, Chatham United Methodist Church, Rising Mt. Zion Baptist Church, St. Vincent Martyr, and Grace Episcopal Church. Most days, we receive food donations from residents and neighbors in and around Madison. The community responds to the need and is sharing resources, and willing to collaborate with First Baptist. The community's response inspires the church to believe that we can mobilize the community for the common good.

In our striving to create a community, I have learned the value of what Rabbi Teutsch describes as "communitas." Teutsch writes, "The feeling of communitas, of human closeness and belonging, is a wonderful thing. It can happen anytime people share a powerful moment, good or bad. However, by its very nature is transitory."<sup>44</sup> Another description of communitas: when I attend a football game at The Ohio State University versus the University of Michigan, most people stand for the national anthem. However, once the song is over, we root for our respective teams, and even if we are rooting for the Buckeyes, it does not mean we are committed to one another after the game is over. There is a need for communitas, but our goal is to establish a community.

We know that our pantry provides a place for charitable people, and the developing relationships are not transitory. People from the community volunteer to serve in and promote the food pantry throughout their respective networks. Through those relationships, we hope to

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<sup>44</sup> Teutsch, *Spiritual Community*, 2.

build a stronger community. Since we emphasize the importance of connection and relationships, we focus on being the church God is calling us to be. Our church believes in the love of God and the grace of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. As a result of the pandemic, First Baptist is in a better place today than in 2014.

We open our church to families without church homes for funerals without charge. However, most of the funerals that we opened our doors to are for families from my hometown. We usually receive a generous donation after the services. We often receive gifts from two funeral homes each year around Christmas. We are learning by several examples that "religion and relationship go together."<sup>45</sup> As a church, we know that we cannot exist in isolation. We must be in a relationship with the community, other churches, with one another, and with God. To change the narrative to move our relationship forward. As Dr. Sweet stated, "Every lurch forward in the Christian tradition springs from the recovery of the true, not the discovery of the new."<sup>46</sup>

### Addressing Injustice While Mobilizing the Community for the Common Good

Most recently, with the George Floyd murder, one cannot but think that as an African American man, that could have been me or anyone I know. Their life would have been over instantly without hesitation. However, that statement may distort the truth since my opinion is rooted in theory and previous police shootings stories. Harari states, "Great power distorts the

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<sup>45</sup> Leonard Sweet, *So Beautiful: Divine Design for Life and the Church*, (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2009), 104.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid, 29.

truth. Power is all about changing reality rather than seeing it for what it is." <sup>45</sup> As a congregation, we see the power struggle to honor humanity and value black life as an injustice. It is rooted in the hatred and oppression of a time past. However, we cannot and must not relinquish the fight against injustice. As a church, we must speak for and to those who are on the margins of life.

The Sunday service, after witnessing the murder of George Floyd, the congregation's spirit was sober. A tragedy is often the time when being in worship with one another is comforting while grieving. I felt the need to get together as a congregation in a space where we could safely socially distance. I also extended invitations to the local clergy and the surrounding police departments. I contacted the mayor to book Dodge Field and to invite him as well. Pastor's I encouraged the pastors to ask their congregations, and the news spread.

On June 6, 2020, weeks after the George Floyd murder, our congregation gathered in Dodge Field in Madison along with about 20-25 police officers from Madison, Chatham Borough, and Florham Park, and 200 plus of our neighbors came together as the community prayed for our congregation, and we prayed for the police. We were opening the event with a statement of purpose for the gathering. The mayor of Madison shared words, then the police chiefs from Madison and Chatham Borough spoke. The local clergy were offering prayer and addressing the crowd. Gathering as a community and circling the police officers praying for their families and their safety was a powerful sight. Following the police's prayer, the community and clergy were circling our congregation, praying for us. We were out there for roughly two hours while people chatted from a safe distance. The moment seemed to have been a healing salve to

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<sup>45</sup> Yuval Noah Harari, *21 Lessons for the 21 Century Church*, (New York: Spiegel and Grau, 2018), 225.

many who were still overwhelmed by the pandemic and the police officer's callousness who murdered George Floyd.

Reflecting on the day's events, I envision a time when we can share outside of the tragic event. The First Baptist members, who are from Madison and longtime residents, were pleased with the event. Many commented that they had never experienced something like that before. I also reflected on the one or two in our church who felt that we should not have prayed for the police. In reading Downing, I understand that some protestors would prefer to retain the signs they are used to instead of getting closer to the truth. The truth is that we are working to develop a better relationship with all three police departments, and that act of grace and love is what we ought to do as Christians. We ought to strive for reconciliation and to display the love of Christ even when it goes against our visceral emotions and feelings.

After the event, one of the local pastors shared a day during a Zoom meeting. The pastor shared that an opportunity was lost with the police at the field that day. The pastor is speaking with a group of women from First Baptist Church, sharing that a group of local officers at the pastor's invitation approaching the women with the question, "What do black people want the police to know?" However, the conversation was a lost opportunity with another person coming to the group, as the pastor shared. I believe it was the pastor that missed an opportunity. Asking the pastor two questions, "What were the women's names that you spoke with?" and secondly, "Did you introduce the police to the women?" The pastor did not ask the women their names, nor did the pastor introduce the police to them. The pastor engaged in transactional action, missing an opportunity for relational gathering. How often have leaders in our churches and communities missed opportunities to mobilize because of self-interest? The story is a reminder of the importance of a relationship before trying to solve a perceived problem.

Moreover, as a result of that event, I am working with the police department in Chatham Township to establish a police chaplaincy program, similar to Madison and Chatham Borough's program. By having a presence in the respective police departments, I believe that the number of stops of black and brown people will decrease in Madison and the two Chatham's.

At First Baptist, we agree with Dr. Sweet's assessment, "Your church exists to love the world and to commission you for a mission of expanding beauty, truth, and goodness upon the earth."<sup>48</sup> We are doing our best to move consistently in that direction to address and eradicate injustice where we see it, feel it, and as others experience it. It is our goal to push out towards the edge of ministry. By edge, I mean taking risks to move out from the Madison area. Stepping out beyond our four walls and even expanding our target area. However, we must be aware and take note of the signs as we make the transition. The key to the growth will be how effectively we read the warnings of change in the community and the church. As Downing noted, "To stay on edge, Christians need to understand how characters make and change the meaning."<sup>49</sup>

#### New Ways of Mobilizing First Baptist for the Common Good

The church is heading in a new direction, focusing on community outreach as well as congregational in-reach. Through the pandemic, we are doing a better job of caring for one another in the church. The ministry leaders, deacons, deaconesses, and trustees have led ministry teams to connect with First Baptist members that we call Sheepfolds. They are to regularly contact each church family member to check-in and maintain the connection. The Sheepfold

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<sup>48</sup> Sweet, *So Beautiful*, 56.

<sup>49</sup> Downing, *Changing Signs of Truth*, 90-91.

ministry enables the leadership to be more proactive in reaching out to the church family. The feedback thus far is that the effort has a positive response from the members. We are making strides to become more missional. We are emphasizing mission in the church. As Dr. Sweet stated,

The mission is not an activity of the church but an attribute of God. God is a missionary, Jesus is a missionary Messiah, and the Spirit is a missionary Spirit. Missions is the family business<sup>50</sup>

We are beginning to understand and stress that "missional is who we are because it is who God is."<sup>51</sup> We are endeavoring to make disciples in diverse ways with one message: the gospel. I see our church doing more mission work in the community around immigration issues, food insecurity, sustainability, quality of life for seniors. I believe there is so much more we can do that does not take many resources and will have a significant impact, like expanding recycling programs that generate income for the church and help save the environment.

For example, our effort with Community Recycling, an organization that recycles shoes and sneakers to keep them out of landfills and creates insulation and other commercial uses. Community Recycling will compensate the church fifty cents a pound for a box of shoes. Community Recycling provides the boxes and the shipping labels; all we do is collect the shoes, box them up, and call UPS for pickup. Suburban Shoes, a local company, and The Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity, Inc. collect our recycling program's shoes. There are also people in the community who volunteer to do collection drives for us in their children's schools.

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<sup>50</sup> Sweet, *So Beautiful*, 55.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid, 57.

Through efforts like those and other opportunities that will come to us as we seek to connect with the community, our people will grow in their relationship with the Lord as we make disciples of Jesus. I desire to see the people grow in grace and love as we serve the Lord in Madison and beyond. However, we must not try to be all things to all people, and we must play to our mission and strengths to work with others who can deliver more effectively. We must become more open to joining in with others to work together to move toward the future.

As we move to become a Missional, Relational, and Incarnational church, as Dr. Sweet describes, we must be open to making mistakes along the way to launch out into the deep. We cannot continue to play close to the shore to be safe and complacent. We must prepare the church for the future, introducing new technology, a new model of content delivery, and finding ways to keep developing new connections. The goal is to create a model for ministry that will sustain itself in the coming years.

As a church, we have done reasonably well with building relationships since most of the church people grew up in Madison. The church is also doing well at welcoming the stranger as part of the church family. I believe that is due to the energy around the outreach ministries such as Family Promise, the senior meals, and the college student ministry. As a church, we will continue to extend ourselves to bereaved families and families going through crises. I believe and agree with Dr. Sweet again when he says, "The church is "sent" to be Jesus. Jesus is the blessing. As we incarnate Jesus into the world, we will find ourselves doing things he did, even "greater things." <sup>52</sup>

The more we strive to do "greater things," the more we will incarnate Jesus in our church and our community through what we do and say. I am excited, nervous, and enthusiastic about

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<sup>52</sup> Sweet, *So Beautiful*, 61.

the direction we are heading together as a church. There will be challenges in the future, but there will also be celebrations and moments of joy.

## CHAPTER 4

### THE PROJECT OF MOVING FROM TRANSACTIONAL ACTION TO RELATIONAL GATHERING

#### Project Title

Toward Mobilizing Communities for the Common Good: Moving from Transactional Action to Relational Gathering

#### The Project: Conversations with the Presbyterian Church of Chatham Township

The First Baptist Church invited the Presbyterian Church of Chatham Township (PCCT) to the table to share with and know their members via Zoom. The purpose of the gathering is to discover ways to mobilize the two congregations for the common good. Also, to find areas of collaboration through our respective ministries in our local churches and communities.

