

A MOANA NAVIGATOR ON A VOYAGE  
FOLLOWING JESUS AND CREATING THIRD SPACE FAITH COMMUNITIES

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## ABSTRACT

### A MOANA NAVIGATOR ON A VOYAGE: FOLLOWING JESUS AND CREATING THIRD-SPACE FAITH COMMUNITIES

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This paper explores some of the reasons people are not attending Sunday worship and to discover and create ways of being the church in the present time and space. Rather than continuing to do church the way it has always been done and becoming less and less relevant to a growing and multicultural population, this project offers the church and community an alternative way—a third-space—the gospel can be planted, take root and flourish. The third-space, as defined by the postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha, is the intersection of cultures and persons, creating a new fluid identity he calls hybridity. The third-space is always changing, never permanent, and always becoming. It is an in-between and in-between negotiable space for the present time and people. It is neither here nor there but always in-between, *tā-vā* (time-space). The third-space is unconventional, communal, mobile, and is always on a voyage. No matter the space, whether in a traditional sanctuary, bar, restaurant, sidewalk, coffee-shop, park, or backyard, the Table is set, and Jesus is Host and Captain.

At the Table, food is shared, and conversations occur, known in the native Tongan - Pasifika language as *talanoa*. The *talanoa* (storytelling) will be told as a voyage across the seas, encountering five waves or chapters. The first wave will contextualize the author's story by telling the context of her faith and where it began. The second wave

explains the context of the church and mission field. The third wave explores the context of the larger culture and society. The fourth wave invites others to the conversation through creating third-space faith communities. The fifth wave reflects and uncovers how each *talanoa* intersects and interweaves throughout the voyage. This wave will affirm the need for a unique particularity in each context, since no two contexts are the same. Others are invited to pursue their own third-space where faith and fellowship can abound.

## DEDICATION

In memory of my parents, Tevita Vaiola Finau and Lile Meleane Lolohea Finau;  
brother, Kofe Finau  
sisters-in-law, Lina Finau and Meti Finau;  
cousin, Ma'ata Havea;  
grandparents, Ana Moala and Sione Finau; Lose and Mateaki Lolohea;  
aunts, Sela 'Emalata Finau Puloka, Ma'ata Ngalo'afe Taufu, and Mosiana Lolohea;  
uncles, Haitini Finau and 'Etu Lolohea;  
church youth and Saturday Night Church team member, Tyler Cobb;  
my best friends, Petee, Angelena, and Snow.

To those still on the voyage with me,  
brothers, Lipoi and Salome, Sione and Veisia, Mateaki and Fe'ofa'aki,  
Militoni and Femaeaki, Kanitasi and Mafikovi, Kitone, Talakai and 'Ofa,  
Kaueni, and their families;  
all Pasifika/Moana persons willing to navigate the seas of academia;  
and my best friend and companion, Philo, who wakes me up early every morning, try to  
protect me from anyone who comes near, suspiciously acts heartbroken each time I leave,  
yet patiently waits and enthusiastically welcomes me home when I return, and who gives  
me a glimpse into the character of God by constantly showing me patience, undeserving,  
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'Ofa lahi atu. Malō 'aupito,

*sela*

## Glossary

Kalia: A vessel or a large ship. A double hulled canoe. It requires many people to operate and can hold anywhere from 50-150 people

MAAFA: is described as the African Holocaust. According to David Brawley, MAAFA is a Kiswahili term coined by anthropologist and African Studies scholar Marimba Ani, meaning “great disaster.”

Moana: A native word in the Pasifika languages to mean water, ocean, and sea. The term also refers to the people of Oceania or Pacific Islanders. It is also the preferred name.

Pasifika: Pacific. It can refer to the languages and people of the region. Peace is the root word for pacific, so as a Pacific Islander, the word carries more meaning.

Polynesian: The indigenous people and descendants of Polynesia. It also refers to the languages of the people. The people include the native population of Hawai’i, Tahiti, Tonga, Samoa, Aotearoa (Maori people of New Zealand), Tuvalu, Cook Islands, Niue, Vanuatu, and several others.

Talanoa: A native word in the Pasifika languages. It means story, telling of a story, and conversation around story and telling.

Terroir: It refers primarily to the natural environment of grapes in which a particular wine is produced. Cumulative factors such as soil, topography, and climate contribute to the *terroir*.

## CHAPTER ONE TALANOA<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

"In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was formless void, and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters."<sup>2</sup> Then God separated day and night; this was the first day. The next few days, God separated the waters, creating the sky, creating dry land, and creating the seas. Then God created lights in the sky with the stars, separating daylight from the nightlight. God said, "Let them be for signs and seasons and days and years."<sup>3</sup> In the last couple of days, God created birds, sea creatures, land animals, and humankind. Looking at creation, God called it very good. Then God rested on the seventh day.<sup>4</sup>

As found in the Hebrew Scriptures, the creation story will serve as the guiding text for this paper. The *moana*<sup>5</sup> (native word in the Pasifika languages to mean water, ocean, and sea. The term also refers to the people and is used in preference over the foreign imposed labels of Oceania or Pacific Islanders), wind, and signs of the skies will play a critical role in this exposition. Lastly, humanity will play a role in the interpretation of signs, not expounding only on the signs of nature, but also on signs of

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<sup>1</sup> Talanoa is a native word in the Pasifika languages. It means story, telling of a story, and conversation around story and telling.

<sup>2</sup> Genesis 1:1-2 (New Revised Standard Version).

<sup>3</sup> Genesis 1:14 (NRSV).

<sup>4</sup> A paraphrase of the first creation story from Genesis 1:1-2:2.

<sup>5</sup> Ocean and sea will be used interchangeably.

human behavior about their relationship with the Creator and creation, precisely human behavior in the ecclesial setting in the present age.<sup>6</sup>

The paper's purpose is *talanoa* (to tell my story) and shares how my story, now my voyage across the seas, inspires me to invite others to share in the *talanoa* (storytelling). This storytelling will come in waves. The first wave contextualizes my story by telling my faith-*talanoa* and where it began. The second wave of *talanoa* explains the context of my church setting and mission field. The third wave delves into *talanoa* by exploring the context of the larger culture and society. The fourth wave of *talanoa* invites others to the conversation. The fifth wave reflects and uncovers how *talanoa* and conversation intersect and interweave throughout the story. Like Christianity, it is that simple, yet it is not simplistic.

If real estate boasts about location, location, location, this dissertation is about context, context, and context. Who am I? Where am I? Where are we? Where are we going? Are we there yet? Len Sweet notes the similarity to God's question to Hagar in the wilderness, "And he said, Hagar, slave-girl of Sarai, where have you come from and where are you going?" She said, "I am running away from my mistress Sarai" (Genesis 16:8 NRSV). Like Hagar, I too am compelled to assess "Where am I? Where am I going?" as I continue on my ministerial journey. Context is everything.

This chapter seeks to *talanoa* from a moana navigator's perspective in a multi-dimensional moving canoe or context. Like a Pacific<sup>7</sup> Island navigator out at sea, I drifted

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<sup>7</sup> I will use the words Pacific, Pasifika, and Moana interchangeably.

westward from Oceania across the Pacific Ocean, from the Kingdom of Tonga<sup>8</sup> landed in North America, in the Dallas/Fort Worth Metroplex (DFW). This is where I docked my canoe for the more significant part of my life, since 1984. Here, I continuously struggle to navigate life's privileges and complexity, first as a Tongan, second as an immigrant, third as a brown-skinned single female living in America. I have had to navigate between two different cultures, one from my native home of Tonga and the other as a foreigner in a country that has become my own.

It is no accident that I am Methodist. I was born into a Wesleyan family in a country greatly influenced by Wesleyan missionaries. I went to seminary not to become a pastor but to gain answers and understanding to faith questions. I had plenty of family members who were already pastors and serving in academia, both in Tonga and abroad. Their chosen line of work influenced me to seek understanding. Anselm's motto of "faith seeking understanding" (*fides quaerens intellectum*)<sup>9</sup> is what brought me to seminary. Never in my life did I aspire to become a pastor. Never in my wildest dreams did I imagine I would become a preacher. If God works in mysterious ways, surely, I am a witness. If God has a way of rerouting, rewiring, and equipping anyone to do Kingdom work, I can give a personal testimony. However unintended, my academic journey led me to the pulpit serving as a pastor in The United Methodist Church. It has also brought me

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<sup>8</sup> The Kingdom of Tonga is the last remaining monarchy in the South Pacific and the only island country never to have been colonized by a foreign power. However, it was a protected state of the United Kingdom from 1900-1970.

<sup>9</sup> Daniel L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2004), 2.

an awareness of society and the world, which I otherwise would not have. I had planned a career in the financial industry.

Other than God, nothing could explain this change in the direction of my life. The Tongan hymn, '*Eiki Koe 'Ofa 'A 'Au*, captures the magnitude of the unknowns and uncertainty that I have encountered along this journey. It never ceases to amaze me that despite all of the twists and turns I have experienced, my faith remains the anchor that keeps me abiding in Christ. This anchor keep me "firm and secure," but it does not tie me down. Rather, it is precisely because of this anchor that allows me to move forward to Jesus.<sup>10</sup>

While enrolled as a Master of Divinity student at Perkins School of Theology at Southern Methodist University, our Professor of Sacred Music, Michael Hawn, asked me to interpret for him a couple of verses of this classic Tongan hymn quoted below. He must have known that this hymn was already familiar to me. This hymn is a part of my identity and story. There was already a paraphrased translation available, but Dr. Hawn wanted a literal translation and a cultural interpretation. These translations appear below followed by my explanation.

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<sup>10</sup> An interpretation of Hebrews 6:13-20 and online conversation with Sweet, March 2021.

	Paraphrased Translation	Literal Translation
'Eiki ko e 'ofa 'a 'au, Ko e moana loloto; Pea ngalo hifo ki ai, Eku ngaahi angahia; Pea kuo 'ufi 'ufi 'Eku kovi koto a pê.	O hidden depth of love divine, like vast waters of the sea, you submerge all sins of mine into a depths I cannot see. As boundless seas o'er earth now move, fill me, O God, with boundless love.	Lord, love is all yours, Like the deepness of the ocean; And you have forgotten, My many iniquities; And for it is hidden My countless sins.
Kapau 'e ngalo hifo au, 'I he ngaahi peau lahi; Pea mole 'iate au, 'A 'eku ngaahi tokoni: Ka 'e ma'u pê 'eku tu i 'E Tamai kiate koe.	Though I should sink beneath the waves that are raging throughout life, though I sense there's none who saves and all is lost, and all is strife. My faith in God shall ever hold; it shall sustain and make me bold.	If you have forgotten me, Because of the high waves; And lost within me, My countless support; I will keep my faith In you, Father.

The hymn "'Eiki Koe 'Ofa 'A Au" (Lord, how great is your love) is not only immensely heartfelt and meaningful for Tongans; many know it from memory.<sup>11</sup> For Tongans, singing is taught in the family, school, and community. Each Tongan child grows up learning how to sing hymns and songs in harmony. At least they should have. Nevertheless, the ocean surrounding the Kingdom of Tonga, or any islands in Oceania, provides and sustains life with its multitude of food and sustenance sources. The people of Tonga depend on the ocean and all that it provides. People understand that they and the

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<sup>11</sup> Sung here by an All Boys School in Tonga during a special service. The students are not in any choir. Singing acapella is part of our Tongan tradition. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3OmTUbCmyYE> Also, the second video of an English professional group singing our Tongan hymn, which is heart warming to have another culture learn yours. Accessed on December 1, 2020. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wmrCQz4s\\_H4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wmrCQz4s_H4)

islands simply cannot exist without the ocean. Since the arrival of Christianity in the Kingdom of Tonga, Tongans understood God to be a provider just like the ocean. Thinking of God as Provider was a re-interpretation and new understanding for the people of Tonga. They rely on and trust God for all things and understand they cannot exist apart from God. Tongans and other Pacific Islanders believe they are part of the ocean, and the ocean is a part of them.<sup>12</sup> This means they have a stewardship role in caring for the ocean. This was a Pasifika people's understanding before missionaries' arrived with their Bible containing the Genesis story. More recently, however, with climate change and its effect of rising sea level, the ocean poses a threat. This threat underscores the urgency and importance of humanity's stewardship role.

Understanding the nature of the ocean and its power to influence temperature and climate change,<sup>13</sup> the stewardship role is not just for the Pasifika people but for all people. There is only one ocean. It connects life. One only needs to look at a global map to realize the ocean covers most of the earth's surface—70 percent. Nevertheless, for geographical purposes, names were given to four regions: Pacific, Atlantic, Indian, and the Arctic, with a fifth region, the Southern, awaiting world recognition.<sup>14</sup> The Pacific Ocean is the largest basin and covers a third of the earth's surface. It was named by

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<sup>12</sup> Epeli Hau'ofa, *We Are the Ocean* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2008), 41.

<sup>13</sup> The Ocean Portal Team Reviewed by Dr. Joshua K. Willis. 2019. "Sea Level Rise." Smithsonian Ocean. Accessed August 5, 2019. <https://ocean.si.edu/through-time/ancient-seas/sea-level-rise>.

<sup>14</sup> National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, NOAA. Accessed February 5, 2021. <https://oceanservice.noaa.gov/facts/howmanyoceans.html>

Portuguese explorer Ferdinand Magellan who found the Pacific very peaceful throughout most of his journey.<sup>15</sup> However, despite its reputation as a peaceful region, "the countries that border the Pacific, or the Pacific Rim, often experience volcanoes and earthquakes causing tsunamis."<sup>16</sup>

Compliments of the Wesleyan missionaries, Tongans are conservative in their theology and worship and modest in appearance. Nevertheless, while the countries that took Christianity to Tonga, England and Australia, have progressed, Tonga has held onto most of its original core beliefs and practices. The acknowledgment of their human sinfulness and meekness is very traditional. This is very apparent at worship services, where preaching and praying becomes very passionate, literally taking on John Wesley's heart-warming experience of weeping from the depths of their souls.

Using the ocean as a metaphor, the hymn, *'Eiki Ko e 'Ofa 'A 'Au*, is an accurate account of Tongans expressing their love for God and vice versa. For Tongans, the ocean is not only a symbol of life; it is their lifeline, a way of life, an eternal inspiration. Likewise, God is the provider and sustainer of the ocean and life. Comparing the love of God to the depth of the ocean is very appropriate for Tongans and something they are inherently connected to.

Furthermore, when the King of Tonga, Tupou I, was converted to Christianity in 1831, he soon dedicated the country and the Tongan people to God in 1839 in a ceremony

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<sup>15</sup> "Ocean Geography," MarineBio Conservation Society. Accessed February 5, 2021. <https://marinebio.org/oceans/geography/>

<sup>16</sup> "Ocean Science," Marine Bio, Accessed February 5, 2021. <https://marinebio.org/oceans/geography/>

known as Tuku Fonua.<sup>17</sup> Placing Tonga in God's hands for protection from foreign powers is reflected in Tonga's national motto: "Ko e 'Otua mo Tonga ko hoku Tofi'a, God and Tonga are my Inheritance." Christianity is also reflected on Tonga's flag, where the red represents the blood of Christ, white represents purity, and the cross is the symbol of Christianity.

### A Voyager from the Past

To a great extent, we are all people of the past, who currently occupy the space of diaspora. This is to say that our current location(s) did not instantaneously appear overnight. Rather, some events in the past took place that eventually led us to our present space. The present space is where I am and where you are also. It may not be the same space or even a permanent space, but nevertheless, it is the present. At this present space, I will share a story of how I came to occupy this space and time in my voyage.

With the arrival of Wesleyan missionaries from London, England, Tonga was to be converted and become a Christian nation. It was on April 17, 1797, that marked the first arrival of missionaries, ten of them, in my native country of Tongatapu.<sup>18</sup> These initial missionaries, sent from the London Missionary Society, failed miserably in their attempts to convert the Tongan people to Christianity.<sup>19</sup> The main reason the missionaries failed was lack of preparation. They did not understand the religion, culture, and tradition

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<sup>17</sup> Sione Latukefu, *Church and State in Tonga* (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1974), 25-33.

<sup>18</sup> Latukefu, *Church and State in Tonga*, 25.

<sup>19</sup> Latukefu, *Church and State in Tonga*, 25.

of the Tongan people. For example, one crucial tradition and custom of the Tongan people, which is still widely practiced today, is the family and society's hierarchical structure. From birth, Tongans know where they have a role, where they belong in a hierarchical pattern of society.

Moreover, the Tongan people were not quite ready to accept a new religion's teaching that "all men [sic] were equal in the sight of God. The belief that everyone were sinners by nature and that in order to get to heaven, everyone, irrespective of rank, had to submit to certain moral discipline, and their preaching that no one, chief or otherwise, had any right to appropriate to himself [sic] any property belonging to another,"<sup>20</sup> did not go over well with those in charge. These new teachings of Christianity were incredibly unpopular with the Tongan chiefs since they undermined their status, privilege, and authority over their people.

Furthermore, white missionaries with their Bible saw themselves as superior to that of the native islanders. At times, missionaries and colonizers worked alongside one another, reinforcing their feelings of superiority. This was evident throughout the Pasifika, a region that was colonized with the help of missionaries and their Bible. Nevertheless, Tonga would receive more missionaries over the years and would eventually convert to Christianity with the Wesleyan Church at the helm, which remains

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<sup>20</sup> Latukefu, *Church and State in Tonga*, 31.

the dominant religion today in belief and practice. Using the master's tools,<sup>21</sup> the master is now local and localized.<sup>22</sup>

The aristocracy that once monopolized the entire field of cultural and technical knowledge became less popular.<sup>23</sup> In their attempts to save everyone's soul, Christian missionaries introduced a new education system made available for everyone for their individual salvation.<sup>24</sup> The Tongan commoners were eager to embrace this new way of thinking and wellbeing. In the past four decades, ordinary Tongans rapidly sought and received higher-level education and acquired a greater awareness of the world and their potential to excel.<sup>25</sup> They became more confident in their abilities in an evolving society.

Today, the aristocracy's influence is limited to the state structure: Parliament, the Cabinet, and the Privy Council.<sup>26</sup> Their resistance to democracy is entirely human: no one relinquishes their main sources of livelihood and power willingly.<sup>27</sup> Nevertheless, Tongans understand themselves as people who have journeyed together for more than two thousand years, and will remain loyal to their heritage.

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<sup>21</sup> Lorde 1984, 110-14 in *Bible, Borders, Belonging (s) Engaging Readings from Oceania*, ed. Jione Havea (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2014), 4.

<sup>22</sup> Jione Havea, *Bible, Borders, Belonging (s) Engaging Readings from Oceania* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2014), 4.

<sup>23</sup> Epeli Hau'ofa, *We Are the Ocean* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2008), 165.

<sup>24</sup> Epeli Hau'ofa, *We Are the Ocean*, 165.

<sup>25</sup> Epeli Hau'ofa, *We Are the Ocean*, 165.

<sup>26</sup> Epeli Hau'ofa, *We Are the Ocean*, 165.

<sup>27</sup> Epeli Hau'ofa, *We Are the Ocean*, 167.

### Navigating the Island life in Tonga and Hawai'i

I was born in Tonga but migrated to Hawai'i at an early age. I recall walking with Grandma Ana to church every Sunday morning, which was about a three-to-five minute walk. On a typical Sunday in Tonga, church bells ring throughout the islands, and services are held from dawn to dusk. There are early sunrise, morning, and evening worship services. Sunday School takes place in the afternoon. There is no question as to what someone does on a Sunday in Tonga. Everyone goes to church. Since each town or village has multiple churches, you can hear the singing. There is no such thing as church shopping because everyone attends their own local church unless, of course, someone is not Wesleyan, then you may need to extend your journey to the next town over. There is usually an 'umu (underground oven) prepared on Sunday morning and is ready after church just in time for the Sunday feast. The same routine is still practiced today. It is, of course, helpful that Tonga's Constitution states that Sunday, the Sabbath, is to be kept holy. Thus, all businesses are required to close on Sundays. There is no public transportation. There are no sporting events. There are no contracts signed. There is no going to the beach to swim. Plain and simple. Sundays are reserved for church and rest.

When our family voyaged to Hawai'i, another Pacific Island<sup>28</sup> in 1976, in search of better economic opportunity with higher education and higher living standards, the Tongan community set up much of the same routine. So the waves of the seas of life were

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<sup>28</sup> A former Polynesian Kingdom but had been colonized and annexed by the US in 1898.

in many ways similar to that in Tonga but modernized and Americanized. However, the church was the focal point of the community; it was the gathering place. As children, we often looked forward to seeing other friends and family, so the church was somewhat a treat. Thus, church involvement was always a big part of my family, life, and upbringing. I attended elementary and middle school in Hawai'i until we moved again, out to sea, this time to the "mainland," to Texas in 1984.

There has always been a great sense of Christian and family values, traditions, customs, and community amongst the Tongans. For this reason, when a family relocates overseas, they frequently visit the homeland, send money to the remaining family, or assist with bringing more family members to their adopted country. It is also important to note that Tongans have very close ties with extended and distant relatives. Culturally, Tongans rely on one another for good fortune and survival. The nuclear family in the western context does not define nor exist in the pacific island family structure.

As new immigrants to a foreign land, my family sought community, culture, church, and a sense of belonging. I do not think that this behavior is unique to my family or to any particular people. With any new arrivals of immigrants to a foreign land, they seek to establish the old community in the newly found space, for obvious reasons of human comfort in familiarity.

### Navigating My Moana Family System

From a family of ten, I am the second to the youngest and the only female. Growing up in a home full of boys was a challenge at times, not because most of our household was male, but because I perceived my freedom to be limited from a Western perspective. Thus, what a typical young American person could do was perceived as tapu<sup>29</sup> (taboo) in my Tongan culture. There were two different sets of rules and expectations for males and females; they were gender roles.

One of the words that define a Tongan is Respect. Respect for God, country, family, and people, regardless of their ranks. Moreover, in the Tongan culture, the female is placed on a pedestal, and the honor is mostly bestowed to the oldest female in the family. As the only female in my family, this was my place in what some consider a patriarchal family and culture. The expectation of becoming a perfect female role model is one that I repeatedly failed, sometimes with intention, and other times by misjudgment. Nevertheless, in my Tongan culture, as is in many Polynesian cultures throughout Oceania, women are placed on a pedestal as a model for other female family members, but particularly portraying a perfect image to be revered and displayed in public, as if to seek approval from the community and maintain a sense of honor for the family. Similarly, the Catholic Church places Mary, the mother of Jesus, the "mother of God," on a pedestal inviting women to revere and imitate her.<sup>30</sup> Perfection is not only an

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<sup>29</sup> The origin of the English word taboo comes from the Tongan or Pasifika word tapu or tabu.

<sup>30</sup> Mary Daly, *The Church and the Second Sex* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968), 148.

impossible task, but it paralyzes a woman's will to freedom and personhood. This idealization and glorification of women are patriarchal notions.<sup>31</sup>

Moreover, there is a "sacred relationship" between a brother and sister in the Polynesian family structure. In the Tongan tradition, the sister is not of equal rank to her brother but holds a higher ranking. For example, in my family, I have privileged status over my brothers and their children. This usually includes the privilege to name my brothers' children. When there are family functions and celebrations, I usually have a position of honor if I choose to participate in this tradition. This is called the Fahu system. Some may say that Tongans have a matriarchal system, but this is not all true. The sister cannot hold this ranking without the brother's agreement to uphold this tradition.

Moreover, in the Tongan tradition, the female does not have a voice regarding family decisions. These important decisions are made by the men of the family, the father or the oldest son or brother. The female, however, decides on matters pertaining to women and other family matters. In the Tongan hierarchical structure, the system balances out, creating harmony. Each person is either of lower or higher ranking to someone else, depending on which family you are with. My father's family is always of higher rank than my mother's family. This is because of my father's sisters. The oldest son and daughter have an important role in the family. If there is only one child (an anomaly in the Tongan family), or only girls or boys in one family, this is not a problem, since your first and second cousins are also considered your brothers and sisters. The word

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<sup>31</sup> Daly, *The Church and the Second Sex*, 149.

cousin simply does not exist in the Tongan language and context. The Tongan people's social fabric is that a person does not only belong to a family but to a *kainga* (a group of all your relatives), a tribe. Of course, each family is free to deviate from or observe this tradition, but it is commonly practiced. In my family, these values and traditions are part of my identity.

My dad's family consists of many ministers, both past and present. My great-grandparents accepted Christianity in its earliest stages, and my grandfather became a Wesleyan pastor. At the time of their ministry, Christianity was not yet entirely accepted by the little Island Kingdom. My great-grandparents and grandparents were exiled from their hometowns, and they lost all land possessions.

In Tonga, real estate law only permits land to be inherited through male heirs or to be granted by the government. When my great-grandfather and grandfather lost their land, my dad still somehow acquired land through my grandmother. My grandmother had one brother, and he did not have any legitimate sons as was required to inherit land; therefore, he was able to lawfully gift his many land possessions to my dad and brother. My family firmly believed that God intervened, knowing my family was doing missionary work to bring more people to Christ. My dad had six siblings, and two died at a young age. Of the four remaining, three sisters all married Wesleyan pastors, and his brother was a Wesleyan pastor. Most of my dad's nieces and nephews serve as pastors in the Wesleyan Church or as teachers or administrators in Christian education.

My dad was the only sibling who did not pursue a life in ministry. However, later in life, he did become a lay preacher. He did not become a pastor because he had a responsibility to his family. He had to seek some form of financial support. Being the oldest living son, he also had responsibility for other family members. After my grandfather died, my dad took care of my grandmother, his sisters, and his younger brother. My mom's family was less involved with church ministry.

God, church, and Tonga were always a big part of my life and always understood in community. Contrary to the Western concept of individualism, Polynesians value and thrive on community. As Tongan theologian Mohenoa Puloka argued, in his *Sisu Tonga* (Tongan Jesus) and interpreting Scripture in context, "*Ko e hala ki hevani 'oku 'ikai ngaohi ia ma a'e tokotaha, ka koe kakai pe.*" meaning "The road to heaven is not made for individuals but only for a people,"<sup>32</sup> thus emphasizing community. The individual simply does not stand alone but exists only in community and in relation to others.

### Navigating the Sea of Academia

At first, navigating the sea of academia was somewhat frightful. Eventually, with my professors' and mentors' encouragement, I learned to water-raft. I found my voice. I felt empowered to be critical and speak my thoughts on paper. This was a very transformative season in my life as a new voyager in academia. I was certain this was the

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<sup>32</sup> Tevita T. M. Puloka, "In Tonga, a Straight Line Is Only a Curve: Poetry as Metaphor in a Tongan Theology of Conservation," *The Pacific Journal of Theology* Vol. 2, no. 38 (2007): 60. Mohenoa Puloka is a first cousin.

direction my voyage was heading, to continue my academic endeavor and to help other Pacific Islanders bring their voices to the table in academia. However, following the recommendation of my professor and mentor, Namsoon Kang, that if I were going to serve anywhere in Christian education, it would be best to be ordained. Before this engagement, pastoral vocation had not even appeared on my radar. Since I was already approaching my last semester of my Master of Theological Studies (MTS) degree at Brite Divinity School at Texas Christian University in Fort Worth, the best option was to complete it.

In December 2009, I graduated from Brite and immediately enrolled in January 2010 at Perkins School of Theology at Southern Methodist University in Dallas. It took me another two-and-a-half years to complete the Master of Divinity (MDiv) in May 2012. I was employed full-time as a financial representative (a series 7 licensed stockbroker) for an investment firm to support my academic studies.

As mandatory with an MDiv program, I was required to take preaching along with word and worship. Since I had no plans to work in a church or to become a preacher and actually feared public speaking, I delayed these two courses to the very end. An internship was also required of all MDiv students. The congregation I chose to serve for my internship was predominantly white, WC Martin United Methodist Church in Bedford (located in DFW). The church had recently received a new Tongan community of about 100 members. This Tongan community resulted from a split from the Tongan First United Methodist Church of Euless, located only a few miles away. I was excited to serve this church, partly because I knew most of the Tongan community who joined, and more than

half were my family. Things seemed to occur smoothly, and without any problems, I truly felt God had a hand in it. For someone who had no plans of working in the church or preaching, I oddly gained a sense of passion for being around the people and felt energized by preaching. I had to pause and wonder if this was really me. The people's responses, both Tongan and non-Tongan, were affirming. I knew then that God was using me. My call to ministry was affirmed while serving as an intern in 2011-12. However, my ultimate goal was getting ordained as an elder and moving on to post-graduate study.

Like unexpected tides that sweep ashore, it took me longer to learn to swim and navigate the UMC process. My ordination did not take place until June 2017, five years after seminary. I did not anticipate ordination would take so long. I had a false sense of expectation. I am, however, fortunate and blessed to have been ordained as an elder in the United Methodist Church, knowing that more candidates do not make it through the tedious and rigorous process.

I do not believe that everything happens for a reason. However, in my case and with my life and my calling to ministry, I am firmly convinced that God is using me for Kingdom work. It may not have been my plan to become a pastor, but surely God has taken my plan and has continued to refine it. I may have plans for the next few years, but I will keep an open mind for unexpected waves, knowing that God may surprise me again and reroute my voyage. It is as if I have been raised up and divinely appointed for such a time as this.

### Navigating My Identity as Pastor

My identity as a pastor in some ways has been formed by my past in Oceania, in the islands, in the Tongan community, in the Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga, in my family, and in my home. Nevertheless, in many more ways, my identity continues to develop daily in practice. It is always becoming and never-ending, like the endless interminable seas. Through pastoral encounters in relationships and leadership, my pastoral identity is being expanded, strengthened, tested, and re-examined. I am like a voyager out at sea learning how to navigate uncharted water and waves, but with experience, I can only hope to follow the lead of my master at sea, Jesus.

In June 2013, I was commissioned in the Central Texas Conference of The United Methodist Church. With commissioning came a full-time appointment. This also meant I could no longer continue my secular employment as required by the Book of Discipline. After serving for two years at W.C. Martin United Methodist Church, first as an intern and later as an associate, I received my first full-time appointment to a two-point charge, where my responsibilities were to serve two smaller churches, Annetta United Methodist Church in Aledo and Bethel United Methodist Church in Weatherford. They were north of Fort Worth, an hour's drive from the mid-cities of DFW, where Martin UMC was located and where my family lives.

While my relationship with one church was great, the second church was a struggle. I encountered several problems within my first year. First, the church expected me to wear a robe because that is what pastors wear, and that is what their previous pastors wore. I did not like being told what to wear. Second, the church members

expected me to wear shoes and not flip-flops. I highly resisted this expectation because, as an Islander, this is regular footwear. I also thought Jesus would be wearing flip-flops or sandals. Third, my family singing in Tongan was not well received by some church members because it was in a language they could not understand. The list of complaints was long, and I was overwhelmed. Was I too different to serve this congregation? What was the Bishop thinking when he sent me to this country town, I thought? My District Superintendent was of no help, and she made things worse. I was drowning at sea with no rescue in sight.

I was in a clash of difference of cultures. The waves pounded against the rocks. Eventually, I learned to battle the storm by channeling my energy with the flow of the waves. I had to get over myself. I was reminded that the first missionaries' attempt to evangelize Tonga in 1776 failed miserably because they did not adequately prepare, and they did not learn the culture.<sup>33</sup> So, in some ways, I experienced a version of culture shock, but to a much lesser degree. As a new pastor, I was too arrogant and self-centered to walk into a church with the expectation that I would be respected and the people would follow my lead. Wow! What an illusionary expectation! I was wrong!

Seminary may have taught me a lot about theology, the Bible, and the history of Christianity. However, it certainly did not prepare me to handle big waves and conflicts and to be relational in a pastoral-leadership role. My pastoral identity was being formed in the local church in practice through trial and error through growing pains. The system

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<sup>33</sup> Sione Latukefu, *Church and State in Tonga* (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1974), 28-29.

of a corporate structure that I was accustomed to did not apply in the local church. The family system that I grew up knowing did not extend to the church. In the corporate system, there were set objectives and job descriptions. If your performance did not meet expectations, the end results were clear. In my family system, everyone was expected to fulfill a role. In essence, I approached my churches with the same or similar expectations. My culture and family system is such that authority figures are obeyed and trusted in their decision-making without protest or questions. I expected the same level of respect and obedience from the church. However, as I lived and learned, this was sadly not the case. The church was not a corporation with paid employees; church members were volunteering their time. My parishioners were not part of my family system. Each person belonged to their own family system, however functional or dysfunctional it may be. Thereby, we all ended up in the church with unrealistic expectations. I had to learn to navigate this new uncharted water.

### Navigating My Charge in Taylor

After serving for three years at Annetta and Bethel, I was appointed to First United Methodist Church of Taylor (FUMC), Texas, on July 1, 2016. The church is as old as the town, established in 1876.<sup>34</sup> At our current location on Lake Drive, the church buildings were built in 1957.<sup>35</sup> A drive into the city with a population est. 18,000+ gives one the idea that you have left the big city. You are now entering a less populated area,

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<sup>34</sup> First United Methodist Church of Taylor, Texas, “History of FUMC Taylor” <https://www.fumctaylor.org/taylor-history/>

<sup>35</sup> First United Methodist Church of Taylor, Texas, “History of FUMC Taylor.”.

mostly farming, as seen along the road with cornfields everywhere. If one grew up in a farming community, the atmosphere might feel like you are returning home. However, having grown up in the islands and later spending most of my life around the city of "Big D," referring to Dallas and DFW, I felt displaced and out of place. There was no beach or moana in sight, and there were no tall buildings. I felt I was entering into uncharted water and had been thrust into the abyss of cornfields. With tears falling down my cheeks, like a kid in their first day at school, I did not ponder on what God was up to; rather, I cried out, as Jesus did on the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"<sup>36</sup> On that first day, driving into Taylor to check it out with a friend, I truly felt abandoned by God and wondered what I did to deserve this? Whatever I had done, my charge and appointment to Taylor was my punishment. These were some of my initial feelings.

For the first year, I drove the 350 mile roundtrip to see my family in DFW, if not every weekend, at least every other weekend. On the other weekends, my family would come to visit me. The second year, my trips to DFW were less frequent, averaging once or twice a month. Since then, my schedule has become busier with the church and community, and my DFW trips are even less frequent. What was also happening was that I started living out my charge of not just preaching the word of God and administering the sacraments, but I have also taken the lead with ordering the life of the church for mission and ministry in and with the community.

Perhaps another contributing factor to the infrequency of my trips to visit my family is the naturalizing of *terroir*, where I am getting acclimated to the environment. I

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<sup>36</sup> Matthew 27:46 (NRSV)

am learning the language and culture of the people. I am living in the context for “every context has a *terroir*, a unique taste, a one-of-a-kind flavor, a somewhere-ness.”<sup>37</sup>

Although “the term *terroir* refers primarily to the natural environment of grapes in which a particular wine is produced, cumulative factors such as soil, topography, and climate contribute to the *terroir*.”<sup>38</sup> Thus the *terroir* of one’s context cannot only be experienced through reading statistics, learning history, or conducting interviews. To fully understand and appreciate the *terroir*, one must be fully immersed, utilizing all of one’s senses. In other words, to fully understand and appreciate one’s context, a person must become fully immersed and part of the community.

I am not the first female pastor, I am the fourth.<sup>39</sup> However, I am the first person of color to serve this predominantly white congregation at 97 percent. While the community is very diverse and quickly gaining a tan, our church remains pale and white, representing The United Methodist Church. Part of the reason, I believe, is that people are comfortable with their identity. People do not like change, especially if they are comfortable. From my perspective, I would not have chosen to move 3 hours away from my family and serve a white congregation on my own. The appointment system of the UMC exists for a purpose, to further the Kingdom through the workings of the churches, even if that means sending pastors to churches where they would sometimes painfully

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<sup>37</sup> Leonard Sweet and Michael Adam Beck, *Contextual Intelligence* (Oviedo, Florida: Higher Life Development Services, Inc., 2020), 125.

<sup>38</sup> Sweet and Beck, *Contextual Intelligence*, 125.

<sup>39</sup> First United Methodist Church of Taylor, Texas, “A Chronological List of Pastors at FUMC Taylor” <https://www.fumctaylor.org/history-of-pastors/>

grow together in the mission field. We have made some intentional moves to interact more with the community, to be a moana bridge.

The Presidential Election of 2016 made it increasingly challenging to pastor a church, particularly as someone serving a cross-cultural and cross-racial appointment, and labeled a "liberal" by some church members. The label is not meant as a compliment. As the country continued to be polarized and divisive, fueled partly by a partisan President, who has recently been voted out of office, it is critical that I find common grounds and ways to stay connected with my congregation and to keep the focus on the mission of the church, "To make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world."<sup>40</sup> Each day and with every sermon, I try to choose my words carefully. What words can I use in my presentation of the gospel will people be more receptive to hear? What social justice issues can my congregation handle at this point? These are real questions that I constantly struggle with. When shall I preach Jeremiah's prophetic words; when shall I preach encouraging words from Paul; how can I present the radical love of Jesus? Learning the context of the seas, when in doubt, I try to always fall on the side of grace. I am grateful to be a follower of Jesus and privileged to help others become followers too. Sometimes that means getting out of the boat.

Learning to navigate my way as pastor of a church in a community, state, and country different from me in some ways yet similar in many more ways, has been enriching, frustrating, advancing, edifying and life-giving. Like a navigator out at sea, I

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<sup>40</sup> The Mission Statement of The United Methodist Church. Accessed March 21, 2021. [www.umc.org](http://www.umc.org)

am learning to ride the sometimes turbulent waves, while other times I bask in the peaceful crest.<sup>41</sup> I am learning that I cannot control the moana; instead, the One who rules the wind and the seas is with me, and I can trust in his power.<sup>42</sup>

### Navigating the In-Between Space

My voyage that began many years ago from the South Seas, from the moana, has brought me this far in time and space. It is the nature of my people, Polynesians, to travel across seas, for this is how we first arrived in the South Pacific Islands thousands of years ago with God's nature as our guide. We travel on a Tongan vessel called kalia.<sup>43</sup> This kalia requires many people to operate and can hold anywhere from 50 to 150 people.<sup>44</sup> Everyone has a role and position on the voyage. Thus, the kalia is never a one-person excursion but a communal voyage. On the voyage, we are seeking new life.

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<sup>41</sup> Peace is the root word for pacific, so as a Pacific Islander, the word carries more meaning.

<sup>42</sup> Matthew 8:24-27

<sup>43</sup> Victoria University of Wellington. "*The Maori Canoe: Canoes of the Tongan Group*." Accessed March 28, 2021. <http://nzetc.victoria.ac.nz/tm/scholarly/tei-BesCano-t1-body-d6-d2-d12.html>

<sup>44</sup> Talafungani Finau, online conversation, April 2021.



Illustration 1.1

Some scholars believe that Polynesians may have originated in Southeast Asia. Indeed, “[b]ecause land and space are limited, South Pacific islanders are oriented toward the ocean, not only as island boundary but also an extension of our land.”<sup>45</sup> Thus moana is a part of my identity, of who I am. Likewise, since I have made my home in America, its culture and values have also become a part of my identity. Each day as I encounter people in the church, community, and society, they too influence who I am and who I am to become. Thus my identity is negotiated and formed in real-time, between *tā* (time) and *vā* (space), in culture, with people.

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<sup>45</sup> Jione Havea, *Elusions of Control: Biblical Law on the Words of Women*. (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 4. Jione is a first cousin.