The conversation was born from a prior discussion via Zoom with their associate pastor. At the time, PCCT in the midst of transitioning from an interim pastor to a new pastor. However, their associate pastor had the support of the PCCT Session to begin the conversations. With the approval of the PCCT, we scheduled a series of four Zoom meetings inviting nine members from each congregation, including the ministers. In the invitation, the four conversations schedule: October 15, 29, and November 16, 30; and the meetings. They were sharing that we are gathering to extend our communities and reach out to our neighbors. Amid the pandemic and the national issues, the associate pastor of PCCT and I believe that we can transform our communities locally. Through our discussions, we can develop relationships leading to honest dialogue.

As a church, our bible studies were leading us toward connecting beyond our church and Madison community. We spent the last few years reading together the works of Howard Thurman, Francis Chan, David Benner, and Henry Blackaby, focusing on serving, discipleship and missions. According to those in bible study, the authors' writings were inspiring and challenging. They were forcing us as a study group to look inwardly, to examine our identity. To truly build community and work towards mobilizing for the common good, we need to be our most authentic selves. Authenticity allows us to participate in relational gatherings by being fully present without pretense. The work that leads us to our first challenging bible study discussion was David Benner's *The Gift of Being Yourself: The Sacred Call to Self-Discovery*. In Benner's work, we read:

In all creation, identity is a challenge only for humans. A tulip knows precisely what it is. It is never tempted by false ways of being...Humans, however, encounter a more challenging existence. We think. We consider options. We decide. We act. We doubt. Simple being is tremendously difficult to achieve and fully authentic being is extremely rare.<sup>53</sup>

Resultantly, as we read the works of various authors, the First Baptist members showed enthusiasm at the idea of connecting the PCCT through the Zoom meetings. Studying the multiple authors and the invitation to converse with PCCT is the beginning of our church truly moving towards mobilizing for the common good beyond their particular interest. The discussions with PCCT presents opportunities to live in an ever-expanding community. In previous years, a conversation with people from a church in Chatham Township would not have been top of mind for First Baptist Church members. However, as a community grows spiritually, the people are open to the conversation and enthusiastic about having the discussions.

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<sup>53</sup> David Benner, *The Gift of Being Yourself: The Sacred Call to Self-Discovery*, (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2015), 16.

By stepping outside of the comfort zones of the people in First Baptist and PCCT, we are laying the foundation for a new organization to form as our communities evolve. Through sharing and relationship building, we are showing forth the love of Christ and answering the call to move out beyond the church location through connecting with PCCT and the sharing of our stories.

The first conversation on October 15, 2020, was a meet and greeted with biographical sharing. Although our churches, due to the pandemic restricting us from coming together face to face, our relational gatherings are fruitful. We began by sharing an overview of our respective churches during the first meeting. Each person was introducing brief biographical information and sharing in the various ways we are serving in our churches.

The list of guiding questions for the first Zoom gathering:

1. How are you using your gifts and talents in the church and community?
2. What would you like to do that you are not doing currently?
3. What is the church doing beyond the four walls?

We learned that the Presbyterian Church of Chatham Township (PCCT) sponsors local and international mission trips. Each year during January, volunteers from the PCCT travel to Haiti for a week in partnership with the non-profit organization, Foundation for Peace, to build schools, churches, and homes. In June, during the summer vacation, the youth from PCCT travel domestically to work in other Christian communities to rebuild homes damaged by storms or floods. PCCT members also volunteer at the Community Food Bank of New Jersey and provide food, clothes, and toiletries to homeless people in Newark and Irvington. We bonded over Family Promise, a ministry that both of our churches support. We are learning that they are a host church as well. Since everyone was a willing participant, the conversation flowed

effortlessly. As people began sharing their Our story-time during the first gathering was rich and authentic.

As we FBC began sharing about our church about how our food pantry is fulfilling a need in the Madison and surrounding community. We share the results and our role in coordinating the COVID-19 testing in their town and Madison. Lastly, sharing how we are working with the police departments to improve community relations. Especially among our church and the police in light of the police shootings in our nation.

As the first gathering came to a close, we left feeling that we covered a lot of ground and addressing the initial list of guiding questions. The conversation though lighthearted, was also engaging. We also discussed ways in which we could support each other during the pandemic.

After the initial conversation, I met with First Baptist folks on the Zoom for their feedback. The members of FBC were impressed by the ministry of PCCT. Others stated that they needed to do more to serve. After the first meeting, it became apparent that our church was agreeing with Harari, "A community may begin as an online gathering, but to flourish truly, it will have to put down roots in the offline world too."<sup>54</sup>

Ultimately, we learned in our initial gathering that we have more in common through the stories shared.

As Paul states in Ephesians 4:1b-6:

I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is in all and through all in all. (NIV)

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<sup>54</sup> Harari, *21 Lessons for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, 88.

We are two churches in different neighborhoods and different ethnic backgrounds, but it is in and through Jesus Christ that we can come together to build a new community. A community that embraces diversity and celebrates our respective ministries. The first meeting's feedback was encouraging from the associate pastor PCCT and First Baptist Church members.

We scheduled the second Zoom gathering the week before Election Day, On October 29, 2020, this time with more people joining the conversation. From the first gathering to the second, the feeling was as though we were old friends. Noticeably absent was the sense of awkwardness. Everyone seemly was comfortable with one another, and the conversation was flowing.

The guiding questions for the second Zoom gathering:

1. What are the pressing issues that have our attention?
2. What are the possibilities for a new future?
3. How can we focus on the opportunities to work together as opposed to listing obstacles?
4. What is ideal for our communities?

It was apparent that the upcoming election was on the minds of everyone on the call. We prayed for the presidential election at the opening of the Zoom meeting. With the opening topic focusing on the election yet, everyone was hopeful that whoever won the election would focus on the pandemic. We did not directly talk politics or who was on the right or the left. We centered the conversation on the possibilities for a new future, asking, "What is our vision for the future?" Several on the call stating they were hopeful, and our coming together was a contributing factor to their sense of hopefulness. We were spending more time focusing on the opportunities for ministry than the community's problems, also discussing the possibility of joining their Haiti relief efforts, working together with Family Promise. Members of PCCT

asking how they could volunteer in our food pantry. At the close of the meeting, we wondered if people would come with what they thought would be ideal for our communities.

The third meeting was two weeks after the election and a week before Thanksgiving. We discussed how the pandemic or if the pandemic was going to alter their ministry during the holiday season. Both PCCT and First Baptist members felt that people in the community were more generous this year. We discussed the number of people reaching out to our church, offering to donate food or monetary gifts to the church to support our food pantry. The response of the community around Thanksgiving is similar to the reaction around other perceived needs. It is a gathering of the neighbors in *communitas*.

The guiding questions for the third Zoom gathering on November 16:

1. How has the pandemic altered how we do ministry?
2. Have people in your church and community become more altruistic?
3. What are people feeling post-election?
4. How are your Thanksgiving plans altered due to the pandemic?

We skipped the question regarding how people are feeling post-election. Since we are still in the relationship gathering phase, it seems as if a belief that talking politics would potentially polarize the meeting. However, addressing the topic indirectly as we talked about Thanksgiving plans. Members of PCCT stated they were glad that family gatherings would just be those in their homes for reasons previously mentioned. Some shared that there were heated debates over the presidential candidates within their families leading up to the election.

First Baptist members were sharing how strange it would feel with fewer people coming together for Thanksgiving dinner. Most people are used to large family gatherings with extended

family guests also in attendance: Thanksgiving 2020 and the presence of COVID-19 altering dramatically family dinners.

Overall, the people seem to be feeling more anxious as the COVID-19 numbers in New Jersey are on the rise. One person on the call who works at Newark's Beth Israel Hospital discussed the Newark mayor's order of a ten-day shutdown. The pandemic has impacted all our lives for nine months, and we debated COVID fatigue. We spent a good deal of time on pandemic-related issues to avoid the election discussion. However, that is part of the getting to know one another process, and it was too early in the building of the community to address a hot topic. As we continue the dialogue, we will be ready to transcend any fears, apprehensions, and anxieties around the election results and the current president's response to the outcome shortly. We are still feeling each other out. As we learn more about one another, trust will develop as well.

The fourth conversation was after Thanksgiving. The guiding questions for the fourth Zoom gathering on November 30:

1. How was your Thanksgiving holiday?
2. What seemed normal over the holiday?
3. What felt peculiar during the holiday?
4. How are you approaching Christmas as a church and in your family?

Everyone took turns reflecting on their holiday time with family and friends, with several people sharing how the Zoom platform was part of their holiday gatherings. People had virtual family dinners with their children who live out of state. While Others sharing, there were fewer food choices and fewer dishes to wash. We can share laughter and where we are at a place where we remember people's names and faces. The fourth gathering was the most intimate of the four,

mainly because we are intentional and committed to coming together and sharing. The convening of the community involves commitment and a sense of belonging. As Peter Block states:

Community, as used here, is about the experience of belonging. We are in a community each time we find a place where we belong. The word belong has two meanings. First and foremost, To belong is to be related to and a part of something. 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 nurture. The work, then, is to seek in our communities. A broader and more profound sense of emotional ownership; it means fostering among all of a community's citizens a sense of ownership and accountability.<sup>54</sup>

Our two churches agreed that the conversations are rewarding. We have a sense of belonging to one another as sisters and brothers in Christ. The members of PCCT are going to conduct a food drive to support our food pantry. Two of their members work in health care, and we discussed the COVID-19 vaccine and the process the state will use to deploy the vaccines. We may have the possibility to be an informational hub for the community.

The members of First Baptist have come away from each conversation with new insight into ministry and outreach. The diversity of the people at the Zoom meeting lends itself to new and creative ideas regarding ministry. For our church, the people seem more excited about ministry and bible study.

### The Proposed Project and the Pivot

The proposed project was to begin during the 2020 Lenten Season. The topic, “The First Baptist Church of Madison: Moving from Serving the Table to Convening the Table.” The guiding question, “What would the church and the community become if First Baptist Church took the lead in convening the community to the table of friendship.”