## Tā-Vā Theory of Reality

This *Tā-Vā* (Time-Space) is a moana theory of culture developed by ‘Ōkusitino Māhina, a moana anthropologist. The *Tā-Vā* moana theory exists in a circular fashion, putting the past in front, and the future in the back of the present.<sup>46</sup> Moreover, there is a common moana saying that “...people walk forward into the past and walk backward into the future.”<sup>47</sup> In other words, the past holds a prominent place and is our guide to the present and future. We understand the present and future by comprehending the past. The early moana navigators, 3,500 to 4,000 years ago, understood this *tā* (time) and *vā* (space) in practice and theory with their dealings across nature, mind, and society.<sup>48</sup> This is contrary to the Western understanding in linear modes where the future is in the front, present in the middle, and the past follows. Furthermore, more value is assigned to the future. Mahina argues that the past and future are symmetrically negotiated rather than disengaged. Thus, as a moana navigator, the past and future are “...constantly mediated in the conflicting and ever-changing present,”<sup>49</sup> the in-between, *tā-vā*, (time-space). Māhina and Tevita Ka’ili, moana anthropologists, and both Tongans, argue that the *tā* (time) and *vā* (space) are inseparable in reality. Both dimensions must be examined

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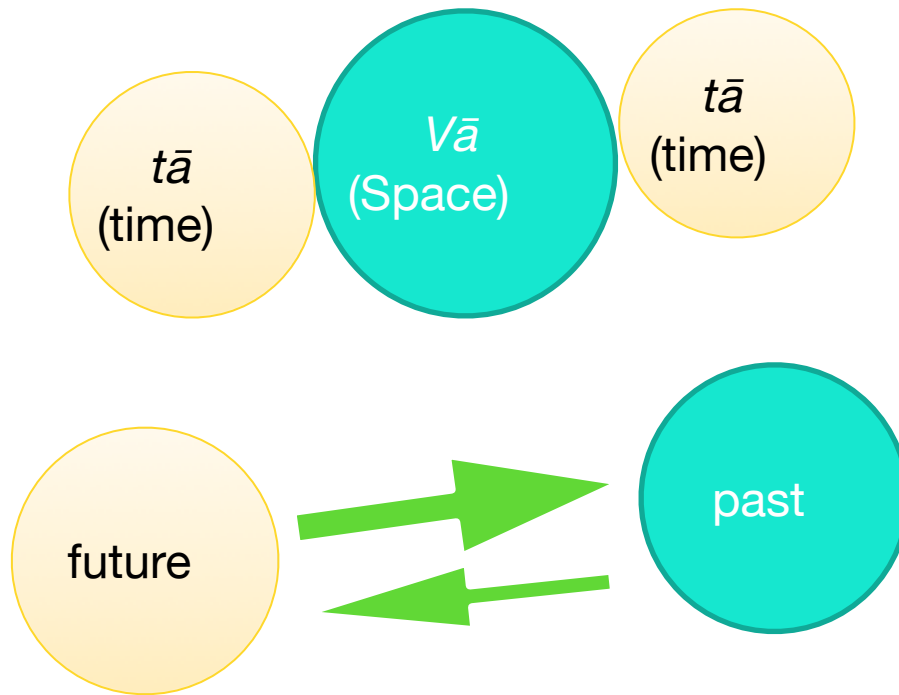
<sup>46</sup> ‘Ōkusitino Māhina, “A Tā-Vā (Time-Space) Theory of Culture,” in *Pacific Studies: Special Issues, Tā-Vā (Time-Space) Theory of Reality* (Laie, Hawai’i: Bringham Young University, 2017), 106-107.

<sup>47</sup> Talafungani Finau, online conversation, April 2021.

<sup>48</sup> Māhina, “Tā-Vā,” 106-107.

<sup>49</sup> Māhina, “Tā-Vā,” 68.

together and in relation to one another.<sup>50</sup> Thus, this is the relevance and connecting point of history and future direction for this voyage.



Illustrations<sup>51</sup> 1.2

<sup>50</sup> Māhina, “Tā-Vā,” 5.

<sup>51</sup> Māhina, Tā-Vā Theory, 68-73.

The negotiated in-betweenness is what Homi Bhabha, a Harvard postcolonial theorist, refers to as a third-space identity comprising culture and people's hybridity.<sup>52</sup>

### Third-Space Theory

Bhabha, a native of India, speaks from a postcolonial perspective. He articulates a perspective that many immigrants resonate with. He uses the dominant cultures language to explain colonized experience. In Bhabha's third-space theory, he speaks for the subaltern.<sup>53</sup> He speaks from a hybrid-identity experience of being in-between cultures, one vastly different from the other. To further expound on Bhabha's third-space theory, he explains it as follows:<sup>54</sup>

First-space is one's home. It includes indigenous, native, culture, language, etc. It is your native home.

Second-space is the colonial structure. It includes religion, education, economics, formality, culture, etc. It is your adopted country. One is not able to freely interact and be themselves in this space.

Third- space is the hybridity of one's identity. It is on a voyage and always becoming since one is likely to encounter others and things in life. It is not necessarily a physical space, but it is intentional about the gathering space. It is in-between here and there. It is a hybrid of first-space and second-space. Hybridity is a mix of the colonized experience and the colonial influence.

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<sup>52</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, "Cultural Diversity and Cultural Differences," *The Post-Colonial Studies: Reader*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin (New York: Routledge, 2006), 156-7.

<sup>53</sup> Gavatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *The Post-Colonial Studies: Reader*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin (New York: Routledge, 2006), 28-35.

<sup>54</sup> Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 53-36.

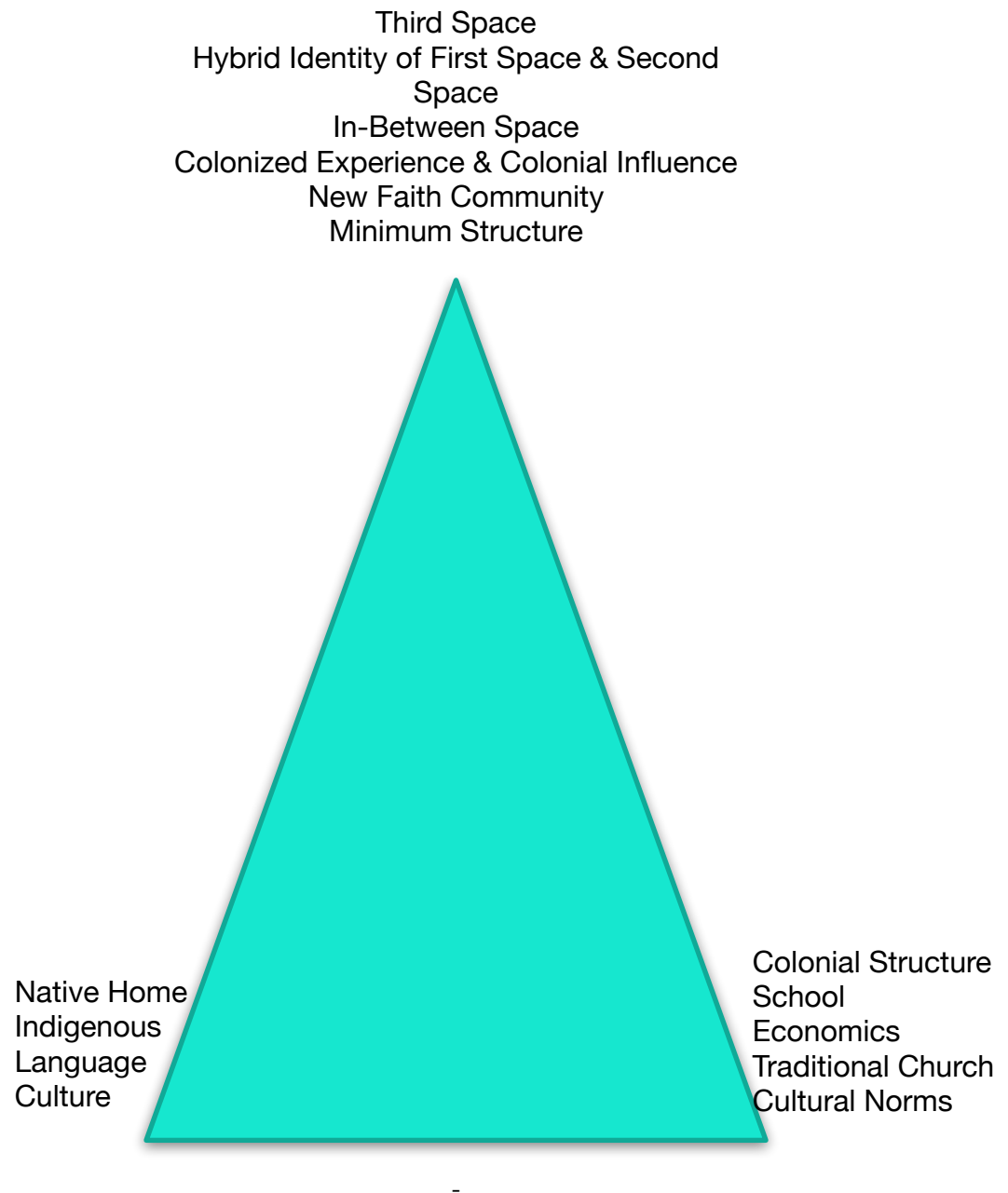


Illustration 1.3

### Third-Place Theory

On the other hand, Ray Oldenburg, an American sociologist from the University of West Florida, argues for a third-place. Oldenburg's theory arises from a gap or inadequate informal life in the public place. The need for a third-place is vital to a community's social life. He argues that "...informal public life is essential to good towns and great cities."<sup>55</sup> He explains his theory as follow:<sup>56</sup>

First-place is one's home.

Second-place is work.

Third-place is a happy and welcoming place. It is a place where you want to be. It is neutral ground. The conversation is the main activity. Examples of a third-place are cafes, coffee shops, bookstores, bars, hair salons, and other hangouts at the heart of the community. It can be a place ... "where everyone knows your name."<sup>57</sup>

In *Celebrating the Third Place*, Oldenburg shares inspiring stories from a variety of places that have embraced his theory and made it a reality. There is even a church in Cincinnati, Ohio, Old St. George, that had been redefined and repurposed into multiple usages by the community from ecumenical religious gatherings to large conferences.<sup>58</sup> One particular place that is not listed in the book, but maybe familiar to many is

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<sup>55</sup> Ray Oldenburg, *The Great Good Place* (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 1989), xxix.

<sup>56</sup> Oldenburg, *The Great Good Place*, 20-42..

<sup>57</sup> From the theme song to the TV show, *Cheers*.

<sup>58</sup> Ray Oldenburg, *Celebrating the Third Place* (New York: Marlowe & Company, 2001), 55-61.

Starbucks. Many patrons of this business gather at Starbucks not only for the cup of coffee but also for the experience. As a matter of fact, Starbucks' mission and values seem to have had Oldenburg's theory in mind when setting up shop. Their website reads: "Our Mission and Values come to life in the promotion of equitable, diverse and inclusive cultures: in our workplace, our communities, and in our stores, a third place environment where everyone is welcome and we can gather, as a community, to share great coffee and deepen human connection."<sup>59</sup>

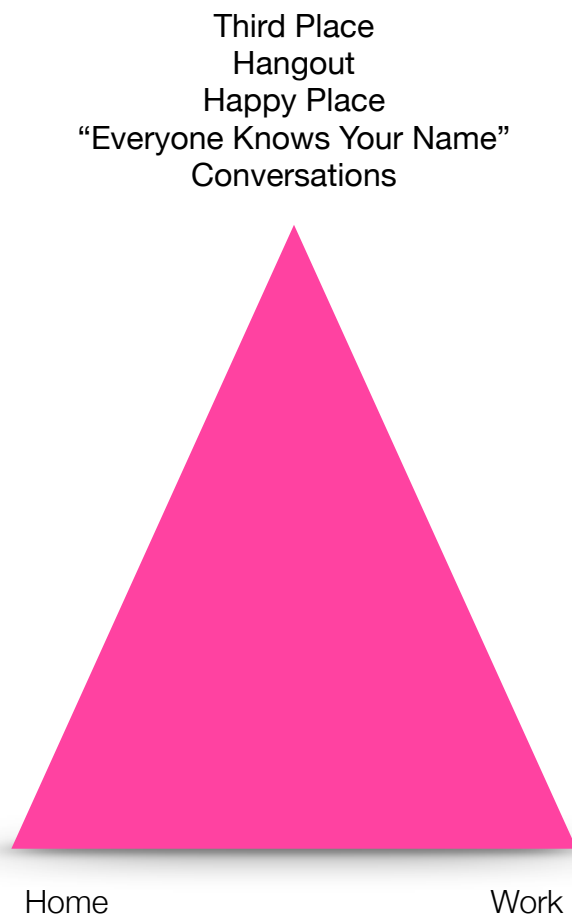


Illustration 1. 4

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<sup>59</sup> Starbucks, "Starbucks Principles for Upholding the Third Place: For Our Partners, Our Customers and Our Communities," Accessed April 3, 2021, <https://www.starbucks.com/responsibility/learn-more/policies/third-place>

While Oldenburg's theory of third-place has more to do with a physical location, whether in-person or virtual, Bhabha's theory has to do with one's hybrid identity. While third-place arises out of a need for community vitality, third-space has more to do with an awareness of self in relation to others and bringing those from the margins to a space where their humanity can be affirmed. While both theories are no doubt interconnected in some ways, as a post-colonial student, it is my intent in this paper to use Bhabha's theory of third-space. Nevertheless, Oldenburg's theory also has a place in the third-space and vice versa. In this voyage, boundaries are crossed and blurred between third-space and third-place, between  $t\bar{a}$  (time) and  $v\bar{a}$  (space), past, present, future, thus leading to a hybrid identity and space. Moreover, since third-place's main activity is conversation, it is already woven into the fabric of this paper's talanoa.

Yet, the moana  $T\bar{a}$ - $V\bar{a}$  theory also joins the talanoa (conversation). It is what makes the space possible. The third-space and place is not only about the present; it is also about making the connection between the past, present, and future. As a follower of Jesus, he is the intersection of connection and separation through this current  $T\bar{a}$  (time) and  $V\bar{a}$  (space). Like the kalia illustration earlier, this  $t\bar{a}$ - $v\bar{a}$  theory offers a true reflection of our ontological and epistemological ways of a moana people and navigators.

Moreover, not forgetting where i<sup>60</sup> came from, for me, there is no i without a We. The i only exists in “community.” Everything is communal. As with the kalia illustration earlier, we voyage *with* the community and as a community. I cannot speak about who I am without including where I came from. I cannot speak about the church, mission field, society, and culture without including myself and my story, and vice versa. We all have a context from which we are speaking. Our contexts do not exist in isolation but are interconnected and interwoven with everything around us, including the air we breathe, the ground we walk on, and the sea and voyage we are on.

"Blessed Assurance" by Fannie Crosby has become one of my favorite hymns in recent years. I love singing it both in English and in Tongan. It is even more powerful when both languages are sung at the same time.<sup>61</sup> The chorus plays in my mind, and I sing it out loudly and repeatedly, especially while writing this chapter.

This is my story, this is my song,  
praising my Savior, all the day long.  
This is my story, this is my song,  
praising my Savior all the day long.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> I use the lower case i to emphasize an individual exists only in community, and when the i is used to spell out community, all letters are lower case.

<sup>61</sup> Sela Finau, <https://youtu.be/su87KLTOL48> Blessed Assurance sung both in English and Tongan at my sister-in-law, Lina Finau's funeral, May 2015. Skip to minute 6:45.

<sup>62</sup> Fannie Crosby, “*Blessed Assurance*,” 1873, *The United Methodist Hymnal* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1989), 369.

As beloved as this hymn is, its focus on the individual is insufficient to meet the global contemporary world's challenges. In a world rocked by COVID-19, economic challenges, and Black Lives Matter, the time has come to do the hard work and to think communally. In this time and space, I must continuously navigate life, pressing against culture, and (re)signing the I to We, where I stands for Inclusion. "This is my story, this is my song, praising my Savior all the day long" to "This is our story, this our song, praising our Savior all the day long."

## CHAPTER TWO

Charles Wesley's hymn "A Charge to Keep I Have" is an "unequivocal call to commitment and to follow" Jesus by fulfilling our vocation through service.<sup>1</sup> Wesley writes: "A charge to keep I have, a God to glorify, a never-dying soul to save, and fit it for the sky."<sup>2</sup> This hymn is said to be based on Leviticus 8:35-36, pertaining to Aaron and his sons' ordination. The stanzas will serve as the basis for this chapter while attempting to answer the question, "What does it mean to learn a living" as juxtaposed to "earning a living"?

As a United Methodist, this hymn and the questions it raises helps me to navigate the waves of my ministerial responsibility. No matter where I serve or what particular ministries I am engaged in at the time, certain questions underlie everything I do. To better serve in my ministry, I need answers to these questions:

1. What is a charge?
2. What is your charge?
3. Where is your charge?

Indeed, Wesley's questions and my answers are a part of who I am and what I do.

Unfortunately, with so much to do, it is easy for me to overlook or take their significance for granted. These questions bring me back to my *Why*? Why do I do what I do?

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Hawn, Professor Emeritus of Church Music at Perkins School of Theology, Southern Methodist University, "History of Hymns: A Charge to Keep I Have," June 18, 2013 <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-a-charge-to-keep-i-have>

<sup>2</sup> Charles Wesley, *A Charge to Keep I Have*, 1762, *The United Methodist Hymnal* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1989), 413.

Particularly, a person called into pastoral ministry and ordained in the church must adhere to a “higher calling,” such as as defined in the Book of Discipline: ¶ 304. Qualifications for Ordination,<sup>3</sup> while learning to navigate and ride waves of life with God's people - the church. The church, like the moana,<sup>4</sup> is in many ways unpredictable. We are not in control of how forceful a wave may be or how fierce a storm may become, the origin of a storm, or the aftermath of a storm. We can prepare for the storm and learn to navigate it by reading the signs, knowing our location, our terroir,<sup>5</sup> and the system. There are always storms to battle, waves to ride, and fears to conquer. All must be faced with bravery and determination if one is to survive. As a moana navigator, I must follow my ancestors' teachings of astronomy and read the signs of the heavens, the stars, the moon, the sun, and the flow of the tides. My ancestors were great astronomers and voyagers who conquered the seas using only God's natural signs as their compass and navigation.<sup>6</sup> They traveled by boat across the deep Pacific Ocean, taking up residence in the Polynesian Is-lands.<sup>7</sup> They would voyage back and forth in the vast ocean to trade, marry, and pass on traditions. As a follower of Jesus, I am often reminded that the Lord is at sea with me, and I can cast all my fears to him. Jesus will guide me through the moana

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<sup>3</sup> The United Methodist Church. “Book of Discipline: ¶ 304. Qualifications for Ordination.” Accessed March 29, 2021. <https://www.umc.org/en/content/book-of-discipline-304-qualifications-for-ordination>.

<sup>4</sup> As noted previously, the term *moana* means ocean in Polynesia. I will be using the terms moana and ocean interchangeably.

<sup>5</sup> As mentioned earlier, terroir is referring to the soil, environment, or climate.

<sup>6</sup> Noel Rutherford, editor. *Friendly Islands: A History of Tonga* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1977), 4.

<sup>7</sup> I hyphenate the word is-land to emphasize land.

and lead me to calming seas and is-lands. Despite the unrelenting presence of storms, there are also moments of peace, sunshiny days with beautiful rainbows after the storm to remind the navigators they are sailing on the promises of God.

The church can be a moana. There are times when the moana is life-giving, but many other times, it can also take life. Similarly, the church can be life-giving, but many times the church can be a barrier to life. However, when we learn to navigate the moana, the church, the moana becomes a part of our identity and serves as a bridge connecting peoples, cultures, races, generations, social-economics, and life itself. The ocean that was once viewed as a dividing force is now a bridge that connects. A human-made bridge has a limited shelf life. People can walk on it, drive on it, stomp on it, and blow it up. The moana is not human-made; God created moana in the beginning and filled it with life (See Genesis 1:1-23). My charge is to navigate the church and to lead its people to a place where they see the church as a moana filled with life, filled with God's creatures, from the beginning of time. I hope the church will become a community of moana navigators. Instead of the community and non-church affiliated persons viewing the church as a staunch, outdated institution, perhaps they can see it as a moana filled with life, a lifeline able to help sustain life.

While learning to navigate the ocean is the immediate goal, the ultimate destination is to connect with the Creator and follow the ways of Jesus. As Wesley's hymn implies, life or death is a choice. We can choose our path. We can learn to navigate the waters by connecting with our Creator and other people, or drowned in the deep and face eternal death. Wesley wasted no time and got right to the eschatological point of

asserting that heaven is the ultimate goal. The fourth stanza of “A Charge to Keep I Have” affirms his heavenward focus.

Help me to watch and pray,  
and on thyself rely,  
assured, if I my trust betray,  
I shall forever die.

### What Is a Charge?

Each week, I go through my credit and debit card statement to verify all the charges are accurate and accounted for. Several times a day, I make sure all of my electronic devices are connected and charged to a power source. Periodically, I get pulled over for speeding. Either I will be given a warning or charged with ignoring the signs and exceeding the legal speed limit. Each day as I pull into my garage, I hear my dogs excitedly charging as fast as they can to the door, just waiting for me to open it. So, when I think of a charge, my initial thoughts are about credit/debit cards, electronic devices, speeding tickets, and family dogs. In many ways, all of these examples relate to what a church charge can be.