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<sup>54</sup> Block, Community, XII

The birth of the idea began in 2016 with the Beloved Community Conversations. The conversations brought together several individuals and organizational stakeholders in Madison. The downside of the Beloved Community Conversations was that people wanted to address the problems in the town. The conversations began as a community-building initiative was hijacked by those who wished to address white privilege and racism in the community. As a result, the conversations lost momentum and eventually ceased.

However, the Beloved Community Conversation did produce a few positive initiatives in Madison. The discussions led to the student-led Beloved Community Peace March. The three local colleges, Fairleigh Dickinson University, Drew University, and the Saint Elizabeth University, participate, coinciding with the International Day of Peace.

My initial proposal for the project was to bring people together at the table to share a meal and build relationships to prepare to mobilize for the common good. I am extending the invitation to the community to come to the table for conversation and communion. I believe that both First Baptist Church and the Madison Borough will become a more robust and healthier community through the table talks. A healthier community may increase community involvement, church renewal, authentic connections, and a reimagined sense of identity for both the church and the community. As Harari states, “To flourish, we still need to ground ourselves in intimate communities.”<sup>56</sup>

The pandemic causing me to pivot from the initial project led to our current project with PCCT. Although we are not meeting at the table, we adapt to the current conditions and create an intimate community. As a shift in my project occurred, there was also a shift in First Baptist

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<sup>56</sup> Harari, *21 Lessons*, 86

people's minds through our conversations with PCCT. Carl Savage and William Presnell write, “The identity of the congregation or other ministry site is shaped by its ever-changing story, clarity about its current identity may also surface. . .”<sup>57</sup>

As we reimagine our identity as a church community and the shift in our mindset, the relationship with PCCT proves to be a tremendous blessing for both congregations. The more we come together and learn to work together, the closer we will become as a church family.

Through extending ourselves to PCCT, Sweet states, “Your church exists to love the world and to commission you for a mission of expanding beauty, truth, and goodness upon the earth.”<sup>58</sup> We are doing our best to show forth the love of Christ in the world. We realize that we are to create community and build relationships through the love of God as we seek to mobilize toward the common good. To establish a loving community, we must be in a loving relationship with God, central to our faith walk. In Colossians 3:12-14 states:

Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. Bear with each other and forgive one another if any, has a grievance against someone, forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity. (NIV)

We are moving towards mobilizing communities for the common good through our dialogues with PCCT. As we mobilize the community, we can create a safe neighborhood for the children and have an overall healthy place to live and support one

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<sup>57</sup> Carl Savage and William Presnell, *Narrative Research in Ministry: A Postmodern Research Approach for Faith Communities*, (Louisville: Wayne Oates Institute), 78.

<sup>58</sup> Sweet, *So Beautiful*, 56.

another. We are continuing the conversations with PCCT, and future potential questions to discuss are:

1. How do we deal with the neighbor-to-neighbor dialogue we need to have?
2. How do we address neighbors' cultural misperceptions?
3. How do we inform others that listening and understanding is an act of love?
4. How do we begin to develop the moral courage to make difficult decisions? As individual? As community?
5. In what ways can we inspire community hospitality?
6. What do health and healing look like in our community?
7. What are we doing, seeing and hearing?
8. What is happening now?
9. If healing happens, how will things look different?
10. Can you have genuine healing if you're looking at the wrong disease?
11. How do we welcome the hurting to the conversation? The students, seniors, and immigrants?

#### Sermons Preached During the Project: Pre and Post Zoom Meetings

During the project, the sermons addressed the day's issues and called our community to focus on God's love and persevere in the faith. The sermons' aim before the Zoom meetings with PCCT was also part of the preparation for the sessions and the bible study.

The first sermon, two weeks before our first conversation, "The Power of a Unified Church," Philippians 2:1-13, the sermon aimed to draw the congregation's attention to the strength of unity. Unity is both the church and in the community in preparation for future efforts to mobilize. Often people support with their lips and not their presence. It was essential to lay the foundation for being on one accord. We would enter a new relationship in a community previously thought to be off-limits due to perceptions. However, when we conducted COVID-19 testing in Chatham Township, the reception was more incredible than expected.

The second sermon, "When All You Have Left is Just What You Need," Mark 5:21-43, was on the Sunday before the first gathering. The sermon's focus was to encourage the people to

put their faith in Jesus. Since Chatham Township is affluent and First Baptist's perception was that the people from the church would not be receptive to our gathering. In the sermon, I directed the people's attention to taking inventory of their life and resources and not focusing on what they do not have.

I preached the third sermon, "Good News for Tired People," Isaiah 40:27-31, before the election. I was sensing that the congregation was tired of all the conflict and challenges people faced before the election: mail-in ballots and Trump's continual lying regarding the vote and COVID-19. Also, in the news, the police shooting victims and the new Supreme Court have sworn in just ahead of the Affordable Care Act hearing. People were tired of all that was going on in the world.

After the election and before our next Zoom meeting with PCCT, I preached the fourth sermon, "A Call to Christian Love," Philippians 4:1-9. In the sermon, I stressed the importance of love as foundational for our relationship with Jesus and others. As we were entering the post-Trump presidency, love was the order of the day. In our congregation, the feeling was as though we were still awaiting the results of the election. As a pastor, I sought to draw their attention to Christ's love for humanity.

Thanksgiving 2020 was a new experience for everyone. Our food pantry was well stocked through the generous donations of the community. The food pantry was a place of mobilization of the community for the common good. The sermon for the Sunday just after Thanksgiving and before our next gathering entitled, "The Church That God Desires," 1 Corinthians 1:3-9. The sermon's timing was on the first day of Advent, and our attention ought to lead people to Christ. However, we were looking forward to our next Zoom meeting with PCCT. We were becoming one church, two locations.

The second Sunday in Advent and after our fourth conversation with PCCT, I was led to preach the sermon, “A Shepherd’s Love from Psalm 23. As we approached the end of the year and Christmas, we were facing new calls for pandemic lockdowns. There was hope with the news of a vaccine almost ready for deployment. The focus was on God’s love that cares and nurtures us, and we are to share that love with others. (The full texts of the sermons are in the Appendix.)

The Zoom meetings with the Presbyterian Church of Chatham Township are foundational to mobilizing communities for the common good: moving from transactional action to relational gatherings. Our gatherings may have begun as a transaction. However, the sessions are genuinely relational gatherings of two very different congregations. Although from different socio-economic backgrounds, we found common ground through our relationship with Jesus Christ. The Zoom gatherings are opening our congregation to the possibilities of collaborating with other congregations and community groups.

## CHAPTER 5

### FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

The challenge as pastor of First Baptist Church in mobilizing communities for the common good: moving from transactional action to a relational gathering to build a coalition of stakeholders who recognize the benefit of coming together in unity. People are used to meetings, and meetings are often transactional. In meetings, people tend to negotiate or share information, or debate issues. On the other hand, people gather to celebrate or share a burden.

The gatherings with the Presbyterian Church of Chatham Township are proving the strength in relationships. Extend the conversations beyond the four weeks is proving to be fruitful. PCCT's new pastor is part of the conversation, and we have met in person. The pastor taught their children the different modes of baptism and came over to our church to video me explaining the Baptist way.

The pivot from the initial project is providing insight into the power of intimate gatherings for mobilizing communities. The small private groups offer opportunities for people to be more open in the discussion. As we move forward, it will be crucial to extend the invitation to other faith communities and organizations to build a coalition for mobilization.

The invitation must take into account and proper assessment of the needs of the community. Also, the invitation to mobilize cannot be selfish or self-serving. The gathering must come from a sincere place of service and understanding. Some people may want to gather to address the problems without developing relationships with other people immediately. However, the outcome of the project proves that approach would hinder solid building relationships.

In today's society, people have become accustomed to living independent and individualistic lives. In *The Abundant Community*, McKnight and Block state:

Real satisfaction, as opposed to counterfeit satisfaction, is a collective occurrence. It can occur only through our relatedness, our associated life, our neighbors, and our community. When we seek satisfaction at the mall, neighborhood, and community, pay the price.<sup>59</sup>

It is not uncommon to see families, couples, or friends out to dinner without people continually checking their phones or taking pictures of the meal to share on social media. The closing of the malls during the pandemic increased people's dependence on Amazon to fulfill their need to be consumers. McKnight and Block further state:

When consumption becomes the path to satisfaction, there is a powerful though barely noticed erosion in our power to be complete human beings. We increasingly choose to escape from silence and empty time. We organize our life with a constant stream of activities, work, and entertainment.<sup>60</sup>

The COVID-19 pandemic was a reboot of sorts. People were home due to the murder of George Floyd catalyzing social justice. Communities in and around Madison are holding Black Lives Matter teach-ins and rallies. The local churches are also addressing the crime and the callousness of the officer.

The response to the murder of George Floyd in Madison and surrounding communities on June 6, 2020, was far more than I could have imagined. I am glad the people were at home and saw the video footage on a continuous loop. The tragic death of George Floyd was an opportunity to mobilize the community toward the common good. A chance to address the hurt, anger, and shock for many of Madison's larger white society. However, on the other hand, for

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<sup>59</sup> McKnight, Block, *The Abundant Community*, 57.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid, 57.

the First Baptist members who are predominantly African American, the murder added to this new type of lynching trauma.

The spirit of the times due to the incident led to an opportunity to mobilize as a community. The event on June 6<sup>th</sup>, inspiring the vision of mobilizing communities for the common good with law enforcement, clergy, and Madison's people. Initially, the gathering was for our church to come together in the social distance to be in one another's presence. There was a desire to gather as a church due to the haze hovering over the Zoom worship service the Sunday prior. After discussing the gathering with church leadership, the expansion led to a mobilizing to include the community. The community came together to pray for our church, and we prayed for our local police officers.

The lessons from the June 6<sup>th</sup> gathering led to our Zoom meetings with the Presbyterian Church of Chatham Township. I was seeing and experiencing first-hand the problem with transactional action.

After the prayer and community, one pastor from a predominantly white church began asking First Baptist members what they wanted the police to know. The pastor called over to the impromptu meeting of several officers from their town. However, the conversation ended abruptly. During our next Interfaith meeting, the pastor brought up the aborted conversation as a missed opportunity. I asked the pastor a couple of questions regarding the encounter. The first question, "What are the people's names that you spoke to from First Baptist?" and the second question, "Did you introduce yourself and the police to them?" The pastor said, "No," because he did not want to lose the opportunity. Unfortunately for the pastor, it was a transactional action. The pastor, missing the chance to establish a relationship with both the women and the

police. In a convening community, we cannot dismiss the need to develop relationships as foundational for a long-term commitment.