In the ecclesial context, a charge is a particular church or multiple churches that a member of clergy has been assigned to or is responsible for. Often referred to as a quadrilateral, the charge covers a wide range of responsibilities including theological, ecclesial, political, and practical matters.<sup>8</sup> The pastor is not only in charge, but is also given a charge—a church. Having recently completed our annual Charge-Conference paperwork, I was charged to be responsible for giving an account of the State of the

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<sup>8</sup> Gary Simpson, online conversation with author, January 2021.

Church, First United Methodist Church, Taylor, Texas. My report included the day-to-day happenings in the life and ministries of the church. It included answers to questions like these:

- Does the church stay connected to the community and our mission field?
- Is the church staying connected and charged to the power source, God?
- Were there any traffic violations or warning signs on the road that we ignored?
- Were parishioners excited and charged up to attend church like my dogs charge to the door?

Indeed, a charge is more than being appointed to a church; it is a particular order; it is a specific "home" church that always needs to be plugged in. A charge comes with a price and accountability; it is a commitment that carries immense privileges and serious responsibilities. Privileges include people volunteering their valuable time to sit and listen attentively to the pastor preach weekly for at least fifteen minutes. Responsibilities include administrative duties and ordering the life and mission of the church.

### What Is My Charge?

My ordination vows as an elder in The United Methodist Church are particular. They can be found in the Book of Discipline and outlined in the ordination order of service.<sup>9</sup> As an elder, I am "ordained to a lifetime ministry of service, word, sacrament, and order. I have been authorized to preach and teach God's word, administer the sacraments of baptism and holy communion, and order the life of the church for mission

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<sup>9</sup> "The Order for the Ordination of Elders," Accessed December 1, 2020. <http://www.explorecalling.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/Elder-Ordination-Liturgy.pdf>

and ministry."<sup>10</sup> I vividly remember the evening I was ordained in front of our annual conference. Kneeling at the communion rails, my hands on the Bible, the Bishop placed his hands on my head. Many hands were on my shoulders. Others stood in solidarity. The Bishop said, "Sela Finau, take authority as an elder to preach the Word of God, to administer the Holy Sacraments and to order the life of the Church; in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." It is a moment in time I remember regularly. With the grace of God, the help of countless people, my family, Tongan community, churches, friends, mentors, teachers, and strangers, I was ordained in the Central Texas Conference of The United Methodist Church on June 13, 2017. With the empowerment of the Holy Spirit and the authorization of the church, I have my charge.

For me, there is no higher calling than this, to be ordained as an elder, a servant of God, to serve in a denomination rooted in Wesleyan theology with biblical authority, grounded in tradition, enlivened by experience, and enlightened by reason. There is no higher position than to serve and glorify God through and with the church. As the Bishop and the annual conference invoked the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon my life and ministry from the moment of my ordination, I am deeply humbled that God would choose to use me to carry out this ministry.

Each day in ministry, I remind myself to stay the course. When the storms get too rough, and the waves are too high, I must sustain a level of calmness. I continuously center myself in Christ, who calms the storms and raging seas. I hold firm to a spiritual

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<sup>10</sup> The United Methodist Church, "Glossary: Elder," Accessed on December 1, 2020. <http://www.umc.org/what-we-believe/glossary-elder>

discipline of prayer and devotional Bible reading. If God has called me, surely there is no one more eager to help and come to my aid than God. I am constantly reminded by Charles Tindley's hymn, "Stand By Me."

When the storms of life are raging, stand by me;  
when the storms of life are raging, stand by me,  
when the world is tossing me, like a ship up on the sea,  
thou who rulest wind and water, stand by me.<sup>11</sup>

My pastoral identity is continuously being formed to shape me into who I need to be to serve God and the people better. I am continually learning new ways to ride the waves of the moana by keeping connected to God.

### Where Is My Charge?

First United Methodist Church (FUMC) is situated in Taylor, Texas, twenty-five miles northeast of Austin. The church was founded in 1876, the same year the town was established. At that time, the town received an influx of settlers from Czechoslovakia and other Slavic countries and Germany and Austria.

Taylor is the hometown of Dan Moody, a 29 year-old District Attorney of Travis and Williamson Counties. In September 1923, in Georgetown, Texas, he was the first to successfully prosecute a case against the Ku Klux Klan.<sup>12</sup> Four years later at the age of 33, Moody became the youngest governor of Texas.<sup>13</sup> Today, the childhood home of

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<sup>11</sup> Charles Albert Tindley, "Stand By Me," 1906, *The United Methodist Hymnal* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1989), 512.

<sup>12</sup> The Texas Politics Project: Governors of Texas, "16. Dan Moody," <https://texaspolitics.utexas.edu/archive/html/exec/governors/16.html>

<sup>13</sup> The Moody Museum, "History." <https://www.moodymuseum.com/history>

Moody in Taylor is a museum. Members of the Moody family were members of FUMC Taylor. In fact, FUMC Taylor's history was written by Mary Moody, the sister of Dan Moody. Mary was also the church pianist for many years.<sup>14</sup> Apparently, Governor Mood's grandfather on his father's side was a Baptist preacher. His grandfather on his mother's side (a Robertson) was a Methodist preacher. Thereby, the family attended two different denominations. The men attended the Baptist Church, and the women attended the Methodist Church. According to Susan Komandasky, this was the norm in their day.

Another prominent member of the Taylor community was Dr. James Lee Dickey (1893 to 1959). He was a local Black physician during Jim Crow. While there are nationally recognized figures such as Dr. Martin Luther King, Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. Du Bois, Marcus Garvey, and Rosa Parks, Dickey was a prominent member of Taylor and Williamson County because he dealt directly with issues "...pertaining to Black lives, in areas of education, business, housing, sanitation, health, and medical care."<sup>15</sup> In 1935, Dr. and Mrs. Dickey opened a 15-bed modern hospital.<sup>16</sup> It was called the Dickey Clinic. Since Taylor was the largest city between Waco and Austin, people of color drove in from other counties for treatment. The Dickey Clinic was the only medical

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<sup>14</sup> Susan Komandosky, Chair of the Moody Museum, phone conversation with author, March 2021.

<sup>15</sup> Maureen Gray, *James Lee Dickey: An analysis of one African-American Leadership in Jim Crow Texas*, Accessed April 4, 2021. <https://scalar.usc.edu/works/james-lee-dickey-doctor-leader-mentor-hero/an-analysis-of-one-leader-in-a-leaderless-time?path=index>

<sup>16</sup> Gray, James Lee Dickey.

facility serving all races for almost 100 miles. Dr. Dickey won citizen of the year in 1952. Dickey was a member of the African Methodist Episcopal Church.

FUMC membership fluctuated over the years, with an average worship attendance ranging between 70 to more than 200. Our membership demographic is 97 percent white, 65 percent white collar, and a median age of 49. We hope to become more representative of our community in race and ethnicity, but acknowledge that hope takes work from both lay and clergy. Taylor's three largest groups are 42.3 percent white, 33.6 percent Hispanic, and 9.55 percent Black.<sup>17</sup>

In the first few months of my appointment, from July to October of 2016, the church was receptive and accepting. In some ways, we were both eager to be in ministry together. It was our "honeymoon" period. My feelings of separation and isolation from having to move 175 miles away from my family were still very much present, but at times they were replaced with laughter, church, and community. FUMC Taylor and I came together like an arranged marriage. We were developing a functional relationship, and we were becoming a blended family. However, some issues had already been brewing for a year or two before my arrival. It was as though a storm had been brewing in the Atlantic, and it was about to hit the Gulf Coast and eventually move inland to central Texas and Taylor. Some power struggles between old members and new ones were causing divisiveness in the House of God.

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<sup>17</sup> Data USA. Taylor, Texas. Accessed March 29, 2021. <https://datausa.io/profile/geo/taylor-tx>.

Apparently, the previous pastor had put some newer members in charge of decorations in the church, which got a few of the older members upset. This led to resentment toward the pastor. Eventually, the pastor decided to retire early, in December 2015. This was mid-year, since our appointments run from July 1 to June 30. An interim pastor, a retired District Superintendent, stepped in to fill the pulpit for six months until a new pastor could be appointed.

By the time I arrived on July 1, 2016, most members seemed eager to welcome me and to tell me about their raging seas and their side of the story, all in hopes that I would take their side. As I listened the first few months, I established a couple of different committees responsible for different and specific tasks. However, the members continued to bicker amongst themselves about other things. This led to some younger families leaving the church. The next month, a few more members left because I had not taken their side. In the wake of November 2016 and Donald Trump's election as President of the United States (POTUS), it was evident that there were differences in politics and perspectives on social-justice issues. In the summer of 2017, the signs of the division were more visible. After multiple attempts to calm the raging waves, some issues subsided while others remained. I was determined to be a better people astronomer, reading the signs and navigating the church's raging seas.

At the time, we had two Sunday worship services, one at 8:30 a.m. and the other at 10:30 a.m. Both services were very similar in style, and a few members attended both. The previous pastor and I made attempts to turn the 8:30 service into a contemporary service or something different, but our efforts were met with resistance. It was evident

that the 8:30 crowd, much smaller in number, had become more of a social club with a divisive agenda than a church reflecting Christ's body.

In January 2018, I recommended to our Administrative Council that our early Sunday morning 8:30 service did not have the numbers to support itself. There was no missional reason to continue holding two worship services when there were more empty pews than people in the early service. The church needed to combine its resources and have only one worship service. The Admin Council voted to cancel our early Sunday morning service officially. This led to a few more upset members leaving the church. In the words of Eugene Peterson, reflecting on his time at the local church, said the following:

But I also had a sense much of the time (but not by any means continuously) that ‘not knowing what I am doing’ is more or less what it feels like when I am ‘trusting in God’ and ‘following Jesus.’ The position in which the church has placed us by ordaining us to this vocation means giving witness to what we don't know much about and can't explain — living into the mystery of salvation and holiness.<sup>18</sup>

In my attempt to battle this storm, I created another storm. As a pastor, trying to understand people as emotional human beings, who are shaped not by logic but by their upbringing, biases, and prejudices can be overwhelming. I remained hopeful for the people of God, and knew that it was only because Jesus helped me to navigate that storm that I did not drown or get swallowed up by sea creatures.

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<sup>18</sup> Eugene H. Peterson, *The Pastor: A Memoir* (New York: HarperCollins, 2011), 315.

Since combining the two services, we have had new people join the church with younger families with children attending worship. Although our younger families frequent the church only once a month (twice occasionally) due to other commitments with secular events (which I cannot comprehend from my Tongan perspective), our church is growing up and trending younger. This gives me great hope. This was, of course, all pre-COVID. We continue to review, refine, reflect and move forward with our various ministries and missions.

There are some things we do very well and other things we could improve on. We do very well with our local ministries and missions. We can improve our young people's ministries and missions. Nevertheless, we continuously review how we do church and make adjustments when necessary, but it is often slow. At present, with the COVID-19 pandemic, we are making major adjustments and quickly learning to do church differently. We are learning and adapting to be a hybrid church, with in-person and digital audiences.

#### Navigating the Wave in the Mission Field in Taylor, Texas

Exegeting a culture is an art and a science.

It is understanding the people and place God has called us to inhabit so that the power of the gospel might fully connect and be transformative.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> JR Woodward, Jr. and Dan White Jr., *The Church As Movement: Starting and Sustaining Missional-Incarnational Communities* (Downers Grove: IVP Books, 2016), 192.

Taylor is a unique town. For the most part, I have enjoyed serving in this small-town country setting with easy access to the big cities, a fifteen- minute drive to Round Rock, Georgetown, or Pflugerville, and a thirty-minute drive to Austin. According to the US Census Bureau, our current population is approaching 19,000, and the town is experiencing growth.<sup>20</sup> The growth is primarily attributed to an influx of new companies moving into the Austin-Round Rock metro area, including tech companies and high-profile projects like a new \$1 billion Apple campus and a new \$1.1 billion Tesla factory, creating a robust economy.<sup>21</sup>

This can only mean great potential for FUMC. As a voyager, Taylor is where I was given my orders to dock my canoe. My charge and mission are to learn everything about the town, follow Jesus around the town, and invite others to follow Jesus.

The town of Taylor was booming in 1876 because it was a major railroad stop and quickly became a busy shipping point for cattle, grain, and cotton.<sup>22</sup> Taylor boasted of being "the largest inland cotton market in the world."<sup>23</sup> In later years, the production had been joined by maize and wheat. In 1951 up to 300 crews were at work, and still, the

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<sup>20</sup> United States Census Bureau, "Quick Facts: Taylor, Texas" Accessed March 21, 2021. <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/taylorcitytexas/PST120219>.

<sup>21</sup> Austin Culture Map, "Austin Population Growth Slows as Suburbs Continue to Boom. Accessed on March 21, 2021. <https://austin.culturemap.com/news/city-life/02-02-21-austin-growth-suburbs-take-off-says-city-agency/>

<sup>22</sup>TSHA: Texas State Historical Association. Accessed March 21, 2021. <https://tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/het01>

<sup>23</sup> TSHA.

town needed 3,000 more pickers. The invention of mechanical harvesting equipment soon reduced the need for migratory workers.

In the 1980s, "transportation facilities in Taylor included two railroads, a bus line, an airport, five freight lines, and two main highways."<sup>24</sup> Taylor's population was approximately 11,000, with 57 percent White, 25 percent Hispanic, and 18 percent Black. There were also 34 local churches representing fifteen denominations.

Today, the population is more than 18,000, with 50 percent white, 38 percent Hispanics, 9 percent Black, and 3 percent of other ethnic origins, including Asians, Native Americans, and Pacific Islanders.<sup>25</sup> A community that was once a rural-farming area now has 58% white collar and 42% blue collar.<sup>26</sup> There are also more than 50 churches representing more than twenty denominations. However, more than 70 percent of the population is not affiliated with any church. On a typical Sunday, the average worship attendance for these churches is under 100, including FUMC Taylor. The denominations that exceed this average are the Catholics and Baptists, each taking 18 percent of churchgoers, followed by Methodists and Non-Denominations at 7 percent each.<sup>27</sup> The trend for churchgoers has significantly declined. The trend of more churches and fewer people also tells a story, perhaps one of intolerance. Are churches becoming something like an entrepreneurial undertaking? If people do not agree with the doctrine,

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<sup>24</sup> TSHA.

<sup>25</sup> MissionInsite: Community Engagement Specialists For Faith & Nonprofit Groups. Accessed on December 1, 2021. <https://www.missioninsite.com>

<sup>26</sup> Missioninsite.

<sup>27</sup> Missioninsite.

tradition, and culture, do they just go and start another church? If so, are they doing it for the right reasons, or are their reasons centered on themselves?

In any case, a remnant of Taylor's original settlers is still very much evident today in churches and businesses. Farming and production facilities still surround our community, but on a smaller scale. As farming becomes less profitable, a generation of farmers has been advising their children that there is no future in farming, and they need to look at other career options.

As Austin continues to grow, gentrification becomes more widespread, thus causing Taylor and neighboring cities to receive the population overflow. We already have a good percentage of commuters to Austin, and this number will continue to grow. Taylor, a city that has been resistant to change and growth, will have no choice but to embrace the influx of younger families and more progressive-minded Texans, particularly newcomers from other states. Many native Texans reject this idea of being newcomers to the Lone Star State. Texas is located deep in the Bible Belt and historically is a politically "Red State."<sup>28</sup> Texas will continue to see bigger circles of purple and blue as seen in Austin, Dallas, and Houston. The recent 2020 election was a sign of (re)signing of ideologies, demographics, and politics, pointing to Texas's future and perhaps the country's. The margin of Texas voters who voted Republican had significantly diminished. Our county, Williamson County, voted blue this year for the first time in a very long time. Some blame the newcomers to Texas.

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<sup>28</sup> Red refers to the Republican Party. Blue refers to the Democratic Party.

### Navigating Society and Culture in Religion and Politics

Politically, my observation is that FUMC is approximately 60 percent Republican and 40 percent Democrat. It is no secret that people are influenced by religion, sets of beliefs, and surroundings, no matter how incomprehensible or insane they may be. We are selective with our Scripture readings, just as we are with our Christian practice. In many ways, a selective reading may make sense for some Christians since the Bible is a large collection of books. It is quite an undertaking to familiarize oneself with the entire Bible beyond passages that are being aired in public, whether on mainstream media, on bumper stickers, social media, or a televised Sunday-morning worship service. As one of my seminary professors once said, "The Bible is a library." So to say, "The Bible says, Do not kill," they are essentially saying, "The library says, Do not kill," which does not make sense. My professor's point is that it is important to be clear and intentional about which book of the Bible is involved. It is also important to note that the word "bible" comes from the Greek language and Latin "biblia, both being plural nouns to mean books or scrolls.<sup>29</sup> The singular meaning arose after the books were bound together.<sup>30</sup>

It is no surprise that our religion, or non-religion, influences our politics. To say that there is a separation of church and state is, in many ways, an oxymoron because the church does not exist for itself, but it exists for the people. Public policies that impact people's lives should be a concern of the church. For this reason, it is helpful to understand people and their political views, since they are likely to elect and vote on

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<sup>29</sup> Philip R. Davies, *Memories of Ancient Israel: An Introduction to Biblical History - Ancient and Modern* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 7.

<sup>30</sup> Davies.

matters that impact them most, not based on social-justice issues, biblical values, or popular rhetoric. To further understand the other, it is wise for pastors to serve in a cross-cultural and cross-racial appointment. It is imperative that pastors understand differences, since each person and community has its own values. Priorities are also very different. What one person/community values is not the same as what another person/community values. With its many books, authors, and editors, the Bible is always on a voyage, a cross-cultural one, indeed. People forget that Jesus himself was also cross-cultural.

What does not make sense many times is that some Christians seem to disregard the teachings of Jesus if they interfere with a comfortable lifestyle or would threaten the status quo. It raises the question: are these people Christian? Are they Christian only when it is convenient for them? What is their definition of Christian?

Sometimes Christian theology and practice seem hypocritical. Take, for example, a discussion on life. For Christians to be "pro-life" and stand against abortion makes sense, for God is a life-giver. However, for the same Christians to justify the death penalty as an acceptable punishment for a crime is a contradiction and a paradox to their previous claim. To be "pro-life" should mean all life and not just some life. This is especially true for Black and Brown lives. To be truly pro-life is to advocate for the unborn and the stranger and the foreigner.

Policies on health care, welfare, education, and immigration are important human rights issues. However, somehow religion takes a back seat in favor of a stricter policy where everyone needs to earn what they have, a view that is contradictory to the gospel message of Jesus. See Matthew 20:1-16, the "parable of the workers in the vineyard."

This brings to question the pastor's role and the role of the church in relationship to society. Are pastors to speak up only when they feel it is safe? Is the church only to speak out when it is convenient? What then is the role of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and its messengers? The church's prophetic voice and purpose are to proclaim what Fanny Crosby wrote in "Rescue the Perishing."

Rescue the perishing, care for the dying,  
snatch them in pity from sin and the grave,  
weep o'er the erring one, lift up the fallen,  
tell them of Jesus, the mighty to save.  
Rescue the perishing, care for the dying,  
Jesus is merciful, Jesus will save.<sup>31</sup>

Has the church lost its voice out at sea? The church's charge is to be a prophetic voice, a prophetic fire even when the wave's power is incredibly mighty, even when the wind looks incredibly forceful.

### Navigating Society and Culture in the American Context

H. Richard Niebuhr defines culture as the whole process and result of human activity.<sup>32</sup> It consists of an "artificial, secondary environment which humanity superimposes on the natural. It comprises language, habits, ideas, beliefs, customs, social organization, inherited artifacts, technical processes, and value."<sup>33</sup> The definition set forth

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<sup>31</sup> Fanny J. Crosby, 1869 and William H. Doane, 1870, "Rescue the Perishing," *The United Methodist Hymnal* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1989), 591.

<sup>32</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ & Culture* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1951), 32.

<sup>33</sup> Niebuhr, *Christ & Culture*, 32.

by Niebuhr may seem overwhelming, but it is nevertheless an accurate description of the culture, particularly the American culture. It seems that the problem has been re-defined or (re)signed, as Crystal Downing argues in her book, *Changing Signs of Truth*. The question now is, how does the church engage culture? Each church has a distinct culture; nonetheless, how does the church's culture engage with the larger culture? Is the church working against culture? Is the church *of* the culture? Is church above culture? Are the church and culture a paradox? Is the church the transformer of culture? How the church interacts with culture is what Niebuhr considered "unconcluded and inconclusive."<sup>34</sup> He left room for the church to decide on its own. For those churches that would like to keep Jesus wholly in the sanctuary and be withdrawn from the world, a point to consider is, would Jesus prefer confinement in the sanctuary, or would he want to meet the people of the world? The answer should be obvious. At FUMC, we interact with the culture daily because we are part of the culture. We intentionally engage with the culture through local ministries and missions for those within the church and society.

It is said that culture is the most powerful determinant of an individual's decision-making. If so, it is a culture that imposes itself and imbues individuals' to want something more, something better, than what their parents and grandparents once had. They desire to gain some of what their neighbors already have. They desire to gain some of what they have been exposed to on television, radio, junk mail and email, magazine, newspaper, internet, gas stations, buses, yard signs, church, school, health clubs, and so on, all of which have a compelling I-need-to-get-that message.

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<sup>34</sup> Niebuhr, *Christ & Culture*, 230.

Our brains are working overtime and need a Sabbath.<sup>35</sup> We need a Sabbath from a "content-driven culture in which we are bombarded with more ideas and information than at any other time in human history."<sup>36</sup> Leonard Sweet adds, "To rest is to reset; every reset requires a rest, just as you turn off your computer before you reboot." If we think we can rationalize our buying decisions independently, we had better think again. Perhaps as Walter Brueggemann argues in *Sabbath as Resistance*, multitasking is not necessarily in God's order and good news for creation. We are all becoming "commodities to one another, to be bought and sold and traded and cheated."<sup>37</sup> We are saturated with advertisements from culture telling us what we should wear, eat, listen to, look like, hang out with, and yes, even which church to attend. We need to find and intentionally take time to rest, not necessarily because we have done anything to earn it, much like humanity taking a Sabbath our first day of creation. It is because that is the way God ordered creation. We need "Sabbath the string that holds everything together."<sup>38</sup> When we take a Sabbath, everything around us takes a Sabbath as well.

Sallie McFague correctly phrased the question, "Do we really believe we rationally choose what we want? Have we not allowed economics to determine who we are by what we want?"<sup>39</sup> Indeed, McFague may be correct that economics plays a vast

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<sup>35</sup> A.J. Swoboda, *Subversive Sabbath* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2018), 54.

<sup>36</sup> Swoboda, *Subversive Sabbath*, 54.

<sup>37</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Sabbath as Resistance: Saying No to the Culture of Now* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), 68.

<sup>38</sup> Swoboda, *Subversive Sabbath*, 127.

<sup>39</sup> Sallie McFague, *Life Abundant: Rethinking Theology and Economy for a Planet in Peril* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 96-97.

role in who we are as Americans and what we become. Furthermore, marketing algorithms play far more of a role in our human behavior than we realize, especially today. Algorithms are not based on, nor cater to rational decision-making; rather, they are task and code-based. In other words, algorithms obey the master or the human coder. They will study human behavior and act accordingly, and this is not to the human's benefit. Each time we use our credit card to charge something, whether at the grocery store or on the internet, algorithms take notice. Each time we Google something, algorithms take notice. Each time we touch our computers and other electronics, algorithms take notice. For those who sleep with a smartwatch (and even without), algorithms take notice of our sleeping patterns and health. Sleeping patterns can be based on the last time you touched your phone at night to the first time you touched it again when you awoke. This is why, when we sign on to social media or other sites, the items we have just searched for or bought are marketed to us. This is why the United States Postal Office will continue to stay in business to deliver unsolicited, unwanted, and unlimited marketing mailers to our mailboxes. In many ways, algorithms contribute significantly to the economy. However, "...in a world increasingly ruled by algorithms, humanity must never be reduced to mere numbers or digits or units."<sup>40</sup> The church is more than numbers. We have a story, and we need to tell it. With that story, we need to trust it and live into it.

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<sup>40</sup> Leonard Sweet, *Rings of Fire: Walking in Faith through a Volcanic Future* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2019), 233.

It is no wonder that we see culture and economics influencing our churches. If culture and economics are significant influencers, then it makes sense that megachurches are drawing large crowds. Is bigger necessarily better? Well, we need to look no further than the American consumer market. We like big cars, big houses, big bookstores, big supermarkets, and even big churches. This desire to want bigger things is not limited to class, race, or gender; it is the same across the board. A mega Super Wal-Mart placed in an LMI (Low-to-Moderate Income) neighborhood will attract customers, as will a Super Wal-Mart placed in an upscale suburb. A town that I used to reside in voted against both a Wal-Mart and a Market Street, yet our town residents flocked to the newly built Wal-Mart in the next town over. However, this Wal-Mart exterior and interior did not appear or feel like a typical everyday Wal-Mart. It looked like a Central Market or a Market Street, an upscale grocery retailer. The Wal-Mart dress-up is because the conglomerate super retailer was forced to adapt to the culture with which it wanted to do business. Wal-Mart is as successful as it is because it makes "good" business decisions. They are continuously re-defining the business with their locations, the products they carry, and expanding their market. Furthermore, although the operation cost is more, Wal-Mart wants to penetrate the market, and it knows that even mid to upper-middle-class Americans want great values and "everyday low prices."

## Moana as Bridging Christ to Culture

Bridging the secular to the sacred is what many churches have adopted, particularly the mega-churches. Today, to create an inviting atmosphere, many of those churches have Starbucks in their lobby. Another church has a McDonald's, another has an on-site fitness center, another a movie theatre, and another, an 8,000 square-foot performing-arts center, which features everything from ballet to opera to gospel music.<sup>41</sup> So they claim that Jesus is using fine arts and coffee to bridge with culture.

### Questions for Consideration

Is it acceptable for the church to profit from this culture-engaging and bridge-relationship building? If Jesus' name is being used to make a profit, where do we draw the line? They call it engaging culture. However, Niebuhr defined this approach as, “The Natural Law Type: Christ of Culture; The Accommodationist Type.”<sup>42</sup> These church issues and/or ethics are common with mega churches and smaller churches desperately trying to survive. Their approach is questionable, particularly with the packaging of the message. A question to consider is: Does the very bridge that leads people to the sanctuary also have the strength and capacity to bridge people to Christ, or does it end with the performing arts and flavored coffee?

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<sup>41</sup> Kent R. Hunter, *The Jesus Enterprise: Engaging Culture to Reach the Unchurched* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2004), xv-xvi.

<sup>42</sup> Niebuhr, *Christ & Culture*, xlv.

## Navigating Church and Culture

Christianity is about forming genuine relationships with people, which requires sensitivity, a listening ear, an open heart, a learning attitude, and helping hands.

Christianity is not so much taught or promoted as it is shared. However, the gospel must be presented in a way relevant to the people. Of course, the Bible is relevant, God is relevant, and the church is relevant, but how we present this to a culture is the challenge every church struggles with. This requires one to focus on what is most important and discern between what is true and what is false. Otherwise, the gospel message might get all wrapped up in the culture and not serve its intended purpose. When Jesus said, go out and make disciples, he did not mean go out and "prostitute" him to the market. Maybe as Len Sweet presents Jesus, he is always relevant because he is in the future.<sup>43</sup>

Many churches today mistakenly think that they exist for the sole purpose of caring for their members. However, this often leads people to negate their core responsibility of reaching out to those outside the comfort of its walls. Churches often have to decide to retreat from culture, ignore culture, judge culture, or preserve culture.<sup>44</sup> An example of retreating from culture is the Amish community, where it confines Christianity to one specific period, forgetting that "Christianity transcends time and culture...."<sup>45</sup> Another example would be the monastic and ascetic movements in the early-church periods. However, as seen through history, even people who withdrew from

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<sup>43</sup> Sweet, Online Class discussion, November, 2020.

<sup>44</sup> Hunter, *The Jesus Enterprise*, 4.

<sup>45</sup> Hunter, *The Jesus Enterprise*, 4-5.

the world often returned to society to engage with culture. A church should ask itself: Is it so holy that it cannot engage with the world? Moreover, how does this translate to the message of Jesus to bring the Good News to the people?

Ignoring culture or refraining from societal participation is like the Jehovah's Witness encouraging its members not to be involved with politics, such as voting or running for any public office. However, its members will have no choice but to abide by the laws set by these same politicians. As Proctor and Taylor put it, "...there would be hope if the people of God would honestly be the Lord's people in public affairs."<sup>46</sup>

Still, at other times, churches ignore the needs of their immediate community, rationalize how the government offers all kinds of subsidies and assistance to the community, and then blame the individual or the family for their inability to improve their situation. As told in Luke's Gospel, there is a similarity to the story, where two people passed by a bleeding and broken person and failed to stop.<sup>47</sup> It is the same with these churches because they "would rather ignore a broken and bleeding culture because it is uncomfortable to engage it,"<sup>48</sup> and rationalize why they should not get involved. If we wanted to rationalize anything we did not want to do, we would never do anything at all, and nothing would ever be accomplished.

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<sup>46</sup> Samuel DeWitt Proctor and Gardner C. Taylor, *We Have This Ministry: The Heart Of The Pastor's Vocation* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1996), 130.

<sup>47</sup> The Good Samaritan, Luke 10:25-37.

<sup>48</sup> Hunter, *The Jesus Enterprise*, 7.

## Black Lives Matter (#BLM)

The Black Lives Matter (#BLM) movement was heightened this year after the Minneapolis police killed George Floyd on the street in broad daylight and the video went viral. Protests broke out globally. Despite the COVID-19 global pandemic, massive protests filled the streets for months. Many streets were renamed and boldly painted "Black Lives Matter," including the street leading up to the White House. However, Gary Simpson asserts, "This is a challenge in the discourse right now. Black Lives Matter is not a 'thing' but, in reality, a formidable response to the 'thing' of systematic and institutional racism in America. The cultural naming of it as a thing in and of itself is a manner of ignoring or dismissing the truth of its causes."

These protests underscored another pandemic that had infected America for generations, racism. Many Black soldiers who fought in World War II believed they were fighting two wars, fascism abroad and racism at home.<sup>49</sup> Today, protesters are the soldiers, and they seem to be still fighting those two wars, fascism and racism, only they are both at home. This is what Ralph Ellison describes in the classic book *Invisible Man*. Ellison seeks to awaken the self to what otherwise may be invisible to the world.<sup>50</sup> One must always stay alert as a soldier at all times. Nevertheless, to see so many people, a diverse people, take to the streets their signs and voices was an incredible witness to people's power. It was a unified global wave of anger calling for justice and demanding change. People are tired of the "ism-skism game" while Black bodies continued to be

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<sup>49</sup> Ronald. A Takaki, *Larger Memory: A History of our Diversity, with Voices* (Boston: The Little Brown Company, 1998), 24.

<sup>50</sup> Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: Vintage International, 1995).

killed by police, as seen on too many videos. They can fool some people sometimes, but they cannot fool all the people all the time. Indeed, the words of the Reggae Rastafarian prophet Bob Marley echos through:

Get up, stand up, stand up for your rights.  
 Get up, stand up, don't give up the fight.  
 We sick an' tired of-a your ism-skism game  
 Dyin' 'n' goin' to heaven in-a Jesus' name, Lord  
 We know when we understand  
 Almighty God is a living man  
 You can fool some people sometimes  
 But you can't fool all the people all the time  
 So now we see the light (what you gonna do?)  
 We gonna stand up for our rights<sup>51</sup>

It was as if America and many first-world countries had not listened to the voices from the margin, particularly Black persons' voices. While white America and white first-world countries advanced, Black and Brown lives were left in the ghetto. In her book, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, Michelle Alexander argues that mass incarceration is not an oversight, particularly in America; rather, it is part of the new Jim Crow. The infiltration of drugs into low-income neighborhoods and mass incarceration are all part of the plan.

Nevertheless, judging culture is the easy way out and the attitude many churches and Christians hold: We are better than everyone else. We place ourselves on a high pedestal, and for this very reason, when we, Christians, fail to live up to our standards, the non-Christian or non-church community rightly points a finger and says, "See they are all hypocrites." The world knows what Christians are against, but it does not know

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<sup>51</sup> Bob Marley, "Get Up, Stand Up" recorded at Harry J. Studios, Kingston, Jamaica, 1973.

what Christians stand for. Perhaps, we Christians are often confused with what we value and what is important to us.

Preserving culture is the attitude of the "old-time religion." This is how we have always done it, and there was nothing wrong with it. Sure, there was nothing wrong with it fifty years ago, but to refuse to embrace today's culture for the sake of tradition, exactly which tradition are they preserving? Is it about the same hymnal that was a favorite fifty years ago, or is it about the liturgy that has become so important to tradition that it blinds itself from the changing culture surrounding us? However, adapting to the culture and offering a new service to the new wave of Christians does not mean ignoring those existing members who are more comfortable with the "old-time" religion. There is false thinking: everyone deserves a worship service they are familiar with because, essentially, the present culture is such that loyalty is only as good as their last worship service. Alternatively, we can get over ourselves and recognize that worship is not about us. Our primary concern should be the one we worship. Is God pleased with the way we do church, the hymns we sing, or the messages we preach?

The church must never be confused about its primary mission, which is sharing the gospel's message. Sharing the gospel starts with an outward focus on the world. This means that Jesus would reach out and meet those in the world right where they are. The church is

...not given a choice of only going into those nations and cultures where the soil is open and receptive to the gospel. The Great Commission is a command to "go

into all the world," not just places where the soil is already tilled and the climate is conducive."<sup>52</sup>

Sweet argues that all soils deserve to be seeded with the Good News.<sup>53</sup> Jesus' point in telling the story of the four types of soils is not to be selective with the soils; rather to know what we're up against.<sup>54</sup>

### The Church's Role as a Moana

What is the role of the church in society, culture, and politics? Do we sit back and let someone else take care of these issues? Or is our ideology so firm and correct that we are willing to ignore human rights? It would be no different from the Church's stance regarding the millions of Jews exterminated in the Shoah. Sure, a few brave souls spoke up, like Martin Neumuller and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, but most pastors and churches in Germany remained silent. The same can be said of America's original sin, slavery. Many pastors and churches used Scripture to justify slavery. According to Bishop Mike Lowry of the Central Texas Conference of the UMC, Francis Asbury, known as the Father of American Methodism, thought of slavery as a necessary evil or "cultural necessity even though he knew it was wrong."<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Leonard Sweet, *Rings of Fire: Walking in Faith through a Volcanic Future* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2019), 22.

<sup>53</sup> Sweet, *Rings of Fire*, 22.

<sup>54</sup> Sweet, *Rings of Fire*, 22.

<sup>55</sup> Central Texas Conference of The United Methodist Church, "Christ and Culture Revisited No.1" Accessed on December 1, 2020. <https://www.ctcumc.org/bishops-post/christ-and-culture-revisited-no-1-14336538>

As an immigrant and a person of color navigating the waves of America, I cannot help but notice that the laws in this country are repeating their discriminatory practices against people of color, particularly Blacks, and immigrants from Mexico, South America, and Muslim countries.<sup>56</sup> These practices affect me and my ministry. I find I must address these issues.

How can America repeat its past? Does it not know or remember its past? Are the churches that claim to be followers of Jesus only willing to go so far? Are we forgetting that to follow Jesus means that we start by being on the side of the oppressed and marginalized? If that means we are led to the cross, why should we be at all surprised? Why are we building up walls and not tearing them down? Why are we in silence when God calls us to speak up and be on the side of justice?

Well, part of the problem is a false memory and false narrative. No, not the false or blocked memory created as an auto-defense mechanism due to trauma. This is selective false memory and narrative. Some of it can be traced back to the Israelites' story as told in the Book of Exodus. The people had a false narrative and memory that everything was better back in Egypt. They only told part of the story and only remembered part of their history.

Navigating the waves, its energy is so powerful that it forces me to reckon with its strain, for it impacts the direction and intensity of my voyage. A hazardous wave that we are all struggling with today and is contributing to an already-divided country is alt-fact

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<sup>56</sup> Due to the focus of this paper, I will not be able to address various social justice issues at great length, such as race, immigration, climate change, and so on.

and alt-truth. Where “waves are commonly and naturally created by wind,”<sup>57</sup> sadly, people create their alternative facts and truths with attitudes like these:

- Who cares about the real truth?
- If you do not like the truth, then create your own truth.
- As long as people will believe you, you can create an alternative truth and story.

Presently, there is a rise to these groups, such as Q-Anon, a conspiracy theorist group.<sup>58</sup>

With the recent 2020 presidential election of President Joe Biden and Vice-President-Elect Kamala Harris, the group Q-Anon among other similar groups, claimed voter fraud and many other claims.

Lawsuits filed by President Trump and his team at battleground states have been dismissed from the various courts, and lately by the US Supreme Court due to lack of evidence.<sup>59</sup> *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times* both reported that this claim of voter fraud not only undermines the election system and democracy of The United States of America, but it further divides and hurts the people.<sup>60</sup> With more and more alternative-

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<sup>57</sup> NOAA “Why does the ocean have waves?” National Ocean Service, U.S. Department of Commerce. Accessed on December 1, 2021. <https://oceanservice.noaa.gov/facts/wavesinocean.html>

<sup>58</sup> FactTank, “Five Facts About the QAnon Conspiracy Theories,” Pew Research Center, Washington D.C. November 16, 2020. Accessed on December 1, 2021. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/11/16/5-facts-about-the-qanon-conspiracy-theories/>

<sup>59</sup> “U.S. Supreme Court Rejects Republican Challenge to Biden's Pennsylvania win,” Reuters. Accessed on December 1, 2021. <https://www.reuters.com/article/usa-election-court-pennsylvania/u-s-supreme-court-rejects-republican-challenge-to-bidens-pennsylvania-win-idUSKBN28I35L>

<sup>60</sup> Henry Farrell, “Trump's Baseless Claims Damage American Democracy,” Washington Post, November 5, 2020 <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/11/05/trumps-baseless-claims-damage-american-democracy/>

truth claims on the rise, social-media giants Facebook and Twitter have censored and banned several groups from their site, for spreading false information, encouraging violence, or promoting hate. With several alternative-truth tweets from President Trump daily, Twitter has labeled those tweets as alt-truth. This censoring by these two mega-social-media platforms has given rise to a couple of other competing platforms, including Parler. Millions of conservatives have embraced Parler, Newsmax, One America News (OAN), among others, as their sources for news, particularly for their free speech promotion.<sup>61</sup> In other words, one can claim their truth all day long without anyone fact-checking them. These conspiracy-theory groups are like the continual disturbance which creates a wave crest. Indeed, these hazardous waves can roll up on the shore like a massive sea-level rise, as we witnessed on January 6, 2021, when the U.S. Capitol was attacked by Trump supporters, many of whom belonged to the group Q-Anon. This was a horrific day in the country; several people lost their lives, and many were injured. Shortly after, the quickly growing social media platforms like Parler quickly dissipated.

Furthermore, as with any book, such as a school textbook, it only tells part of the story and history. Hi-story is always biased because it is told and written from the writer's perspective. In my opinion, some school systems are contributing to an alt-truth problem when they do not include a variety of storytellers and writers. As Yuval Harari argues,

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<sup>61</sup> Benjamin Mullin, Juliet Chung, Keach Hagey and Rebecca Ballhaus, "Trump Allies Explored Buyout of Newsmax TV as Fox News Alternative," *The Wall Street Journal*, November 15, 2020, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/trump-allies-explored-buyout-of-newsmax-tv-as-fox-news-alternative-11605464737>

"humans have always lived in the age of post-truth."<sup>62</sup> Harari cites the idea that "when a thousand people believe some made-up story for one month, that is fake news. When a billion people believe it for a thousand years, that is religion."<sup>63</sup> He is, of course, raising questions about the belief systems of religions, including Christianity. Even so, when it comes to the belief systems such as Christianity and the Bible, "there are historical facts contained in the narratives, but there are also fictions."<sup>64</sup> Some of the Bible stories cannot be scientifically proven, but whoever is asking the question is not reading and appropriating the texts correctly. Some of the talanoa needs to be approached metaphorically.

These matters affect any pastor, any congregation. For me, serving in a cross-cultural appointment, these events add another layer to the waves I must navigate. I am confident that God gives me the grace to navigate these troubling waters. Perhaps, these words hold true, "You can't go alone, but you haven't succeeded until you've survived the sabotage."<sup>65</sup>

Nevertheless, this is a rhetorical question, but why is humanity willing to surround itself with alternative truths? Perhaps another question would be more appropriate, why is humanity so self-absorbed and always wanting to be at the center?

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<sup>62</sup> Yuval Noah Harari, *21 Lessons for the 21st Century* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2018), 238.

<sup>63</sup> Harari, *21 Lessons for the 21st Century*, 239.

<sup>64</sup> Davies, *Memories of Ancient Israel*, 135.