Moving toward mobilizing communities for the common good is not as simple as I initially thought. I saw that event as potentially leading to something more significant. However, with the ability to mobilize communities for the common good, one must take time to build relationships intentionally. Without solid relationships, any attempt of mobilizing for the common good will not succeed without a long-term commitment to people who desire to establish connections.

When I sent invitations to the community to gather to pray for our first responders and thank them for their service during the pandemic, we had far less than 200 plus people attend and even fewer first responders. Although my intention was good, the result was far less than I desired. This is a crucial lesson, mobilize a community for the common good, too, like the pastor from the predominantly white church should have taken the time to get to know more people at Dodge Field on June 6.

Though not well attended, the second gathering sparked the conversation that led to our church and the Presbyterian Church of Chatham Township engaging in mobilizing for the common good with our two congregations—also providing an opportunity to embrace the fluidity of the moment. I took the chance to reflect on the lessons and setbacks of ministry I experienced from the second gathering to invite another congregation to a diverse conversation around ministry and service to God.

The project was a pivot from my initial plan, taking place over meals during the Lenten season. Since we could not gather in person, Zoom provided a reliable platform for building our relationship with the Presbyterian Church of Chatham Township. Expanding the conversation

will help us in avoiding what James O. Duke and Howard W. Stone caution in their work, “Limiting the circle of conversation partners in advance whether due to prejudice or ignorance is always a theologian’s loss. That makes it the church’s loss as well.”<sup>61</sup> The conversation with PCCT helps our church move beyond their skepticism and apprehension of people from other ethnic and racial backgrounds. We accept that racism exists; however, we must challenge ourselves not to view every white person as racist.

To move beyond perceiving every white person as racist. As the church, we have to become good listeners and be able to raise practical questions. The art of questioning leads to understanding and insight into a person’s ideology and worldview. Duke and Stone also state:

Two standard techniques: listening and questioning. Listening involves an active waiting that allows new information in, is prepared to be surprised, remains open to the illumination of the Spirit. Questioning is a corrective to complacency—the danger of becoming satisfied with old answers preconceptions. We subject our answers of yesterday to fresh questioning to embrace new situations and new insights. The aim of listening is receptivity; the objective of questioning is honesty.<sup>62</sup>

We are listening, questioning, and aiming to deepen the relationship with the people from the Presbyterian Church of Chatham Township. The two listening and questioning skills move us beyond our comfortable and complacent space to a place where we are open to engaging one another in open and honest dialogue. The space for open and honest discussion is often lacking due to the fear of being vulnerable. However, as we build trust and people feel more relaxed, it will enrich the dialogue.

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<sup>61</sup> James O. Duke and Howard W. Stone, *How to Think Theologically*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., (Minneapolis: Augsburg Press), 5.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid, VIII.

The four Zoom meetings with the Presbyterian Church of Chatham Township are instrumental in laying the groundwork for future conversations. We are planning to continue the Zoom meetings as we grow in our relationship with the two churches. The sessions are allowing us to share our anxieties around the pandemic. The sharing of stories is a powerful means of healing for both congregations. In sharing our stories, Vogl states:

There must also be stories about how the community's values are expressed and how they affect real people. These stories will tell everyone far more about community identity than everything else combined. When you think about communities, you appreciate and consider what stories are told to newcomers and shared over and over again among members. These stories represent the values all hope to embody.<sup>63</sup>

The sharing of our stories helps us understand what each community values and what values we share. The Presbyterian Church of Chatham Township, as a worshipping community, values their relationships with one another. They also participate in and love international and domestic mission work. It is clear from our discussion that our church is not as adventurous when it comes to foreign missions. Mainly because in the traditional African American church, the missionary auxiliary or ministry's focus was primarily on their local church's initiatives. As a result of the project, we will extend our reach beyond Madison Borough. The convening of our two churches is inspiring to our church. I realize that it is the coming together with others outside your denomination, social, and ethnic community that will lead to a deeper understanding of self and call to ministry. As Flowers and Vannoy state, "Embracing your neighbors is an attitude before it's an action."<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Vogl, *The Art of Community*, 77.

<sup>64</sup> Flowers, Vannoy, *Adapt to Thrive*, 79.

As a pastor, I will continue encouraging First Baptist members to take risks and reach out to other churches and communities to converse and, if possible, collaborate. The pandemic caused us to shift the focus of our outreach ministries as well as the worship experience. Through Bible study and Sunday School discussions, I discovered that First Baptist members were afraid to get tested for COVID-19. One of the deacons in our church and their daughter contracted the virus early on after our last worship service on March 15, 2020. The church shut down due to the COVID-19 virus and learning that St. Matthew A.M.E. Church in Orange, NJ, was offering the COVID-19 test for free through the governor's initiative. Although a negative test for COVID-19 is yet testing positive for the antibodies. As a result, it was essential to initiate a call to the pastor of St. Matthew, who then connected with the testing company for First Baptist Church to conduct COVID-19 testing in Madison.

After connecting with the testing company, the next step to reach out to the mayor's office, the health department, and the Madison YMCA to see if they would provide the testing space. After hearing from the mayor and the health department, the town did not have an available space to conduct the testing. The Madison YMCA president was responding to the ask by offering the YMCA as the site for testing. After agreeing on the testing dates, we as a church were ecstatic about coordinating the testing for Madison and surrounding area residents. However, the press release failing to mention First Baptist's involvement. The mayor, the health department director, Madison Y staff, and the testing team in the photo. As a pastor, it is vital for our church members for the local media and Madison YMCA to notice our involvement is in organizing the testing. When mobilizing for the common good, be prepared to deal with those who will seek political or selfish gains through your efforts.

Mobilizing the community for the COVID-19 tests, as an African American pastor of a small church in Madison and collaborating with well-established entities, one has to fight to be heard and be assertive to establish our place in history. Reaching out to the mayor, the health department director, and the Madison YMCA president to find out why we were left out of the story and only receiving apologies. The Madison YMCA's president was apologetic. In asking the mayor and the health department director what role they did in organizing the testing. It was vital for me to address all parties and report my actions and responses back to the church in addressing the matter further by writing a letter to the local paper editor. It was essential to my pastoral identity. The voice of prophetic fire was necessary for the congregation to know that we would not accept the dismissal or minimize our role in coordinating the testing.

For far too long, the African American community has been invisible or seen as inferior to the larger Madison community. William H. Willimon writes,

Community is a great virtue, but there must be limits upon the community for there to be a community. A community with no boundaries for appropriate community behavior is no community.<sup>65</sup>

By addressing all parties involved and sharing my follow-up emails and a letter to the local paper editor, the church members were proud for taking a stand for them and the church.

As a pastor, it is essential that I continue to mobilize the community, whether for long-term relationships or in response to the current issue that is consuming the community's focus and attention. Equally important is learning to be aware of the opportunities as they present

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<sup>65</sup> William H. Willimon, *Calling and Character: Virtues of the Ordained Life*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000), 73.

themselves and pay attention to those in the room being sensitive to their comfort level without minimizing the issue to make them comfortable.

I learned that in mobilizing the community for the common good, one ought to be strategic and focus on building relationships. However, I also know that one must be open to leading the Holy Spirit. We should never get ahead of God. It takes patience and love to mobilize the community.

As I reflect on the Madison Interfaith Council, calling the local clergy is a lesson in mobilizing and building relationships. It takes patience as I email the church with a list of the dates with the Zoom link. I will receive emails inquiring about the next meeting, and they would not attend. The one time I sent an email stating that we would not meet, nearly everyone sent emails apologizing and promising to attend the next meeting. As we gathered for the next meeting, pastors were open and honest about the feeling of helplessness and the isolation of COVID-19 from not being able to gather for worship. A few were sharing their grief over the loss of loved ones and parishioners—another moment of fluidity.

People are experiencing feelings and emotions that prevent some clergy from opening up. However, I remind myself that where two or three come together, Jesus will show up. As Willimon also reminds us that “Ministers, like all Christians, are called to embody the faith that we profess.”<sup>66</sup>

As I reflect on my project's implications and the larger context beyond my soil, the pandemic has taught me one has to remain flexible and fluid. As a church, we ought to focus on the community's needs and trust that God will provide our needs as we mobilize for the common good. The outpouring of love and generosity toward our church as a result of our food pantry is

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid, 8.

impressive. People will walk by our pantry and give monetary donations. Others will drive up with food donations. It is also a blessing to provide those in our community and congregation who come for the food. I stress that the food pantry is for our members too because some felt embarrassed by coming. I witness a new level of compassion among the members for one another and the community.

I am also learning that there is a national narrative regarding police relations and the African American community. I must keep an eye and ear to the national story and its effects on our congregation while maintaining our congregation's local relationship to vilify officers through the national discourse. I will continue to avail myself to the local police and recognize their humanity outside the uniform and in the uniform. For example, recently, I was co-officiant at the Madison Police chief's wedding. I was with the Madison Police chief, who lost their spouse to cancer a few years ago. I was honored to participate in their marriage. I was recently asked to be part of the hiring process for new officers in Madison. The invitation to be part of the hiring process is truly an opportunity to impact Madison and the community beyond my soil.

As a pastor, my identity will continue to be shaped and formed as my story evolves. I was born into a loving family. I have had opportunities that others could only dream about—playing college football at Ohio State University. Also, playing football at the highest level, the National Football League, although brief, I can say I was there. To work for two major media companies and travel the country to work with schools and colleges. To work for an international company and travel transpacific and be exposed to different cultural experiences. All these experiences had an impact on me as a person and as a pastor. I am learning to integrate those experiences in what I am doing as a pastor while remaining open to new opportunities.

As Downing wrote:

Christians are called to love the whole world, which includes the cultures in which we are embedded. For only by loving culture can we become effective communicators.”<sup>67</sup>

I realize that people must learn to love the culture they are embedded in, just as I must love the Madison community and its culture. I also cannot forget the words of Samuel Proctor, “The pastor, like everyone else, was born and reared in a certain cultural ethos that she or he inherited.”<sup>68</sup> My experience as a child, through adulthood, and presently in Madison contribute to my pastoral identity.

As a pastor, I must tune into the issues and concerns that affect our congregation and the community. The pandemic has led to an increase in domestic violence and alcohol abuse in Madison how people have been able to grieve the loss of loved ones. The first funeral I officiated during the pandemic, the funeral home allotting the family fifteen minutes for the service. The brevity of the services remains a challenge for me as a pastor.

First Baptist Church's role in mobilizing the community and my role as pastor will continue to evolve. Our church is moving away from its feeling of invisibility to mobilizing the community toward the common good. Moreover, we know that we can take the lead as long as we as a church feel empowered to speak up and extend the invitation.

In the future, we will mobilize the community around shared values and the church community around those values and faith in God. Concerning ourselves with the larger community, not just First Baptist and Madison Borough. As Rabbi Teutsch states:

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<sup>67</sup> Downing, *Changing Signs of Truth*, 28.

<sup>68</sup> Samuel D. Proctor, Gardner C. Taylor, *We Have This Ministry: The Heart of the Pastor's Vocation*, (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1996), 112.

A community must be concerned with the larger society, learning from the outside world and interacting with it in various ways. We need to recognize that obligations flow from both hesed, caring covenantal commitment and from the community's place in the larger society.<sup>69</sup>

I must have a strong witness of faith in Jesus and an impeccable character. I must be a person of scholarship and study, as I have learned through this project. The more I read and prepare, the better I will become at equipping the ministry's church. I must be constantly aware of my blind spots and shortcomings. I ought to be open to feedback from colleagues and congregants. I cannot allow myself to be dismissive of anyone. I must be available to God's leading and be the first follower. There are people beyond First Baptist's walls who believe that God is far away from them and that the church is irrelevant. Unfortunately, some churches co-sign that thought unintentionally. However, when we fail to continually look inward and raise difficult questions, we can often blame the community for not being spiritual enough or viewing the community as the enemy. We have to be open to how God chooses to work for such a time as this.

By being open to the Lord's leading and being flexible during the pandemic, we have increased the number of community partners we share in the church's ministry. Allowing our church to gain access to new resources, businesses, educational opportunities, and partnerships. One such opportunity is my appointment to the Board of Trustees at Saint Elizabeth University. I am a police chaplain in Madison, Montclair, and Chatham Borough. In the summer of 2020, receiving several invitations to speak at Black Lives Matter teach-ins and other rallies. In the future, I see books, podcasts, and other opportunities for our congregation. I see international

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<sup>69</sup> Teutsch, *Spiritual Community*, 22.

missions for people in the congregation through our relationship with the Presbyterian Church of Chatham Township.

We, as a church, must remind the community that was being responsible for one another. We are, by nature, social beings created in the image of God. We are to glorify God in all we do. The church cannot afford to be apprehensive regarding welcoming the stranger. We have to teach first Baptist members not to be reticent about sharing their faith and testimony. We cannot become fearful nor boastful. Instead, we must remain humble. As a pastor, I must remain alert to the changing signs and stay connected to Madison's terroir.

Rev. Marvin McMickle writes his work, *Be My Witness: The Great Commission for Preachers*, "Seeing something means taking note of what is happening in the lives of the most vulnerable and needy in society."<sup>70</sup> My prophetic voice has to be alerted to speak for those who have not yet found their voice. I am committed to the call to the Gospel ministry and as pastor of First Baptist Church, which means interceding on behalf of the vulnerable and the needy. The police officers are dealing with sick children. There are people in the town dealing with mental health issues. The helpless are the immigrant population who work in the city, but some people fail to view them as community members. Some affluent foreign-born people are afraid for their children will experience bullying in the Madison school district. And there are members of my congregation who have due to gentrification forcing them to relocate out of town.

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<sup>70</sup> Marvin A. McMickle, *Be My Witness: The Great Commission for Preachers*, (Valley Forge: Judson Press), 69.

However, as we mobilize the community for the common good, we can begin to restore human dignity through the love of God. We, as a church, will move away from transactional action to relational gathering: mobilizing the community toward the common good.

As Howard Thurman writes:

In the experience of mankind, the attitude or act that triggers this release of fresh vigor and vitality is singleness of mind. This means surrendering the life at the very core of one's self-consciousness to a single end, goal or purpose.<sup>71</sup>

I will focus with the singleness of mind and open to leading God's loving Spirit as I work to continue to lead our church and the Borough of Madison from transactional action to the relational gathering: toward mobilizing communities for the common good.

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<sup>71</sup> Howard Thurman, *Disciplines of the Spirit*, (Richmond: United Press), 19.

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## Appendix 1

Philippians 2:1-13 "The Power of a Unified Church."

African proverbs:

"If you want to go quickly, go alone. If you want to go far, go together." "Ubuntu – I am because we are."

"If you think you are too small to make a difference, you haven't spent the night with a mosquito."

"When there is no enemy within, the enemies outside cannot hurt you."

Margaret Mead, American Cultural Anthropologist

"Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has."

The notion that we are products of our environment is our greatest sin; we are products of our choices.

When we are unified, there is nothing that the church and community cannot accomplish. There are times in our history when we were able to achieve more with less. For the simple reason, like in the days of Nehemiah. The people had a mind to work. When you put your mind to a task and commit to it, the desire will come to fruition or something that exceeded your expectations more often than a notion.

Every believer is called to oneness in Christ.

In our text, we find Paul with an appeal for unity to the believers in Philippi.

It is an appeal for unity, from which rises the great passage which speaks of the selfless humility of Jesus Christ (2:1–11). For there to be unity in the church and community, we ought to move past our selfish ambitions and humble ourselves in the sight of God.

Our ability to unify is rooted and grounded in our relationship with Jesus Christ. We are comforted from disappointment and consoled when in physical pain. We are in a relationship

with the Spirit of God with love and mercy. Because we are in this relationship with God through Jesus Christ, then we are moving in love.

The unified church fulfills the joy of the community of faith. The community is like-minded. Not same-minded. We do not all have to think the same. We will, however, share our perspectives and gain insight from one another. No one person has all the answers, but we can find the answers and solve the problems together. That's being like-minded.

We ought to have the same love and on one accord. Of one mind,

**Motivation:**

*Let nothing be done* through selfish ambition or conceit,

**Attitude:**

but in lowliness of mind, let each esteem others better than himself.

Let each of you look out not only for his interests but also for the interests of others.

Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus,

**Description:**

who, being in the form of God, did not consider it <sup>[b]</sup>robbery to be equal with God,

**What did He do?**

But made Himself of no reputation,  
taking the form of a bondservant and coming in the likeness of men.  
And being found in appearance as a man,  
He humbled Himself and became obedient to *the point of* death,  
even the end of the cross.

The sacrifice on the cross was for you and me. He bled and died for us.

**Jesus's great reward:**

Therefore, God also has highly exalted Him  
and given Him the name, which is above every name,

## The Result

That at the name of Jesus

1. every knee should bow, of those in heaven,
2. and of those on earth,
3. and of those under the world,

and *that* every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ *is* Lord, to the glory of God, the Father.

## Paul's request:

Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for *His* good pleasure.

The power of a unified church lies in the faithfulness of God's people. It is up to you and me not to be imitators of Christ; instead, we are to be the incarnation of Christ here on earth. We are to embody the love of Christ to a love-starved world.

We have to have the mind of Christ, which is to maintain a focus on God.

When the church is unified, walls fall. See Jericho

When the church is unified, walls are rebuilt

When the church is unified, the spirit of God moves. See Pentecost.

When the church is unified, we become fishers of people, see Jesus at the fish fry

When the church is unified. We can feed 5000, see the lad who had a fish sandwich

When the church is unified, the cross loses its shame and becomes a symbol of victory.

When the church is unified, you and I can do exceedingly, abundantly above all that we can ask or imagine.

Jesus restored a sinner to unity on the cross, with the words, this day!

This day, we have all we need

This day we have the Lord on our side

On this day, we have been redeemed from death, hell, and the grave.

This day we can shout for this is the day the Lord has made; we shall never see another one like it.

## Appendix 2

## "When All You Have Left is Just What You Need" Mark 5:21-43

The year of our Lord 2020 has brought on multiple sets of challenges. The likes of which we have never seen, and hopefully we will never see again. The death of Kobe Bryant, the rise of this pandemic has shut the nation and the world indoors. A pandemic plague has decimated families, destroyed dreams, and allowed death to cast a pall over our communities.

As a nation, we have watched protests and riots in response to the many deaths of young men and women at the hands of law enforcement. We heard the dog whistle to the proud boys. We even held our breaths until word of this week's election outcome was announced. Yes, some celebrated, and some were angry.

Our hope is built on nothing less than Jesus' blood and righteousness; I dare not trust the sweetest frame but wholly lean on Jesus' name. On Christ, the solid rock we stand on all other ground is sinking sand.

We may sing the hymn, but the truth of the matter is that there are times when our hope wanes. Doubts creep in, and we are overcome by fear. The truth is we are only human. Even the biblical giants we read about had moments of doubt and fear. Moses talked about his stutter. Jeremiah focused on his youth. Esther feared that she had not been summoned. Gideon needed to test God with a fleece.

All of us trembled in the face of adversity and the challenges of life at one time or another. Who has never wondered if a particular situation was going to work out in your favor? Who hasn't worried in anticipation of a diagnosis? Who hasn't paused and prayed until you received word that you were hired for the new job?

It came down to all we had left, hope.

It was Langston Hughes who said, "Hold fast to dreams, for if dreams die, Life is a broken-winged bird that cannot fly."

Author Roy T. Bennett stated, "Never lose hope. Storms make people stronger and never last forever."

The bible puts it this way, Abraham, "contrary to hope, in hope believed."

In the book *Just Mercy*, Walter McMillian spent six years on death row for a crime he did not commit. Six years of this man's life was robbed from him, and the justice system simply says, "Oops! We made a mistake." Six years of lamenting and declaring his innocence and yet falling on deaf ears until one day someone said, let's re-look at the case. Imagine crying out for help for years and being overlooked, overshadowed, and ignored. How would you feel? What would you think? Would you resort to taking matters into your own hands if you could? What would your response be?