<sup>65</sup> Tod Bolsinger, *Canoeing the Mountains* (Downers Grove: IVP Books, 2015), 151.

Humanity is willing to demean and sacrifice others in order to lift themselves. This problem traces back to the garden story of the two brothers, Abel and Cain, in Genesis. No doubt, we are a fallen people.

The biblical scholar Philip Davies argues that "stories are never innocent of point of view, plot, ideology, or cultural value."<sup>66</sup> We all tell stories of the past from a particular place: the present.<sup>67</sup> It is from our location-ality and position-ality. We cannot be objective, neutral observers, no matter how hard we try. We are part of history, the events happening, and the stories being told, whether it is the news, gossip or history books, or even our memories.<sup>68</sup> In many ways, our interpretations are not shaped by logic; rather, they are shaped by what has informed us. We do not begin with a clean slate; we come to the table with an already built-up bias.

As followers of Jesus, we are called to be different. To be at the top is to serve below. To be first is to be last. To be great is to be a servant. This model is the one that Jesus taught his followers, as told in Matthew. This is the example we are called to follow. While America has improved in so many levels with race relations, particularly with the historic election of the first female Vice President, a person of color, and whose parents were immigrants is incredibly meaningful. I, along with millions of others, celebrate this accomplishment. However, Kamala Harris' election to Vice President of The United States does not eliminate sexism, racism, or xenophobia just as racism and

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<sup>66</sup> Davies, *Memories of Ancient Israel*, 11.

<sup>67</sup> Davies, *Memories of Ancient Israel*, 11.

<sup>68</sup> Davies, *Memories of Ancient Israel*, 11.

xenophobia were not eliminated under President Obama's eight years in office. Barrack Obama was also the son of an immigrant from Kenya.

To follow Jesus does not mean to follow safely within the comfort of our church walls. It means putting our orthodoxy into orthopraxy. It means to seriously consider what Jesus would do because he is among the "caravan" migrants. He is among the children separated at the border from their parents. He is among families locked up in cages. He is among those murdered on the streets and in their homes. Pastors should, therefore, move our churches to speak up for Jesus. Our churches are called to the margins of society to be in solidarity with the oppressed and marginalized. Our churches are called to offer the "grace of life-giving God who works through cultures to address human needs and who is always close to suffering people."<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Harold J. Recinos, *Good News from the Barrio: Prophetic Witness for the Church* (Louisville: WJK, 2006), 106.

## CHAPTER THREE

To serve the present age, my calling to fulfill;  
O may it all my powers engage to do my Master's will!<sup>1</sup>

The waves of the ocean surround the church. These waves are intensifying and increasing in size. What is a church to do but rise to the challenges of its day. Plan. Prepare. Pray. Learn to swim, dive, surf, water-raft. Learn to navigate the moana. Like a tidal wave coming onshore, some lives may be injured, swept away, lost, and drowned; others will have escape the danger. Some brave souls will survive and thrive. One thing is for sure; nothing will be the same after a tsunami. There will be destruction. Deaths will be numerous. Lives will be forever lost. New lives will emerge. Rebuilding will begin.

The second stanza to Wesley's hymn is about where we find how to fulfill our calling. We do so by serving "the present age." We do so by learning to navigate the moana. We do so by reading the signs of our time and engaging the present age, the people, the community and places where we have been sent. It is my present location, not only geographically, but also philosophically, theologically, politically and socially. My charge requires that I engage the world with everything in me to fulfill God's will. Perhaps this stanza is most challenging, yet there is a recognition that my charge is to engage the present age with God's truth that is neither bound by time nor season, but remains relevant through all ages. As the prophet Isaiah proclaimed in Isaiah 40:6-8:

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Wesley, A Charge to Keep I Have, 1762, *The United Methodist Hymnal* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1989), 413.

<sup>6</sup> A voice says, “Cry out!”  
 And I said, “What shall I cry?”  
 All people are grass,  
     their constancy is like the flower of the field.  
<sup>7</sup> The grass withers, the flower fades,  
     when the breath of the LORD blows upon it;  
     surely the people are grass.  
<sup>8</sup> The grass withers, the flower fades;  
     but the word of our God will stand forever.

Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, people often forgot about God or did not know the Lord. This was evident throughout the Israelites’ journey in the wilderness for forty years after their liberation from Egypt. People intentionally turned away from God. They favored a god that was tangible and flexible. They favored a god that was always on their side, and not the other way around. They favored a god they could see and touch. This was apparent with the golden calf. They wanted a faith that would always see things their way. Never mind about God’s way; their way should be God’s way also.

This is the type of God the Israelites wanted. Moreover, in many ways, that is the type of God we all want, as well. This is what led Joshua to speak his most famous line, “Choose today whom you will serve...but as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.”<sup>2</sup> The unfaithfulness and short-lived memory of the people of what God had done for them continued as told through the Book of Judges. This crashing of waves on the rocks would eventually lead the people to demand a king. They wanted to be like the other nations. The saga continued with the kingdom beginning with the crowning of Israel’s first King, Saul. Thus, it could be said that what we may be observing today in the present age is not new, just a different time and different people. As written in the

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<sup>2</sup> Joshua 24:15

Book of Ecclesiastes 1:9, “What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done; there is nothing new under the sun.”

In churches all across the United States, worship attendance is declining. More churches are closing their doors than new ones opening. Faithful church members are dying at a faster pace than new members are replacing them. Churches today are unable to reproduce and rekindle the spirit that was once passed on to them at the same pace. Churches have been unable to keep up with the changing signs of the time. Instead, the flames that once ignited the Silent Generation and Baby Boomers are becoming dimmer with each passing day. Today, more nominal Christians are hanging on the edge as if waiting for a last reason to jump over to the other side. Thus, the American landscape is becoming less and less Christian.

The Pew Research Center did a comparison study between 2009 and 2019. It showed that Christianity was declining but was rapidly declining as if driving on the fast lane on the highway with no lower speed limit or exit sign in sight. As the US population grew younger, the research showed that this population became less Christian. The study also showed these eyeopening facts about the Christian-faith-generation gaps and who claimed to be a follower of Jesus: Silent Generation (born 1928-45) at 84 percent, Baby Boomers (1946-64) at 76 percent, Generation X (1965-80) at 67 percent, and Millennials (1981-96) at 49 percent.<sup>3</sup> These percentages carried over in representation with church attendance but on a greater sliding scale. However, an interesting finding from the survey

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<sup>3</sup> “In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace,” Pew Research Center, Religion & Public Life, October 17, 2019, <https://www.pewforum.org/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace/>

showed that Christians reported that their worship attendance had not changed; rather, the significant difference was fewer Christians as a share of the US population. The study showed that in 2009 the population was 233 million adults living in the US and 77% or 178 million were Christians. In 2019, the US population grew by 23 million, resulting in 256 million adults living in the US and 65% or 167 million identified as Christians. Pew Research Center drew the conclusion that worship behavior has not changed. That did not make sense to me. Or at least I disagreed with it, since it is evident within my own denomination, The UMC, and in my local church, FUMC Taylor, that the decline in worship attendance is a growing trend as if it were the popular thing to do—as in popular not to go to church.

It is well worth considering why people are not attending church. Are reasons related to the pressure of culture and society, politics, spirituality, people, God, relationship, faith, church structure or style? Or is it simply because there are no compelling reasons for them to attend church? To begin to understand the reasons behind declining church attendance, we must be able to read the signs of our time. We do not want to be limited as astronomers only in reading the signs of the sky. We must also be able to read the signs of the present age. Otherwise, Jesus' rebuke of the crowd calling them hypocrites very well applies to us also. Jesus told the crowd in Luke 12:56, "You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?" Indeed, the church has enormous ongoing work in the mission-moana.

## COVID-19 Pandemic Impact

The phenomena of church decline is accelerated today with the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic's tsunami will quickly wipe out many churches that had not learned basic survival skills such as swimming. One basic step is how to stay connected in this time of disconnect. While some churches are beginning to re-open their doors to in-person worship, faithful worshippers are not attending for various reasons. It is worth noting that gathering restrictions vary from one jurisdiction to another. While some states have stricter rules for worship gatherings, declaring churches as non-essentials, in Texas, the Governor issued an executive order on March 31, 2020, declaring religious services and houses of worship to be essential services.<sup>4</sup> This is one positive attribute of living in Texas. The Governor's executive order was a huge relief for many churches. Ultimately the decision to gather for worship was left to the individual churches and parishioners, provided we adhere to CDC guidelines with social distancing. Also, at the Central Texas Conference of the UMC, our Bishop required that masks be worn inside all church facilities. For some folks, the risk of attending in-person church during the pandemic is too high. For others, particularly pre-COVID-19 marginal and occasional worshippers, are not attending in-person worship because it is more comfortable worshiping from their living room without getting ready Sunday mornings. For those who were already looking

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<sup>4</sup> "Office of the Texas Governor: Greg Abbott, Governor Abbott Issues Executive Order Implementing Essential Services and Activities Protocols." Accessed March 31, 2020. <https://gov.texas.gov/news/post/governor-abbott-issues-executive-order-implementing-essential-services-and-activities-protocols>

for an excuse to jump ship, the pandemic has pushed them over to the abyss. This has become the new normal during this pandemic season.

According to Barna Group research conducted from April to May 2020, one in three or 35 percent of practicing Christians are still attending their pre-COVID-19 church, whether online or in-person.<sup>5</sup> For those streaming their church's online worship, they are also streaming different church services. This research showed that 14 percent switched church during the pandemic, while 32 percent of practicing Christians stopped attending church altogether. This leaves 18 percent who view worship services from multiple churches throughout the month. The Barna Group research further showed that half of practicing-Christian millennials are not viewing services online. The percentages of Boomers are 35 percent, Gen X are 26 percent. Boomers who are also watching online worship less and less.

At First United Methodist Church, Taylor, our attendance has been greatly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. When we started in-person worship the last week of June 2020, our average worship attendance was 25 people, representing about 22 percent. Since October, we have held our worship services outdoors to give people a greater sense of safety, and we continued social distancing and wearing masks. Our worship attendance increased only slightly. Having recently completed our year-end conference forms, the question was asked about worship attendance and my goal to increase it. I responded by saying that increasing worship attendance was not a goal. We

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<sup>5</sup> "State of the Church," Barna Group. Accessed July 8, 2020. <https://www.barna.com/research/new-sunday-morning-part-2/>

are in the middle of a pandemic. When in-person and large gatherings are discouraged by the CDC, how can we focus on worship attendance? It seems irresponsible, unconcerned, and un-pastoral for any church to focus on attendance during this time. Virtual worship attendance is in many ways limited and perhaps not as reliable either. Perhaps the words “worship attendance” are given too much attention and power. The focus should be on church connection and worship engagement. Maybe the church can focus on being present for the broken people in the world. Numbers do not tell the full story. Moreover, in a world increasingly ruled by algorithms, we should not be reduced to mere numbers or digits. The church is more than numbers. We have a story that we are trying to live into, and it does not come in numbers, and it does not come in words. However, as important as attendance numbers, giving numbers, spoken words, faith, as James wrote, is dead without works (James 2:14-26). Ultimately it is what Christians do day to day in their personal and communal lives that matters.

Furthermore, our church suffered many deaths in these last six months (May - November 2020); seven of our faithful members plus additional family members transitioned to their heavenly home. I presided over six of those funerals. It started with a tragedy with one of our youth from a very active church family. This loss was devastating not only for the family but also for our youth ministry, our church, and the community. All these deaths in a short period of time in our small church have been draining for the church and me, physically, emotionally, and mentally. We are grieving together, and we will move towards healing together. While disciple-making is always the goal, the wisdom from the Book of Ecclesiastes said: There is a time for everything. There is a

time to grieve. There is a time to make disciples intentionally, and there is a time to tend to those wounded on the side of the road, as told in the Parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:30-37. At this time, my focus is pastoral and being a wounded healer. I believe this is what Jesus would do also.

Indeed, we cannot proceed forward operating as if everything is “normal” and as if we are not currently in a pandemic. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), November 27, 2020, over 262,673 people died from COVID-19 in the U.S.<sup>6</sup> The death toll is rapidly rising. It is clear that the church’s focus should be outwardly focused on the countless people who have suffered greatly, who have lost someone due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Clearly, churches and Christians today need to re-think our strategies and approaches in the world today.

Nevertheless, the pandemic unexpectedly forced churches into a digital world. We are no longer confined within our sanctuaries. Now, John Wesley’s words ring more true than ever: “The world is my parish.”

Today, churches are not only streaming their services live, but they are also creating online ministries. According to Barna Group, “...while most churchgoers do not prefer digital gatherings, they are interested in having both physical and digital options. About half (52 percent) of churchgoers say that their preference is for physical gatherings, one-tenth (9 percent) say their preference is for digital gatherings, and a little

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<sup>6</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention COVID Data Tracker. Accessed December 12, 2020. [https://COVID-19.cdc.gov/COVID-19-data-tracker/#cases\\_casesper100klast7days](https://COVID-19.cdc.gov/COVID-19-data-tracker/#cases_casesper100klast7days)

more than a third (35 percent) claim a preference for both.”<sup>7</sup> The digital world is here to stay, and it is a big part of the church tomorrow. In an interview with Fresh Expressions and on his YouTube channel, Len Sweet said, “The internet is the front door of the church today...the digital church is the front door of many churches today.”<sup>8</sup> The pandemic shows the importance of churches continuing to reach the current and next generations. This epidemic has also exposed the fact that churches were ill-prepared for this time. Mike Ramsdell, Director of the Center of Evangelism at the Central Texas Conference of the UMC, said, “Many churches, of every denomination, have been exposed in not making disciples nearly as well as they thought to. It's hard to make disciples. Jesus is not easy to follow, picking up a cross is not an instinct. No group should have been more prepared for this period of upheaval than disciples of Jesus Christ. We weren't.”<sup>9</sup> Indeed, when we feel a "disparity between reality and ideality, this is not a space of despair but a space where one's sense of prophetic call and passion for the impossible must come in.”<sup>10</sup>

### Three Wave Movements

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<sup>7</sup> “Veturis Online Church,” Barna Group. Accessed October 20, 2020, <https://www.barna.com/research/cpw-reyes-veturis-online-church/>

<sup>8</sup> Len Sweet, “Count Your Blessings Amidst the Pandemic Pandemonium,” Count Your Blessings 12 Blessings from the COVID-19 Crisis Curse. Accessed December 12, 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RgmF5NJVOi0>.

<sup>9</sup> Mike Ramsdell, “WIG Weekly,” E-Note, June 10, 2020.

<sup>10</sup> Namsoon Kang, *Cosmopolitan Theology: Reconstituting Planetary Hospitality, Neighbor-Love, and Solidarity in an Uneven World* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2013), 11.

There are three current-wave movements, House Church, Fresh Expressions, and Table Church, that I wish to discuss in this paper. While other church movements are happening, I will limit my discussion to these three. These new waves of doing church are creative and forward-thinking. They have been able to re-present the gospel to a generation of people who may otherwise not have heard it at all. Each of the movements has its pros and cons. Nevertheless, their attempts at being the church in the twenty-first century are very noteworthy. I will, however, begin with a wave, which may have either wiped out or washed ashore, perhaps even creating a splash to the current movements.

### Emerging Church

One could argue that the Emerging Church movement arose as a protest to the modern way of the church. Leaders of the Emerging Church movement, or conversations as they prefer to be called, sought a different way to be the church in the 21st century, specifically a new way to reach the present and the emerging culture of our time. The Emerging Church leaders views the church as an institution of modernity, which currently exists in a postmodern world. It sees the church of the nineteenth-century or older form of the church as not communicating clearly to the twenty-first-century cultures.<sup>11</sup> The group argues that the church needs to do its homework on culture. It needs to understand and immerse itself in culture. The emerging church is an umbrella that covers many diverse

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<sup>11</sup> Eddie Gibbs and Ryan K. Bolger. *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 17.

movements.<sup>12</sup> The name emerging church refers to expressing a new form of church to relate to the emerging culture.<sup>13</sup>

The rationale behind the Emerging Church movement is church decline. The church is a cultural accommodationist to a society that no longer exists. Time has changed; the Western Culture has changed; yet, the church remains the same. The only generation that is happy is the boomers. The majority of people are no longer following the religion of their parents. In order for the church to thrive, it needs to live in the new culture. It needs to have new organizational structures.<sup>14</sup>

With its postmodern approach, the Emerging Church focuses less on doctrine and belief and more on being and doing. It focuses less on traditions and more on being conversational and adaptable. It seeks to communicate the gospel in a way that connects with the emerging generation. As Kester Brewin, an emerging church leader from London, explains, they “will keep at it, not because we think we are somehow the “salvation” of the church—far from it—but because now we have tasted something of this reconfigured body and we simply cannot go back to pews and song sandwiches.”<sup>15</sup>

While I wholeheartedly agree that the church needs to keep at it by taking risks and recreating ways to reach new people, I found the latter half of the statement, which is representative of some of the emerging church adherents and leaders, to be not only

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<sup>12</sup> Gibbs, *Emerging Churches*, 41.

<sup>13</sup> Gibbs, *Emerging Churches*, 41.

<sup>14</sup> Gibbs, *Emerging Churches*, 20.

<sup>15</sup> Gibbs and Bolgers, *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures*, 27.

uninformed but also inconsiderate to the traditions of the church. Some of the criticisms of the emerging church movement are that it is a watered-down theology, and in some cases, it seems they are tossing out Jesus with the bathwater. While tolerance of other belief systems is highly valued and pluralism is celebrated, perhaps this openness to other religions is the main culprit to the decline in church worship attendance.

Still, the emerging church movement is mission-oriented and focused. They aim to incarnate Christ in the culture. According to Andrew Jones, an emerging church leader, they seek to bring justice and transformation to culture and society.<sup>16</sup> There is no beginning and no end point to the gospel; rather, it is a daily activity. It is not about a belief system; it is about a living reality. It is about proclaiming and living the mission of God, in the kingdom of God, here and now.

### House Church

The Church, as described in the Book of Acts, started in people's homes. The early Christians did not go to church. They were the church at home. They were the church on the road. They were God's building and temple at each other's homes. The recording in the Book of Acts 2:42 states, "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers." The early church was a house church, although they did not think of themselves as such. So is House Church today a movement, or are they simply returning to our humble beginnings of holding

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<sup>16</sup> Gibbs and Bolgers, *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures*, 58.

smaller gatherings in people's homes? For our purpose, we will consider House Church a movement because there are usually driving forces to a movement.

It is interesting that many companies like Amazon, Google, Apple, Facebook, and Microsoft all started in people's homes, in a garage, a bedroom, or a basement. From modest beginnings to billion-dollar corporations! However, companies have grown to their mega-size by being creative and staying ahead of the curve by predicting the future needs of the consumer and creating solutions that meet those need, leading the way into a new era, as it were. Nevertheless, once you create or plant something, sometimes it is the nature of the thing created or planted to grow.

Nevertheless, the House Church movement may be a call to return to our humble beginnings out of necessity. This is because "A church building cannot properly be the Lord's house because in the new covenant this title is reserved for the church as people. So, if church buildings have any justification, it can only be practical; simply a place to meet and carry on essential functions, as necessary," according to Howard Snyder in his book *The Problem of Wineskins: Church Structure in a Technological Age*.<sup>17</sup>

Indeed, House Church has not only been around a long time, but it has been in existence from the very beginning, and it will probably always be around for several reasons:

1. A house church may be the easiest and simplest form of church one can start.
2. There is usually minimum overheads, no corporate structure, and no pastoral-leadership qualifications.

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<sup>17</sup> Lorin Smith, "The House Church Movement." Accessed February 21, 2021. [https://housechurch.org/basics/lorin\\_smith.html](https://housechurch.org/basics/lorin_smith.html)

3. House churches are “stripped of all the glitz and glamor,” and people are reached with the gospel through relationships, according to Ed Stetzer in *Christianity Today*.<sup>18</sup>

Neil Cole, a leader and advocate of house churches, adds, “What churches win people *with*, is what churches win them *to*.”<sup>19</sup> In other words, without the glitz and glamor, the gospel presentation may be more authentic and real. Also, house churches help eliminate worries of “adding additional ministries to keep people committed or entertained.”<sup>20</sup> This approach is of course counter-cultural.

On the flip side of this appeal to the House Church Movement are potential complexities. Many times, people who end up in house churches left the institutionalized church because they were dissatisfied or burned. Thereby members of house churches are possibly angry children of the institutional church. Second, it is less likely that members will get well-rounded teaching and preaching on the Bible. Third, without structure, there is less responsibility and accountability. Families looking for a safe ministry setting for their children and youth will less likely find this option at house churches. Fourth, in my opinion, there is a greater chance of false teaching and misleading the flock.