You have come to the end of your rope, and there is not much left in you but the desire to make it better if it is at all possible.

There are times when all you have left is just what you need. What we need is to place our hope and faith in the Lord. Trust in Him; he will never leave us nor forsake us.

I am glad that with God when all I have left is just what I need. Like Moses's staff, David's slingshot and one of five stones, Daniel using lions for a pillow, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, a fiery furnace,

**Every believer is called to put his or her absolute faith and trust in Jesus.**

This morning, we read of two people who came to Jesus with all they had left in our text. Jairus was a wealthy and important man, but his wealth could not save his daughter. His daughter is at the point of death, and with him being a ruler in the synagogue, the priests and the temple servants could not help his situation. He came running to Jesus and fell at his feet, begging Jesus to save his daughter.

While Jesus is going with him, there appeared an unnamed woman. She breaks into history with a thought and a touch. All she had left was a thought and a contact. The text says she spent all her money on cures for her ailment. Instead of getting better, she grew worse. She thought that if she could just touch his hem, she would be made whole. A simple touch that has inspired many to sing about her and identify with that one moment of desperation. All she had left was just what she needed. Faith in Jesus and hope that she would be cured.

When we have exhausted all other avenues of help, and we have faith in Jesus and trusting in Him: there is help, there is hope, and there is healing in the name of Jesus.

When all you have left is just what you need. We can go to Jesus for help, hope, and healing.

The text says, Jairus came to Jesus and fell at his feet. Jairus was a leader in the synagogue. His name meant one who shines. But the truth is that he was not the source of the light. We can

surmise that he probably tried everything, and when all he had left was just what he needed, he came to Jesus.

He probably heard about the many healings and miracles Jesus had performed throughout the region. News of Jesus spread. Jairus forsook his social status, religious status, and community status to come to one he believed could help him. Far too many people will not come to Jesus because of what others might think. Jairus said I had tried everything, but if you go and lay your hands on her, she will be healed. He came to Jesus for help. He broke through the crowd to get to Jesus. The text says that Jesus verse 24 went with him. When we call on Jesus, he will answer, and he will help us in times of need. We just have to ask. Jairus needed help. He asked Jesus. He took it to the Lord himself. When we need help, we need to go straight to the source. There is a fountain filled with blood flowing from Immanuel's veins. There is help in Jesus.

While he was going to Jairus' house, a woman had been hemorrhaging for twelve years. She was not even supposed to be among people who were ceremonially unclean and by Mosaic Law. Her presence made everyone religiously unclean. Leviticus 15. She was not supposed to be there. But she had been dealing with the heartache and social disgrace for twelve years. (Spiritual fulfillment) She had hope that the man who could cause another man to be in the right mind could stop this issue of blood. The man who could calm the raging waters could prevent the issue of blood. She had spent all she had on doctors, and she was worse off than before. That's how life is. When we take matters into our own hands and put our confidence in others. Yet, when all we have left is just what we need. We need confident hope and trust in Jesus,

We ought to never place our hope in people to complete us. Look to validate us. Seek others to make us whole.

The only one who can restore us is the one who created us in His image.

You Know, the one Isaiah says,

"He was bruised for our iniquity and wounded for our transgression. The chastisement of our peace was upon him, and by his stripe, we are healed."

When all you have left is just what you need. In Jesus, there is help. We ought to hope in Jesus. We can believe there is healing in Jesus. Healing from the penalty of sin. Deliverance from death, hell, and the grave.

Jairus and the woman knew that there was something special about Jesus. His touch would cure. His touch would deliver. His touch would make it all right.

Jairus said, lay your hands on my daughter. So that she might be made well and live, the woman said in her heart and mind if I but touch the hem of His garment, I know I will be made well.

Jesus, on his way to Jairus's house, stopped long enough to heal this woman. He was interrupted long enough to heal this woman. She had been suffering for 12 years. Twelve means fulfillment, completion. Her cycle was over. He took a moment out of time to her testimony. In verse 33, she told him the whole truth. This woman's testimony was for the people, not for Jesus.

Jesus knew what he could do, but the people needed to know what he could do. Her testimony in ages past sealed her place in history—a marginalized person who made a difference in our lives. A person overlooked by society but sought out Jesus made a difference in you and my life. She was healed at the point of touch, but the story goes on.

She could sing pass me not oh gentle Savior Hear my humble cry While on others thou art calling do not pass me by and Jesus stopped long enough to answer her prayer.

There is help. There is hope. There is healing. There is one more point. After that encounter, some folks came from Jairus' house. Give up, Jairus; your daughter is dead. Why trouble the teacher any further? Isn't that the way it is sometimes? You want to believe, and some unsuspecting person comes to rob you of the hope you have. They were coming from their limited understanding. Jesus was coming from the foundation of the world. Do not fear, only believe" (Tell the rest of the story). The last point, did you see it? It is there in the text. He took her by the hand. Shackled by a heavy burden

'Neath s load of guilt and shame

Then the hand of Jesus touched me

And I am no longer the same

He touched me, Oh He felt me

And oh the joy that floods my soul

Something happened, and now I know

He touched me and made me whole

There is a hallelujah when Jesus touches you.

Man, by the well.

Legion,

the woman at the well you and me.

When all you have left is just what you need.,

Jesus was beaten. Stripped. And a crown of thorns was placed on his head. The charges, Pilate had a notice prepared and fastened to the cross. It read: Jesus of Nazareth, the king of the Jews.

All Jesus had left was the cross.

Oh, when all you have left is just what you need. The cross was just what we need.

When I survey the wondrous cross

On which the Prince of Glory died

My richest gain I count but the loss

And pour contempt on all my pride

Where every realm of nature mine

My gift was still far too small

Love so amazing, so divine

Demands my soul, my life, my all

The cross was all Jesus had left, and it was all that was needed.

Our Salvation doesn't begin at the Sermon on the Mt. Nor the raging sea. Our Salvation begins at the cross.

When all we have left is just what we need.

## Appendix 3

Isaiah 40:27-31 “Good News for a Tired People.”

Today is the first of November. We have been consumed with news and statistics regarding COVID-19 or the Corona Virus for the past eight months. In addition to the pandemic, we were bombarded with the injustice of the Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, and Ahmaud Arbery. All that makes me just tired.

We have yet to hear about the outcome of the most recent shootings of Jonathan Price in Texas, Walter Wallace Jr., in Philadelphia, Marcellis Stinnette, in suburban Chicago, wounding his girlfriend, Tafara Williams, and just one day ago, Kevin Peterson Jr., was shot in the state of Washington. And Still, I am just tired.

On top of all that, many are anxiously awaiting the results of Tuesday’s election. There have been long lines for early voting, one incident of mailboxes being vandalized to remove ballots. And the president not committing to conceding should he lose. All the more reason, I am just plain tired.

We also watched, and a new Supreme Court Justice was sworn last Monday, just ahead of the SCOTUS, hearing case regarding the Affordable Care Act.

With all the news that is out there. We are dealing with the local news—information in our families and our communities. When we hear of people dying, being sick, or contracting the virus, we are inundated with bad news.

Are you tired of church?

Most are so tired that Many people have even refused to watch the news. I can identify. I believe that we can suffer from news fatigue. Just tired of all the mess and tragedy.

I am sure many people are wondering where the church is in all of this. How can a loving God allow all this to happen? Where is God when we are in need?

How do I deal with anxiety, depression, and loneliness? How do I cope with isolation and the lack of human touch?

We live in a truly unprecedented time in our lifetime, but not in all of the time. People before had to deal with their crisis, whether plagues, wars, pandemics, drought, earthquakes, fires, and famine.

People have lived through slavery, Jim Crow, and the fight for Civil Rights.

But long before any of those events that have been reported in the pages of the newspapers. Other incidents impacted the lives of God's people. They are not recorded in the Jerusalem Times or the Roman Gazette.

He is instead recorded on scrolls handed down through generations, now on down to you and me. The stories and events of humanity, as recorded in scripture, are not so many stories about the people as much as they are stories about a loving and living God who sits high and looks low. A caring and loving God who hears the cries of His people and answers according to His will. A God who has promised never to leave us nor forsake. That's good news for tired people.

The church needs to be reminded of the Good News. God is still on the throne. Jesus is always making intercession for you and me, and the Holy Spirit is still guiding and guarding us. That's good news for tired people.

Many people these days are doubting God. They are challenging and question How can we know God is real? Where can we find God?

I read somewhere an account of a Russian Cosmonaut, Gherman Titov, who in 1961, was the second man to orbit the earth. On a visit to the Century 21 World's Fair in Seattle, he was asked how space travel affected his life philosophy.

Titov responded that he was looking around attentively while in space and did not find anybody out there. No angels and no God.

Many people share Titov's view. They can't see God nor understand God's existence from an intellectual point of view. So, therefore, God cannot exist.

I have learned over time, and I had to adjust my theology. That the opposite of faith is not fear. Instead, the opposite of faith is a certainty.

When we are sure of a thing from our intellectual pursuit, then faith ceases to be.

Here in chapter forty, we read the prophet's good news for Tired People.

We learn that God's forgiveness is eternal:

40 "Comfort, yes, comfort My people!"

Says your God.

<sup>2</sup> "Speak <sup>[a]</sup>comfort to Jerusalem, and cry out to her,

That her warfare is ended,

That her iniquity is pardoned;

For she has received from the Lord's hand

Double for all her sins."

We also learn that God will equip us for the journey. The children of Israel would, in the future, prepare for the long and arduous journey. Isaiah wrote to a future generation that God would prepare the way.

<sup>3</sup> The voice of one crying in the wilderness:

"Prepare the way of the Lord;

Make straight <sup>[b]</sup>in the desert

A highway for our God.

<sup>4</sup> Every valley shall be exalted

And every mountain and hill brought low;

The crooked places shall be made <sup>[c]</sup>straight

And the rough places smooth;

<sup>5</sup> The glory of the Lord shall be revealed,

And all flesh shall see it together;  
 For the mouth of the Lord has spoken.”  
 When the Lord speaks, things happen. We can trust in the word of the Lord.

We ought to remember that all life on earth is temporary. All trouble on earth is quick. We often make moments eternal. We refuse to let go of past hurts and disappointments. That’s what makes our journey more difficult.

<sup>6</sup> The voice said, “Cry out!”  
 And [d]he said, “What shall I cry?”  
 “All flesh is grass,  
 And all its loveliness is like the flower of the field.

<sup>7</sup> The grass withers, the flower fades,  
 Because the breath of the Lord blows upon it;  
 Indeed the people are grass.

<sup>8</sup> The grass withers, the flower fades,  
 But the word of our God stands forever.”

No ruler on earth compares to our God. Many believe their hype. Like 45. They do so because people worship them. Only God of all creation is worthy of worship. People can be praised and thanked, but they should never be worshipped.

<sup>21</sup> Have you not known?  
 Have you not heard?  
 Has it not been told to you from the beginning?  
 Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth?

<sup>22</sup> It is He who sits above the circle of the earth,  
 And its inhabitants are like grasshoppers,  
 Who stretches out the heavens like a curtain,  
 And spreads them out like a tent to dwell in.

<sup>23</sup> He [i]brings the princes to nothing;  
 He makes the judges of the earth useless.

Here's the Good news for tired people:

<sup>25</sup> “To whom then will you liken Me,  
Or to whom shall I be equal?” says the Holy One.

<sup>26</sup> Lift your eyes on high,  
And see who has created these things,  
Who brings out their host by number;  
He calls them all by name,  
By the greatness of His might  
And the strength of His power;  
Not one is missing.

The very hairs on our heads are numbered. God takes great delight in caring for His children. He knows the way we take and the paths we take. Nothing is ever hidden from God.

<sup>27</sup> Why do you say, O Jacob,  
And speak, O Israel:  
“My way is hidden from the Lord,  
And my just claim is passed over by my God”?

Just know that our God is faithful. We ought to remember all that God has done for us in the past and the present. We can trust that God will act in our future.

<sup>28</sup> Have you not known?  
Have you not heard?  
The everlasting God, the Lord,  
The Creator of the ends of the earth,  
Neither faints nor is weary.  
His understanding is unsearchable.

<sup>29</sup> He gives power to the weak,  
And to those who have no might, He increases strength.

<sup>30</sup> Even the youths shall faint and be weary,

And the young men shall utterly fall,  
<sup>31</sup> But those who wait on the Lord  
Shall renew their strength;

Our renewed strength is rooted and grounded in faith, hope, and love.  
They shall mount up with wings like eagles,  
They shall run and not be weary,  
They shall walk and not faint.

Mount up with wings like eagles. That's Faith. Faith soars.

Run and not be weary is hope, is joyful anticipation. We run with joy to our beloved.

Walk and not faint is love. Love is for the long haul, and it is not for the faint of heart.

The disciples are the crucifixion.

## Appendix 4

## Philippians 4:1-9 "A Call to Christian Love" Nov 2020

On December 23, 1776, Thomas Paine released a pamphlet entitled "The Crisis." He begins that document with these words:

THESE are the times that try men's souls. The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of their country, but he that stands by it now, deserves the love and thanks of man and woman. Tyranny, like hell, is not easily conquered; yet we have this consolation with us, that the harder the conflict, the more glorious the triumph. What we obtain too cheap, we esteem too lightly: it is dearness only that gives everything its value.

Summer and sunshine refer to those who are fair weather. Those who will not withstand the difficulties and trials of life. On the other hand, he states that those who rise will deserve the love and thanks of both man and woman.

By our commitment and sacrifices made of time and talent, we show the world our witness to the faith we profess in Christ Jesus.

There is an adage that says, "if you don't stand for something, you will fall for anything." As a community of Christians and a worshipping family, we ought to be clear about who and what we stand for. Jesus Christ and the spread of the gospel throughout the world. That's taking a stand. It ought to be clear, to all, where you stand and on whom you stand. On Christ, the solid rock I stand on all other ground is sinking sand.

The Apostle Paul is encouraging the church at Philippi to stand firm in the Lord.

As Christians, we are called to stand firm in the Lord. Paul calls those whom he longs for his joy and crown. The ones who display the joy of the Lord. And those who are the crown of victory. Not a kingly crown but the crown of victory.

In standing firm in the Lord, Paul says to the church amid trying times, don't focus solely on the problems. Focus on the opportunities. We can fret and lament what's going on in the world, or we as the church can seek to provide a place of refuge and comfort for those whose hope and faith are wavering.

I believe the Lord's desire is for those who call upon the name of the Lord not only to be saved but to serve amid difficult and challenging times.

Paul issues a call or repeats the call of God. Like in the days of Isaiah, who will go for us, whom can I send?

Or the call of Jeremiah, who when he told God he was too young, God said you are not too young, but you will go to all whom I send you.

God's call is permanently active. The market of God is happening until we breathe our last breath. Paul is repeating God's call.

It is a call to active duty as a soldier in the army of the Lord. We are called to stand firm in the Lord regardless of the circumstance and challenges of life. God is more significant than any problem that may arise in our lives. I am sure at two or three of you have a testimony of how the Lord made a way out of no way. You know about our Lord who can take a crooked stick and hit a straight lick. The one who can do anything but fail. God is the God who delivered the children of Israel. The same God was with those who endured the hardships of the life of involuntary servitude, Jim Crow, Civil Rights, and now with innocent people being gunned down at the hands of law enforcement and vigilantes.

Yet, in the midst of all this, we have to keep encouraged that God is a God who hears our cries and pities every groan. When we lie awake at night, troubled by the events of the day or awake troubled by the events of the past. I am glad we have a God who we can call on. The God Who stoops down to hear our innermost cries. Here we find Paul writing from a Roman jail cell and not knowing his fate but believing that death is inevitable. And yet, he is encouraging the church. The apostle Paul is instructing the church at Philippi, how to stand firm in the Lord.

In this way: reconcile, rejoice, reflect, and be resolved

Help people **reconcile**. We have this ministry of reconciliation. As Jesus reconciled the world, we ought to be reconciled with one another.

In the church at Philippi, there was a dispute that came to Paul's attention in Rome. His request was for the church to help them out. They were hard workers for Christ but had lost focus on the actual work. Church, conflicts arise when jobs overlap. Keep focused on what God is calling you to do, and don't worry about someone else. Even though they were a distraction to the ministry, their names were still written in the Lamb's book of life. We are all co-laborers. The church is always looking for those who want to love and serve the Lord.

God desires people who can resolve conflict and do the work of the Lord. We need to do all we can to be reconciled.

**Once we are reconciled, then we can rejoice.**

Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Since the Lord is near. We need not worry. We need not get so distracted. I know it's easier said than done. But we must remain focused on the Lord.

The distractions are many in the times we are in now. The 1600 Black Lives Matter plaza resident in DC is under doctors' care for COVID-19, still trying to hold rallies. And had one at the white house, which I thought one could not save campaign events there. But even with the distractions of the many police killings that still go on in this country. The militia wanted to kidnap the governor of Michigan because the gyms were closed. As one of the reasons.

The fact that we are gearing up for a second wave of COVID-19 to occur. Hurricanes are hitting land on the Gulf coasts. And the election is less than four weeks away.

We can easily be distracted, and yet Paul is calling the church from the first century to rejoice in the Lord always, and again he says rejoice.

Let your gentleness be made known to all.

Far too many Christians fall short of their calling and vocation by focusing on the wrong thing. We worry about people, places, and things. Unfortunately, only 7% percent of the things we worry about ever come true, as it has been said. We 97% of our time worrying about situations that probably will never occur. We waste valuable time in this life. Worrying.

Worrying is paying a debt you don't yet owe. And as the Lord stated, <sup>25</sup> "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes? <sup>26</sup> Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? <sup>27</sup> Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life?"

So, with all the distractions, remember don't worry, Pray! In every situation, Pray, before bed, now I lay me,

Before we eat, God is great, God is good, and we thank him for this food.\

Acknowledge God Our Father who are in Heaven

And when you can't get the words out, sometimes just grunt, groan or moan.

Then the peace of God will surpass our understanding and guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

We can reconcile and rejoice.

**Then we ought to reflect.** With our hearts and minds guarded, we need to think differently then.

Reflect not on the wrongs done to us. Or the slights or even the times our hearts were broken.

The mistakes made and our disappointments. But rather listen to Paul's list of things to think about.

Paul gives a few topics for thought.

Whatever things are true, what is real?

Whatever things *are* noble, what is for our highest good?

Whatever things *are* just, what is right?

Whatever things *are* pure, what is free from impurities?

Whatever things *are* lovely, what is near and dear to your heart?

Whatever things *are* of good report, what is well spoken of?

If *there is* any virtue: pleasing to God

if *there is* anything praiseworthy— that you may receive commendation from God.

Meditate on these things.

**Reconcile, rejoice, reflect, and be resolved.**

<sup>9</sup>The things which you learned and received and heard and saw in me, these do, and the God of peace will be with you.

Do what you are called to do. Be determined to follow through on the call of God. It is not always easy; you will have to make sacrifices. But the reward is great. There is a crown of righteousness laid up for you. be resolved to stand firm in the lord.

Be resolved to reconcile and be a minister of reconciliation

Be resolved to Rejoice in the Lord always

Be resolved to reflect on the goodness of Jesus when I think about the integrity of Jesus and all he has done for me.

My soul cries Hallelujah

I thank God for saving me.

## Appendix 5

## “The Church That God Desires” 1 Corinthians 1:3-9

Today is the first Sunday of Advent, the Sundays leading up to Christmas. Advent simply means “coming.” The season is the celebration of the three comings of Jesus.

1. Jesus is coming into the world as a baby, to live as a man, and to die for our sins on a cross.
2. Jesus coming into our lives now, as Lord and Savior
3. Lastly, Jesus is coming back again.

For some, this is just another day. For the church, we ought to have an expectant hope of brighter days ahead.

The truth is that although we are preparing for Christmas, Advent does not begin with joy. Instead, Advent begins with a note of despair.

2020 has been a year unlike any I have experienced. In 2020, we were locked in and locked down. We enjoyed a few weeks of freedom only to see a rise in COVID-19 as summer ended and fall activities resumed.

In 2020, we are still witnessing the belligerent child president always claiming that the election was unfair and refused to concede.

In 2020, we had lost loved ones, welcomed new loved ones, witnessed people uniting in love. All the while, despair is all around, yet hope springs eternal.