Nevertheless, in countries such as China and Latin America, house churches are the norm. Like the early church, house churches may be thriving in China due to government laws and persecution. Jon Zens, an advocate of the house church, says that

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<sup>18</sup> Ed Stetzer, “The Exchange with Ed Stetzer,” *Christianity Today*, May 25, 2017. Accessed February 21, 2021.  
<https://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2017/may/house-churches-good-or-bad.html>

<sup>19</sup> Ed Stetzer.

<sup>20</sup> Ed Stetzer.

the movement is monolithic.<sup>21</sup> The thousands of house churches worldwide vary extensively in origin, character, size, and purpose. Zens does not know where it will go in the next few years, but he was confident it will always be around.

Indeed, house churches are appealing because they are biblical, missional, relational, contextual, and cost-effective. Without a doubt, house churches are biblical because they find their roots in the early church. They are missional, and they can quickly spread the gospel's message through one-on-one relationships. Since house churches are smaller, they can be more contextual and adaptable. During the COVID-19 pandemic, it is obvious that everyone was experiencing a form of a house church. If there was a church movement that could have thrived in the pandemic, it is house churches. When larger numbers are used as indicators of healthy churches, the house church movement can thrive in its smallness.

As a modern-day movement, the Church Multiplication Associates (CMA) quickly got off the ground. In its first year, ten new churches were started.<sup>22</sup> In their second year, 18 new churches were started, then 52 the following year, and it quickly grew to 800 churches globally.<sup>23</sup> The movement's goal was to be clear, simple, natural, and "to reproduce healthy disciples, leaders, churches, and movements to fill the earth with God's Kingdom."<sup>24</sup> Cole distinguishes between a *attractional* model and *missional*

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<sup>21</sup> Smith, "The House Church Movement."

<sup>22</sup> Neil Cole, *Organic Church: Growing Faith Where Life Happens*, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005), 26.

<sup>23</sup> Cole, *Organic Church*, 26.

<sup>24</sup> Cole, *Organic Church*, 27.

model.<sup>25</sup> Cole argues that the attractional model only adds but does not reproduce. This addition is not enough to keep up with population growth and is too expensive to multiply effectively.

On the other hand, the missional model multiplies, and can rapidly grow. Thus the missional approach is embraced by the house church movement. Cole further argues that the world no longer wants to “wake up on a Sunday morning to go to church on their day off, to hear a lecture about a man they have never met.”<sup>26</sup> For Cole, he asserts that he is not saying we should do away with the institution; rather, he urges the institution to invest more in being the church throughout the week by helping the poor, the hurting people, and to “spend less on ourselves.”<sup>27</sup>

Frank Viola is not necessarily an advocate of the house-church movement. Instead, Viola argues for an “organic expression of the church.”<sup>28</sup> Viola asserts that when the early church outgrew a house where they held church, they “simply multiplied and met in several other homes, following the house-to-house principle” found in Acts 2.<sup>29</sup> Today, a church is usually associated with a physical location and a building. The house church movement argues that the “sanctuary” or the “house of God” is the community of

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<sup>25</sup> Neil Cole, *Rising Tides: Finding a Future-Proof Faith in an Age of Exponential Change*, (USA: Starling Initiatives, 2018), 62.

<sup>26</sup> Cole, *Rising Tide*, 65.

<sup>27</sup> Cole, *Rising Tide*, 68.

<sup>28</sup> Frank Viola, “House Church Vs. Organic Church,” Beyond Evangelical, October 10, 2010, <https://frankviola.org/2010/10/12/house-church-vs-organic-church/>

<sup>29</sup> Frank Viola, *Reimagining Church: Pursuing The Dream of Organic Christianity*. (Colorado Springs: David C Cook Publisher, 2008), 85.

God, and not the brick and mortar.<sup>30</sup> Since 2012, interest in the house church movement has dwindled in the west. However, Viola believes it will awaken again in the future. Without available current data on house churches in the U.S., I can only assume that things may have picked up, especially during the pandemic. Nevertheless, the house church movement may be similar to class meetings in the Wesleyan tradition.

### Fresh Expressions

As the name indicates, Fresh Expressions is another church movement that seeks to express the gospel freshly. Unwilling to sit back and suffer a silent death, the Church of England and the British Methodist Church decided that it needed to find fresh expressions of the church that would reach new people and to “proclaim the Gospel afresh in every generation.”<sup>31</sup> Unlike the Emerging Church movement, Fresh Expression values the tradition but seeks something newer and livelier to engage the present culture. Like the Emerging Church, the Fresh Expression movement is ecumenical and crosses between denominational lines, if any. While the Emerging Church movement is usually associated with big crowds and larger churches that are non-denominational, the Fresh Expression movement is usually tied to a denomination as a base and exists primarily in small-size groups. One of its purposes is to reach people who have not heard about the gospel. These Fresh Expression communities can gather in places like a coffee shop, bar, fitness center, retirement center, community center, or even at a dog park. The movement,

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<sup>30</sup> Frank Viola, *Reimagining Church*, 86.

<sup>31</sup> Fresh Expressions, “About.” Accessed February 21, 2021. <https://freshexpressionsus.org/about/>

like the Emerging Church conversation has also gone global from England to Canada, to Australia and New Zealand, to South Africa, and now the US.

There are four guiding principles to the Fresh Expressions movements:<sup>32</sup>

1. Missional - Joining God's mission by going those not currently served by any church.
2. Contextual - Grounded in the language and culture of the people in and for their particular context.
3. Formational - Focused on discipling people in the way of Jesus.
4. Ecclesial - Forming local, tangible Christian communities that are able to step out as church in their own right.

Glancing at the four guiding principles, it occurred to me that there is no difference between the Fresh Expressions movement's claims and what a traditional church already claims. However, I found another definition more distinct as Travis Collins, one of the leaders of Fresh Expressions-US, provided. Collins said, "A fresh expression of church is a *church*, and is characterized by the elements and enduring marks of a church: it is *up*, *out*, *in*, and *of*. Meaning there is an *upward* reach toward God, an *outward* reach to people beyond our circle, an *inward* commitment to discipleship and fellowship, and a clear understanding that the church is part of the universal church and part of a deep, historical stream."<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Fresh Expressions, "About." Accessed February 21, 2021. <https://freshexpressionsus.org/about/>

<sup>33</sup> Travis Collins, *Fresh Expressions of Church* (Franklin: Seedbed Publishing, 2015), 6.

Furthermore, fresh expression churches are indigenous to their particular context. Worship and discipleship reflect the local culture and backgrounds of the participants. Numerical expansion is not the goal of fresh expression, although it could happen. Rather, Fresh Expressions movement is about the Great Commandment and the Great Commission.<sup>34</sup> It is about taking the church to where people live.

Needless to say, if Fresh Expressions was birthed into existence due to the alarming rate of decline in church attendance in the UK, that very well might be our future here in the US.<sup>35</sup> Therefore, it is best to pay attention to what God is doing there, take notes, and go into action to reverse the alarming tide.<sup>36</sup>

### Contextual Intelligence (CI)

Intelligence Quotient (IQ) measures human intellectual reasoning. Emotional Quotient (EQ) or Emotional Intelligence measures one's emotional management abilities. Cultural Quotient (CQ) or Cultural Intelligence is an "outsider's ability to interpret someone's unfamiliar and ambiguous gestures the way that person's compatriots would."<sup>37</sup> Cultural Intelligence is related to Emotional Intelligence. Contextual

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<sup>34</sup> Travis Collins, *Fresh Expressions of Church*, 39.

<sup>35</sup> Travis Collins, *From The Steeple To The Street: Innovating Mission And Ministry Through Fresh Expressions of Church* (Franklin: Seedbed Publishing, 2016), 129.

<sup>36</sup> Travis Collins, *From The Steeple To The Street*, 129.

<sup>37</sup> P. Christopher Early and Elaine Mosakowski, "Cultural Intelligence," *Harvard Business Review*, October 2004. Accessed March 21, 2021. <https://hbr.org/2004/10/cultural-intelligence>

Intelligence (CI) is the ability to understand the limits of our knowledge and to adapt that knowledge to an environment different from the one in which it was developed, according to Tarun Khanna, Harvard Business School Professor.<sup>38</sup> Contextual Intelligence is related to Cultural and Emotional Intelligence.

For our purpose, Contextual Intelligence can be simplified by stating it is all about context. Context matters. Understanding one's context could have an enormous impact on churches. Perhaps Contextual Intelligence should be explained side-by-side with the Fresh Expressions movement or expressed as the active ingredient to fresh expressions, Table churches, and new faith communities. In their recently published book, *Contextual Intelligence*, Michael Beck and Leonard Sweet set out to show the importance of context and knowing your context.<sup>39</sup> While contextual intelligence has been tried and applied in various fields such as business, psychology, and sociology, it has not been tried and applied in ecclesial settings. In the Florida Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church, where Beck is pastor of a local church, he sets out to demonstrate how understanding one's context or to "accurately diagnose a context" is critical to making correct decisions on what to do and how to do it.<sup>40</sup> Beck, who recently wrote and published his DMIN dissertation on Contextual Intelligence, provided examples of how taking successful ideas and methods from one context and applying it to another context

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<sup>38</sup> Tarun Khanna, *Harvard Business Review*, Harvard University, South Asia Institute, September 2014, Accessed December 1, 2020 <https://hbr.org/2014/09/contextual-intelligence>

<sup>39</sup> Michael Adam Beck and Sweet, Leonard, *Contextual Intelligence*, Oviedo, Florida: HigherLife Development Services, Inc., 2020.

<sup>40</sup> Beck and Sweet, 30.

may not work. What may have worked at Street A UMC in Fort Lauderdale may not work the same way at Street B UMC in Palm Beach, even with the same pastor. One needs to do the work and understand the context. One needs to understand the people and culture. Beginning with symptoms of decline and defining challenges, Beck and Sweet explored biblical texts to establish the foundation for contextual intelligence work. Looking at the early church, the Methodist movement, and the Fresh Expressions movement, Beck explored their contextual intelligence and values.

While I agree with Beck and Sweet's work and appreciate the concepts and research behind Contextual Intelligence, I fear there may be other issues besides understanding one's context when it comes to the church. It is one thing to understand one's context; it is quite another to want to do something about it. Some churches like it just the way it is, even with their dwindling numbers. Some churches understand the changing demographics that surround their houses of worship yet refuse to take notice. There is resistance within some of the traditional churches to change. Often people refuse to acknowledge the signs of their time. Just as people are sometimes slow to accept the changing reality around them, so does the church. I am reminded that the church is not a building; it is the people. Human behavior can be a positive attribute to the progression of things, or it can be a barrier to moving forward, even kingdom work. Just as a high Intelligence Quotient (IQ) and Emotional Quotient (EQ) do not guarantee success in life, nor does Contextual Intelligence (CI) guarantee success in the church.

Also, Tarun Khanna, arguing the case of contextual intelligence in the business institutions, said that "understanding the limits of our knowledge, which is at the heart of

contextual intelligence, is a very basic component of human comprehension.”<sup>41</sup>

Furthermore, Isaiah Berlin from Oxford also argued that there is a distinction between knowing the facts and making a judgment. Berlin asked,

What are we to call this kind of capacity? Practical wisdom, practical reason, perhaps, a sense of what will ‘work,’ and what will not. It is a capacity, in the first place, for synthesis rather than analysis, for knowledge in the sense in which trainers know their animals, or parents their children, or conductors their orchestras, as opposed to that in which chemists know the contents of their test tubes, or mathematicians know the rules that their symbols obey.<sup>42</sup>

Indeed, contextual intelligence is of extreme importance to many areas of life; yet, there is no guarantee for success for any church plant, Fresh Expressions or New Faith Community. Perhaps in the ecclesial context, we can understand that it is based not only on grassroots research and development but also on prayer.

### Table Church

In the midst of this pandemic, when many churches could not gather in person, there has been much talk about table etiquette. No, I do not mean using the correct utensils, arms off the table, or properly sitting at a table. I mean, what is the proper table etiquette at Jesus’ table, the table that holds the holy meal, Holy Communion. However,

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<sup>41</sup> Khanna, Contextual Intelligence.

<sup>42</sup> Isaiah Berlin, “On Political Judgment,” *The New York Review*, October 3, 1996, Accessed December 1, 2020, <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1996/10/03/on-political-judgment/>

thankfully, we are not talking about Holy Communion here, either. We are talking about, still yet, another church movement. This movement is on the horizon is called Dinner Church, which is really Table Church. As the name implies, food is a big part of the gathering. As a matter of fact, the meal itself is worship. Sometimes, when a meal is held at a restaurant, you get handed a menu instead of receiving a bulletin or liturgy guide. But as Kendall Vanderslice has stated, "...dinner churches are not a fundamentally new thing, this is not just like the latest cool iteration of church, and that eating together has been central to the church for the entirety of the church's life."<sup>43</sup> In the early church, people gathered daily at the temple to worship, pray, and learn. Also, at their homes they broke bread and had a meal. Here is the passage from the early church as written in Acts 2:44-47 (NRSV):

**44** All who believed were together and had all things in common; **45** they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds[a] to all, as any had need. **46** Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home[b] and ate their food with glad and generous[c] hearts, **47** praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

Today, there are many Table churches across the globe. Here in the US, there are The Jesus Table, The Welcome Table, Barbecue Church, Open Table, Waffle Church, Emmaus Dinner Church, Picnic Church, etc. They all have a common theme: food. The gathering size is usually small, the size of a dinner party, between eight and twelve. Their goal is to be simple and accessible. They want table talk to rethink communion and

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<sup>43</sup> Kendall Vanderslice, *We Will Feast: Rethinking Dinner, Worship, And The Community of God* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2019), 2-3.

community.<sup>44</sup> Instead of the usual, where the church orients itself toward God in the presence of others; members of the Table Church movement re-orient themselves toward each other in the presence of God. Instead of a vertical church, it's horizontal.

Since the beginning of time, everyone has had to eat, so it is the common factor for all persons at the Table Churches. It too crosses denominational lines as more and more churches are desperately trying to reach the unchurched. The gathering is usually less formal, smaller in size, and instead of a traditional sermon, an engaging conversation occurs. It is a trend that is especially taking off with the younger crowd, Gen X and Millennials. Nevertheless, appropriately so, Table Churches are being used by God to reach the broken and those who exist on society's fringes. Len Sweet in *From Tablet to Table* stated that, "Jesus ate all kinds of food around all kinds of tables in all kinds of places with all kinds of peoples. To be a disciple of Jesus (then and now) is to love to eat, no matter what Jesus cooks and no matter where he sets the table."<sup>45</sup> Wherever the table is set, Jesus is the host. Table Church provides a template for the church on how to reawaken evangelism.<sup>46</sup> It reminds the church who is to be invited to dinner, and that is not only our friends and family, but also the poor, the lost, the broken, those on the margins of society. It is at the table that sinners and saints alike can sit together and be served by Jesus.

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<sup>44</sup> Mike Graves, *Table Talk: Rethinking Communion And Community* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2017), 33-38.

<sup>45</sup> Leonard Sweet, *From Tablet To Table: Where Community Is Found And Identity Is Formed* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2014), 57.

<sup>46</sup> Verlon Fosner, *Dinner Church: Building Bridges by Breaking Bread* (Seedbed Publishing, 2017), 173.

In addition to Jesus setting the table in multiple places, Jesus also makes house calls. Jesus will also come to your home and have a meal there with you. The question for us to ponder is: when was the last time you invited Jesus to dinner? In the Book of Revelation, Chapter 3:20, Jesus said, “Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me.” Set the table. Invite Jesus to dinner.

### Mega Church

Even though the Mega Church phenomenon is technically not being evaluated here, it is hardly possible to ignore them and not mention a few things about these influential and giants of churches. Scott Thurma from Hartford Institute for Religion Research says the following,

One of the biggest keys to most megachurches’ success is their ability to minister in, and adapt to, an ever-changing contemporary world. A vital church reaches out to both its members and non-Christians in relevant ways, and megachurches seem to do this both accidentally and intentionally.<sup>47</sup>

Thurma also noted the top ten principles any church size can learn from mega churches. He listed the following as the number one principle: “Don’t strive for size; strive to serve God.”<sup>48</sup> Thurma explains that the majority of megachurches grew to its size because their pastors had a passion and a vision for the unchurched. I absolutely agree; if only churches and their leaders, including my conference, would pay attention and listen.

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<sup>47</sup> Scott Thuma, “What Can My Church Learn from a Megachurch?” Hartford Institute for Religious Research [http://hrr.hartsem.edu/megachurch/megachurch\\_lessons.html](http://hrr.hartsem.edu/megachurch/megachurch_lessons.html)

<sup>48</sup> Scott Thuma, “What Can My Church Learn from a Megachurch?”

To serve the present age is the church's calling to fulfill. The church must continuously engage the culture, yet remain faithful to Scripture. Frantz Fanon, in referring to culture, said, "Each generation must discover its mission, fulfill it or betray it, in relative opacity."<sup>49</sup> So it is with the church except the mission of the church has already been laid out in Matthew 28:19 "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." The church's role in each generation is to discover ways to fulfill its mission or otherwise betray it. The result could be as Thom Rainer asserts "...churches that refuse to change will inevitably decline or even die."<sup>50</sup> As followers of Jesus, we must "embody fluidity, adaptation, and collaborations. It's what we call the third-culture way. Adaptable to changing circumstances. To challenging cultures. To complex crises and problems. If there's one quality that matters most to the fate of the church in the twenty-first century, it's adaptability."<sup>51</sup>

Indeed, the words from the song Oceans ("Where My Feet May Fail") can help bring this chapter to a close and take us to the next. In fact, the Australian-based group and church Hillsong, with its worldwide adherents and influence, boasts a weekly pre-COVID-19 worship attendance exceeding 100,000; perhaps they can also be considered a

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<sup>49</sup> Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2004), 145.

<sup>50</sup> Thom S. Rainer, *The Post-Quarantine Church* (Carol Stream, Illinois: Tyndale Momentum, 2020), 101.

<sup>51</sup> Dave Gibbons, *The Monkey and the Fish: Liquid Leadership for a Third-Culture Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 38-43.

movement.<sup>52</sup> Music can make new and powerful waves in a way that may just save the church.

You call me out upon the waters  
The great unknown where my feet may fail  
And there I find You in the mystery  
In oceans deep  
My faith will stand [swim]<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Tanya Riches and Tom Wagner, eds. "Introduction" in *Hillsong and Movement, Examined* (Cham Switzerland: Palgrave MacMillan), 1.

<sup>53</sup> Brackets are mine.

## CHAPTER FOUR

And I will call upon Your name  
And keep my eyes above the waves  
When oceans rise, my soul will rest in Your embrace  
For I am Yours and You are mine<sup>1</sup>

### Oceans Rise—The Project

The ocean is rising without a doubt, and the church is in the deep moana. The church is drowning at sea, and it must learn how to survive the rising vast ocean. It must pick up new skills, create something new, and recruit new voices of the present age. Hillsong is not only a native voice of the current generation, but also a primary influencer. Jesus is calling our names, telling us to keep our eyes above the waves. Don't allow the wind, sky, and the happenings around us to distract our focus. Like Jesus' call to Peter at sea, he is calling us also to get out of the boat and come toward him. It is the story told in Matthew 14:27-31.

Jesus is throwing us a lifeline, but we need to first get out of the boat and reach for the life vest thrown to us. Thankfully, it is through the grace of God that stands ready to pull us up and be our guide. When we are in too deep, and our feet fail us, and our fear overtakes us, God will be our lifeline through other voices. God will guide us to where we need to be.

Your grace abounds in deepest waters  
Your sovereign hand  
Will be my guide  
Where my feet may fail and fear surrounds me

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<sup>1</sup> Hillsong United, "Oceans" August 23, 2013, #17 on Zion, Hillsong Capitol CMG, 2013, Apple Music.