In 2020, I believed we are reminded that some situations and circumstances are beyond our control. I also realize that no matter how much money we have, resources available to us, or just how intelligent we may be, we cannot save ourselves.

Salvation belongs to God. And we ought to direct our hope towards the one who set the stars in their place and gave each a name. We ought to direct our hope to the one that leads the children of Israel through the wilderness to a place they could call home.

We ought to direct our attention to the one who those whose ancestors landed on these shores involuntarily would steal away to the hush harbors to gather in a place of worship away from the

master's ear. They would steal away to Jesus to worship amid the most despicable times in the history of this nation. And yet, they found hope in a place of worship as the church of Jesus Christ.

I believe they gathered in the church that God desires. A church where people would come lay down their heavy load—a church where they could walk together as children of the highest. Not to get weary because they knew the same Lord that delivered Daniel would one day give them.

They didn't just go to a secret space; they went to a private place. There is a difference. The church that God desires is not only space. It is a place.

Your home was just space. However, once you began to move your belongings in, it transformed into your place.

Although these two words are often used interchangeably, I would put forth today that they are very different.

Space is that which we can occupy but not have an emotional connection. On the other place is where we gave room to our memories, personal experiences and gave rise to our identities.

The trouble in today's society is that the church is just space for those outside the church, just like a hotel room or a seat in a stadium, movie theater, or concert.

The church that God desires is not a building or location. The church that God wants gathers together in one place, either physically or virtually, for the common purpose of worshipping His holy name. A place where the presence of the Lord is felt and experienced. It is the place where two or three are gathered in His name—knowing that He is in the midst.

I am grateful for the connection to the church of God through Jesus Christ.

Every believer is connected to the church that God desires through Jesus Christ.

Let's look at the text

The church at Corinth was riddled with conflict and controversy, and yet Paul is thankful for the church at Corinth.

Why?

<sup>2</sup>To the church of God which is at Corinth, to those who are [a]sanctified in Christ Jesus, called *to be saints*, with all who in **every place** call on the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, both theirs and ours:

**Did you hear it?** The church belongs to God.

We are sanctified not by our own will. Nor are we blessed by our actions. We are sanctified by the goodness, grace, and love of God. We didn't choose God. God chose us. That while we were yet a sinner, Christ died for the ungodly. No matter how good you or I believe we are, it is only by and through God's grace that we are saved.

Not just us be all who call upon the name of the Lord. We are called saints with all who in every place also call on the name of the Lord.

The place is not just a physical place, but those who have given God a place in their hearts.

I have learned that two people can be in the same space but not occupy the same place. One has made room in their heart which is the place. The other has created a space for them to sit, but no place in their heart.

We, as the church, ought to give God a place in our hearts.

The church pew is more than space. It is the place where we share in worship.

The Zoom platform is not just space. It is a place where the church gathers.

Just as our ancestors made a way to worship through many dangerous toils and snares, we too come to worship.

And when we come to worship, we greet one another in the salutation of Paul.

<sup>3</sup>Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ

<sup>4</sup>I thank my God always concerning you for the grace of God, which was given to you by Christ Jesus,

<sup>Five</sup> that you were enriched in everything by Him in all utterance and all knowledge,

<sup>Six</sup> even as the testimony of Christ was confirmed in you,

<sup>Seven</sup> so that you come short in no gift, eagerly waiting for the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ,

You and I are valuable to God, and we were worth the price Jesus was willing to pay to redeem us from the penalty of sin.

There is a difference between worth and value.

Value is how much one believes something is worth to them.

Worth is how much someone is willing to pay for something.

In relationships, people will show you how much they value you by how they treat you. If you are not worth much to them, they will show you. And if they value you and your relationship, they will show that as well.

We show God how much we value our relationship with God by how we come to him.

God gave His best, do we?

<sup>Eight</sup> who will also confirm you to the end, *that you may be* blameless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.

<sup>9</sup> God *is* faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

## Appendix 6

A Shepherd's Love, Psalm 23 12/6/20

<sup>6</sup>Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; <sup>7</sup>and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

The Lord is my Shepherd; I shall not want!!

Today is the second Sunday in Advent; Christmas is just 19 days hence. Is it me? To me, it seems as though the Coronavirus has eclipsed the holidays. It was Easter, then Memorial Day, on through Independence Day, Labor Day, Thanksgiving, and now Christmas is upon us.

This year has been fraught with anxiety, fear, and worry. We have had to separate and avoid human contact. Gone are the smiles visible on people's faces, now covered with face masks if there is human touch it not without vinyl or latex gloves.

The hope and skepticism arising with the news of vaccines to prevent and mitigate the spread of the virus.

Nearby cities imposed a ten-day lockdown in hopes of reducing the spread.

Many are raising the question, "where is God? And "Why does God allow this to happen?"

That's a question of why does a Loving God allows evil in the world? I cannot speak for God. I can, though, talk about a relationship with God. When preachers preach, we don't speak for God, and God has already spoken through the pages of scripture. We merely talk about hat thus saith the Lord.

Even our testimonies. Our testimonies should never draw attention to us as though we have special favor with God, for God is no respecter of persons. You may have heard previously, “what He’s done for others He can do for me.”

The resources of God are without limit. The blessings of God do not need rationing. I praise Be to God that peace of God will go beyond your and my understanding.

I will admit, there are times when peace seems absent. When the storms of life are raging, sometimes it’s hard to tell the night from day. I know that God is with me, and my soul is anchored in the Lord.

What brings you peace? Do you have a sense of peace and calm when all around you are going crazy? Do you know for sure that the Lord has you? Can you trust in the Lord?

For the believer in Jesus, we ought to rest in the promises, provision, and protection of the Lord.

One day this week, as I left my home, the first sentence of this passage grabbed my attention, “The Lord is my Shepherd; I shall not want.”

For the life of me, I could not remember the rest of the Psalm. I just kept repeating that one sentence, “The Lord is my Shepherd; I shall not want.”

Although this is a familiar Psalm, I was forced to reread the Psalm in an unfamiliar way. When I thought of the word want in the passage, I associated it with material possessions. But the word is not limited to material possessions.

Material possessions are not the foundation on which a relationship can be built. That foundation is shaky at best.

Relationships must be rooted and grounded in a relationship with Jesus Christ. On Christ, the solid rock I stand on all other ground is sinking sand.

The first sentence in Psalm 23, more than material possessions.

David draws the proverbial line in the sand, standing flat-footed, and declares: The Lord is my Shepherd! That's first and foremost about a relationship. The Lord is not my Santa Claus. I will present him with my list.

The Lord is my shepherd. Can you make that claim this morning? As Bill Withers asked, "Who is He, and what is he to you?"

For David, the Lord is his shepherd. When you know something about shepherding, you can relate to David's metaphor. What's your metaphor for your relationship with God?

When the relationship with God is clear, and you have made a declarative statement, the Lord is my Shepherd,

Then the second part of that sentence comes alive for me. I shall not want.

Because the Lord is my shepherd, I am not incomplete, I am not defective, I am not a reject, I have worth and value in this life.

Regardless of what others may think, regardless of how others try to treat me. I have not been weighed or measured on their scales and been found wanting, lacking, or insufficient because the Lord is my Shepherd.

My Shepherd has promised me that I shall not want. I shall not want approval; I shall not need another's affirmation. My life has been bought with a price, and I have been redeemed.

The Good Shepherd provides, protects, and presents

The Lord will provide. He is Jehovah Jireh.

**He makes me lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside the still waters. He restores my soul.**

Seven hundred fifty-three times in the OT does the word refer to the soul. The soul is described in Hebrew as our inner being with its thoughts and emotions. The animating force of the body.

When our soul is tired or disturbed, it is hard to get motivated. It's difficult to focus. We have a distorted view of the world.

But the good shepherd leads us to the place where our soul is restored. He will make you lie down in green pastures, then direct you to the still waters.

After your soul is restored, you and I are on a new journey. The paths of Righteousness. To bear witness to the goodness and grace of the good shepherd. We are His namesake. We witness the good shepherd, and we declare on that path, The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.

On the Path of Righteousness, we have to trust God. And like the mother in the poem Mother to Son

Well, son, I'll tell you:

Life for me ain't been no crystal stair.

It's had tacks in it,

And splinters,

And boards were torn up,

And places with no carpet on the floor—

Bare.

But all the time

I'se been a-climbin' on,

And reachin' landin's,

And turnin' corners,

And sometimes goin' in the dark

Where there ain't been no light.

So boy, don't you turn back.

Don't you set down on the steps

'Cause you finds it's kinder hard.

Don't you fall now—

For I'se still goin', honey,

I'se still climbin',

And life for me ain't been no crystal stair.

That path will lead us to the Valley of the Shadow of Death. And when we get there. We will fear no evil. Because the Good shepherd is with us. The one who promises never to leave us nor forsake us.

We know that he is with us. To protect us.

He has his rod and staff. Which give us comfort.

Look at the journey first of all. It's a shadow, and we don't have to run. We will walk—no need to rush. We run from danger, but with God, we are not in any danger. We can walk, though, because the valley is not our final destination.

We have to go through to get to the dinner the shepherd has prepared on the other side of the Valley. We become a guest at a banquet.

Thou prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. They may have once been your enemies, but at God's table, they are guests. And you have no influence or control over who was invited. One other thing, you cannot change seats. Your enemies are not God's enemies. Police may be your enemies, but not God's.

God anoints my head with oil. To prevent irritants

Then after the anointing, your attention is drawn to the cup of salvation—the cup of life, which is now running over.

The Good shepherd will ensure that you are in good company, with goodness and mercy.

And you will never be homeless because he's prepared a place for you to dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

No in the stable, not in the barn but in the house of the Lord.

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.

Peter knew

Joseph knew it

Mary knew

Paul knew

The thief on the cross

**Contextual Advisory Team:**

1. Rev. Scott Foster, pastor, Presbyterian Church of Madison
2. Sis. Rosemary Moynihan, Sisters of Charity, social worker
3. Dr. Karanja Carroll, Professor, CUNY
4. Dr. Tracey Duncan, Associate Dean for Graduate Programs, Pillar College
5. Edward Sallie, Lay Leader in First Baptist Church of Madison
6. Rev. Diane Pacione, DMin partner