You've never failed and You won't start now<sup>2</sup>

### Purpose of the Project

The purpose of this project and writing is to explore some of the reasons why people are not attending Sunday worship, and to discover and create ways of being the church in the present time and space, a third-space. Rather than continuing to do church the way it has always been done and become less and less relevant to a growing and multicultural population, I intend to create and offer an alternative third-space to people in the community where the gospel can be planted, take root and flourish. I will be using the term *third space* from the postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha. Bhabha defines *third space* as the intersection of cultures and persons creating a new fluid identity he calls hybridity. The *third space* is always changing, never permanent, and always becoming.<sup>3</sup> It is an in-between and in-between space for the present time and people. It is neither here nor there but always in-between. Furthermore, Gary Simpson asserts that “third space is helpful in times of polarization and binary ideas that define ownership. (Your place OR mine.) In the third space, we must both concede our ownership. It is OUR space.”<sup>4</sup> As mentioned earlier, there is a connection between Bhabha’s third-space and Oldenburg’s third-place. While I framed this project using Bhabha’s third-space theory, what may

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<sup>2</sup> Hillsong, Oceans.

<sup>3</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, “Cultural Diversity and Cultural Differences,” in *The Post-Colonial Studies: Reader*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin (New York: Routledge, 2006), 156-7.

<sup>4</sup> Gary Simpson, online conversation with author, January 2021.

have actually resulted at times was a third-place. All in all, there is always a place in the third-space.

The same can be said of the life of a Christian. We live in the in-between time. As the saying goes, "We have not yet arrived." For the church, the reality is that it exists in the in-betweens of time and space, the third space. However, more often than not, churches hold on to traditions that are sometimes recognizable in the first space, one's origin, but not in the second space, current context. Take a tradition from the previous century, or even decade, and apply it to the church today. It is like a VHS church in an online streaming world. It is like night and day. The streaming world never experienced VHS, and they are outdated and obsolete. Nevertheless, there is a place for tradition, but it must be appropriated where contextual, cultural, and emotional intelligence are negotiated and applied sensibly. Moreover, although I favor many of the church's traditions, I recognize that there needs to be an on-going dialogue and negotiation between the first and second spaces, perhaps the formation and necessity for a third-space church. Jesus transcends time and space, broke through all kinds of barriers, and crossed many cultural lines and boundaries. Following him would lead us to do the same and move us to a third space since that is where people are doing life.

It is my intent to create this third-space church that will bring new possibilities of serving those in the community, whether it is at noon at the well or midnight at a friend's home.<sup>5</sup> If people are not coming to a traditional church, then seeking them out is not only

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<sup>5</sup> Referencing Jesus' encounter with the woman at the well at noon as told in John 4:42-6, and Jesus' visit with Nicodemus at midnight told in John 3:1-21.

what Jesus would do, but it is also the church's mission to seek and intentionally create a third-space in order that they may hear the Good News of the gospel's message. It is my role as pastor and as a "keeper"<sup>6</sup> to always seek out ways to reach people, whether it is through an emerging church, a house church, a fresh expression of church, a Table Church, a new faith community, or a different way that the gospel's message can be presented in the language of the people, in a format that communicates to the present age.

#### Narrative of Opportunity and Concern—New Faith Community (NFC)<sup>7</sup>

To help combat church decline and increase worship attendance, the Central Texas Conference of The United Methodist Church, in which I am a member, put together a WIG plan, which stands for Wildly Important Goal. As part of this goal, the conference envisioned starting 100 new faith communities within two years. Since 2018, there have been more than 50 New Faith Communities initiated.<sup>8</sup> The goal of starting 100 NFC was not met. I am slightly puzzled as to why pastors and churches were not taking advantage of the opportunity, especially since there was a monetary incentive to help fund any upfront cost. Approximately 300 churches are part of the Central Texas Conference, and I expected many churches to participate. I suppose that the churches who did not apply have their reasons. We are all motivated differently. At the same time, I am aware that

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<sup>6</sup> Referencing the story in Genesis when God asked Cain for the whereabouts of his bother, Abel.

<sup>7</sup> I will be using New Faith Community and NFC interchangeably.

<sup>8</sup> Central Texas Conference of the United Methodist Church, "Wildly Important Goal," <https://www.ctcumc.org/wig>

some applicants were not approved for various reasons. Nevertheless, the more than 50 New Faith Communities are worth celebrating.

The Bishop and conference offered a start-up grant of up to \$10,000.<sup>9</sup> Of the New Faith Communities started in our conference, some have failed in the process, and others simply failed to start. Several NFCs are surviving, and some are thriving. The New Faith Communities are mostly new church plants, but they are tied to a brick-and-mortar home church. The NFC could be anything that a pastor and a church could imagine, as long as they offered biblical foundation and practical ways for the new faith community, such as weekly gatherings. There are a few other mandates, such as Wesleyan theology (this was a given), teachings on stewardship, breaking of bread (Holy Communion), and a few other requirements, but all were seemingly practical.

A proposal of the new faith community had to be submitted and approved. The types of new faith communities within the conference varied widely from a pub ministry such as Beer, Bourbon and Bible<sup>10</sup> to a community-meal ministry called Jesus Table to a children's ministry called Messy Church. There were many creative and new ways of doing and being the church. These new faith communities are similar to the Fresh Expressions movement, but operating under a different name. Some of the ideas and concepts are the same; some of the new faith communities emerged directly from the Fresh Expressions movement, for example, Messy Church. There is obvious overlap, but rightly so because nothing develops in a vacuum. We are all connected and

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<sup>9</sup> Central Texas Conference, “Wildly Important Goal.”

<sup>10</sup> This is a different ministry from our Beer and Bible.

interconnected. Indeed, the church needs all the help it can get to stay relevant and connected in today's rapidly changing world.

Meg Witmer-Faile, Associate Director of Evangelism, Mission and Church

Growth at the Central Texas Conference of the UMC shares the following:

Since the WIG initiative launched the New Faith Community Grants we have awarded 55 grants. The grants were \$10,000 each, although not all churches requested the full amount. Additionally, we have received some grant funds in return from a couple of churches that did not spend the entire amount they received. We have three NFC's that either failed to start or have failed in the process and have 52 that are still viable.

Additionally, we launched an Online Community Microgrant option this year in direct response to COVID-19 and the need for our churches to shift quickly to online worship. To date we have awarded 139 microgrants at \$1,000 each.

The coronavirus pandemic has definitely impacted our NFC's and all of our churches. As you know, our pastors and lay leadership have had to pivot quickly and adapt to a rapidly changing landscape. As with our churches, the NFC's have moved online and/or adapted to socially distanced in-person ministry.

A complete picture of the overall impact of COVID-19 on our NFC's is yet to be determined, but suffice to say that it has definitely altered the original vision. In response to COVID-19, we are relaunching our grant proposal process effective January 2021. The types of grants available and the request process will be adapted to existing needs.<sup>11</sup>

Reading the signs of our time, our conference is providing a financial lifeline to churches to get creative, focus on mission, and "Go." However, as mentioned earlier about contextual intelligence, sometimes the church's issue is not being able to read the sign of our time, but the refusal to read it. It is not the lack of creativity but the lack of desire and sense of urgency. We are stuck in a world of what-is-in-it-for-me thinking. In many ways, the churches in our conference cannot say lack of financial resources is the

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<sup>11</sup> Meg Whiter-Faile, "NFC" Email 12/10/2020. Permission was granted to use this data.

problem. Our conference generously provides resources, which are readily available to churches. Financially, there is no reason for a church not to do a mission project or to be in mission in and with their community. As a matter of fact, Faile also shared the following grant opportunities for 2020<sup>1</sup> for the churches in our conference:

- \$1,000 Microgrant focused on digital/online worship;
- \$5,000 NFC Relaunch Grant for existing NFC's that desire to relaunch post-COVID-19;
- \$10,000 new NFC Grant similar to the ones in the original WIG initiative;
- \$25,000-50,000 NFC Partnership Grant<sup>12</sup>

These types of financial opportunities are available mainly in denominations, such as The United Methodist Church, which thrives on its connectional system. I am already thinking about what our next project will be so we can take advantage of this opportunity.

While movements and communities are contextualized to a particular time, space, and people, we have many shared human experiences. After all, we read the same Scripture, and we worship the same God, and follow the same Lord. The point is to get out into the community and share the love of Jesus and make disciples. Jesus calls all his followers to "Go" into the world. Indeed, our mission is to follow Jesus into the community and set up a third-space faith community. It would be a place where people from different backgrounds can freely gather.

Our church applied for the conference grant two separate times, and both times, our request was approved. We received two separate grants, each for \$10,000. The first grant helped us to launch Beer and Bible in the summer of 2018. In late 2019 to early

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<sup>12</sup> Meg Whiter-Faile, "NFC" Email 12/10/2020. Permission was granted to use this data.

2020, we realized there was still grant money available. After some discussion, discernment, and prayer, we decided to start up another ministry. Our second grant approval helped us to launch and fund our Saturday Night Church in February of 2020. The church and I were super elated that our ministry-grant requests were funded. We took this as a sign that creativity and fresh expressions of the church were desperately needed. In 2020 alone, FUMC Taylor has received \$40,123 in total grants, \$11,000 from the conference, and \$29,123 from the government. Included in that amount was \$30,123 precisely to assist in this pandemic season. This is attributed to actively reading the signs of our time, knowing what is available, and taking advantage of the extended opportunity and lifelines.

One impetus behind the Emergent Church, House Church, Fresh Expressions, Table Church, and these New Faith Communities in the Central Texas Conference of the United Methodist Church is the same, church decline. Someone once said, "Desperation puts forth creativity." If you are not receiving the desired results, do something about it. Failure is accepting the undesired outcome. If the church is in decline, do something about it, not tomorrow but today. It is our call and our mission. When we cannot reproduce the faith, Christianity becomes an endangered species.<sup>13</sup>

With resources like these, questions are raised: How can we refresh our faith and not allow it to go stale? How can we take an ancient Jesus and tell the online-streaming world about him? Obviously, we cannot communicate to a digital streaming world with our VHS equipment and mentality. We must use the current language and tools available

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<sup>13</sup> Sweet, online class discussion, February 2021.

to us. The answers on how to refresh our faith will vary across the spectrum. However, it is clear, Jesus can speak for himself, but we need to join him on the streets. We need to follow Jesus into places where it may be uncomfortable for us. We will most likely go into places, associate with people, have a conversation and a meal with community members we may have previously ignored. As the rising sea continues to batter the shore, the more urgent our mission. Strap on some water-proof boots as we follow Jesus around town.

### Scope of the Project

The project's scope included the First United Methodist Church of Taylor, Texas, traditional Sunday-morning-worship service, and the two New Faith Communities: Beer and Bible and Saturday Night Church. The stories gathered represented those who were active or became inactive during the research period. Research narratives included those gleaned from websites, podcasts, YouTube, social media, journals, music, films, conversations, zoom sessions, lectures, and books. The study was conducted during nine non-consecutive weeks in the COVID-19 pandemic. These nine weeks were like snapshots of the church's life represented in these three faith communities from March to November 2020. While the traditional Sunday worship was included briefly, the focus was on the two new faith communities. All in all, there were periods of confusion, anxiety, and angst, especially during this pandemic. There were also periods of relief, joy, and celebration.

### Qualitative Methodology of the Project

In the Third Spaces of the new faith community, the gathering was ecumenical, the format conversational and interactive in a mutually engaging, beneficial, and constructive way to the participants and myself. I continued to build on this format using the postmodern-narrative-research method. Then the pandemic happened, and this impacted the project significantly. The format and frequency of conversations altered the approach. While our narratives continued to intersect and influenced each other, the project took a turn and utilized both the proactive-research method and postmodern-narrative-research method. My theology as a researcher rises from a specific theological stance, one that originates from the margin. From this standpoint, I align with "the goal of proactive research [it]<sup>14</sup> is not only understanding but transformation."<sup>15</sup> Therefore, I am aware of the issues uncovered, but I am proactively seeking to influence, advocate, and change the system to benefit those on the margins.<sup>16</sup> I acknowledge that although I attempt to be objective, the reality is that I cannot completely "empty" myself and remain unbiased as one would with an ethnographic-research method.<sup>17</sup> My location and position will always impact my worldview. No matter how hard I try, we cannot be objective and neutral observers. Michael Polanyi argues that once you have learned something, you

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<sup>14</sup> Brackets are mine.

<sup>15</sup> Carl E. Savage and William Presnell, *Narrative Research in Ministry A Postmodern Research Approach for Faith Communities* (Louisville: Wayne Oates Institute, 2008), 109.

<sup>16</sup> Savage and Presnell, *Narrative Research*, 109.

<sup>17</sup> Savage and Presnell, *Narrative Research*, 108.

cannot unlearn it. It is irreversible for “it is a transformation of our intellectual life, originating in our own desire for greater clarity and coherence.”<sup>18</sup> Our new and acquired knowledge changes our ways of thinking, as it should.

### New Faith Community: Beer and Bible<sup>19</sup>

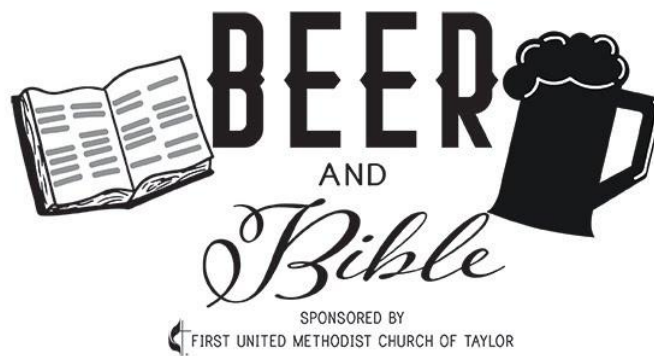


Illustration: 4.1 Our logo

Our first stop is at a bar. It is not the usual church-gathering place, but Jesus was not the usual kind of a guy. He would often go to places and associate with people that religious folks thought were unthinkable. Well, yes, indeed. Welcome to Beer and Bible, sponsored by First United Methodist Church of Taylor, Texas! Our theme is shown here:

Do all the good you can,  
By all the means you can,  
In all the ways you can,  
In all the places you can,

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<sup>18</sup> Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015), 106.

<sup>19</sup> A playlist of a few Beer and Bible gathering. <https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLY7b9qkIeK0efBUTIE-MBPEkOaAUDRxnF>

At all the times you can,  
 To all the people you can,  
 As long as ever you can.<sup>20</sup>

The addition of a New Faith Community: Beer and Bible was one of our church's biggest changes in 2018 or since my arrival in 2016. When Bishop Mike Lowry offered a \$10,000 grant to any church within our Central Texas Conference willing to start a New Faith Community, I was eagerly listening. That is much money! I thought to myself, "We can do so much with \$10,000." Free money with no strings attached was the conference's way of saying we need you to expand and work your mission field; here is \$10,000 to help you. Get creative. I discussed this opportunity with various committees of the church. They all liked the idea, but no one came up with a plan.

Since the conference offered a monetary incentive to get creative and reach new people we were not already reaching, I knew this would be an excellent opportunity for FUMC Taylor. It has been a few years, but I still recall watching the news one evening, and there was a story about a pastor in another state who started a bar ministry. The pastor made the news because he was in a place where he was not expected to be. However, the pastor argued that the people in the bar also needed to hear about the love of Christ and the Bible. That news episode has always stayed with me. Moreover, when the monetary incentive came up from the conference, I immediately thought of "What if?" questions.

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<sup>20</sup> This quote has long been attributed to John Wesley; however, there is no source connecting the quote to Wesley. Nevertheless, the words advocate for the common good of humanity.

I brought the idea to a few of our committees: worship, evangelism, and administrative council. After several discussions, we decided on the bar ministry, completed the grant application, submitted our request, and were approved and received the funds shortly after. Our kickoff date was in August of the same year, 2018. This was a joyful moment affirming that Jesus was leading us to where we needed to be, out in the community.

### Target Market Defined

Our target market was diverse, younger, and unchurched individuals. Specifically, our goal was to reach a younger crowd, 20s to 40s (maybe some 50s), who did not belong to any church and may not be comfortable attending worship in a traditional-church building. Our vision was to engage people in downtown Taylor who were not regular Sunday morning worshippers. We intended to meet people where they were, love them for who they were, and share the Gospel of Jesus Christ with them. This would be a non-traditional gathering with live music that would be more of an ecumenical social-justice happy hour. We hoped to get creative with this opportunity and let it evolve into something that fit our Wesleyan tradition with social justice and the new people we were trying to reach.

### Initial Desired Spot

Our team initially decided on a location, an open space between Texas Beer Company (the bar) and Curbside Coffee (a coffee shop). We were excited about the space

because it would offer people the opportunity to either bring their coffee or their glass of beer and join us in worship. We also decided that our worship time and space were not going to be traditional; rather, it would be a contemporary to postmodern gathering focusing on social justice. We had a vision and great hopes. However, our vision and hope about the space did not materialize. The original space fell through because the building owner did not want to disturb her tenants who lived upstairs. We were discouraged but remained hopeful.

#### Second Choice Spot—Texas Beer Company

The bar's owner next-door, Texas Beer Company, was willing for us to meet at the taproom as long as we did not take over the whole space. The owner was excited that a church was courageous and willing to get outside its walls and have a group at his bar. He was further enthused that our topics would be focused on social justice, as his Presbyterian church in Austin focused on social justice. However, he still had a concern because he had a business to run and did not want a church group to be a detractor to his customers. Even though we were meeting for only 1 hour a week, our presence met some resistance. Nevertheless, our team was excited that we would have a bar ministry at the main local hangout in Taylor. Not only would we be visible, but we would also meet our target market and reach new people, thus fulfilling our mission.

If there was anything urban and uptown in Taylor, this place was it. The establishment is part of the new growth in Taylor, a major connecting point in our community. Politicians, community leaders, real estate groups, and everyday people

frequent this place. We decided on the name Beer and Bible, as it was simple, catchy, and representative of our location, and who we were trying to reach. We were the church with a Bible trying to connect with people at the bar drinking beer. We kicked-off Beer and Bible on the second week of August 2018.

### Planning with the Team

Our team met weekly to exchange ideas and plan for what our gathering would look like. We divided up the responsibilities: marketing materials, announcements, communication, invitations, prayers, speakers, band, food, and others. It was not our intent to encourage alcohol consumption, but instead to meet the people who were already at this space. For our first few months, our average participants numbered in the 30s, with various faith leaders from the community leading our conversations.

### Overcoming Issues

Since the inception of Beer and Bible, we have received a lot of strong criticism. One or two people also left the church. However, the positive feedback we received far outnumbered the negative ones. We had certainly caused a stir and interest in the community. Our gathering had been very racially and ethnically diverse and ecumenical, something we had not been able to accomplish on our own Sunday mornings within our walls. For this reason, I was optimistic about our future as a church located in a very diverse and growing city.

We encountered other issues at Texas Beer Company. The noise was an issue. The acoustics in the building were so terrible that we could not hear one another. If there was a speaker, only the nearest persons could hear them. Thereby, we had to work around this issue, holding only table discussions. We held our gatherings outside a few times, but it got cold, and since we were at an intersection, we still had noise to deal with. We held it once at the coffee shop next door because the bar had a private event booked for that evening. However, since we took up all of the coffee shop's space in the front and overflowing into the sidewalk, they asked us to hold it in the back if we wanted to have it there again. Apparently, the owner thought we were a distraction to their customers. After four months of holding Beer and Bible at the Texas Beer Company, we decided to take the church on the road. The facility was not conducive to our gathering because of the noise. If we could not hear one another, then we did not have authentic dialogue.

### Taking Beer and Bible on the Road<sup>21</sup>

We decided to bar hop across the street to Taylor Station Bar for the month of December. This was our second location. The sound level was a great improvement, and the owners were willing for our group to take center stage. We were their primary customers. However, since our group included children, the bar frowned on it. During this time, I also made arrangements with the owners (who are church members) of 4th Street Grind Coffee & Deli for us to meet at their place of business for the month of

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<sup>21</sup> See Appendix A, B, C.

January. Thereby 4th Street Grind Coffee & Deli became our third location. Gary Simpson asserts, “There is something biblical about this moving from place to place.”<sup>22</sup> The Israelites and their tabernacle moved from place to place. We were taking our worship space with us because we know that we, the people, not the building, are the church.

This was a much better atmosphere for our group. The place was cozy, and the sandwiches were good. The business, however, closed at 5 p.m. and our group meets at 6 p.m. While we had the place to ourselves, attendance was based on invitation. We did not have the public visibility as we did at the bar. Although I submitted a few brief articles to the newspaper telling of our topics and gatherings, which they published, we never received the traffic we had anticipated. After actively searching for another meeting location, we moved to Squirt's Burgers and Wings three months later, in April. Squirt's became our fourth location. By this time, we were committed to moving around to different businesses. This not only gave us greater visibility, but it also allowed us to support the local businesses.

We met at Squirt's Burgers and Wings for three months and then moved to Lucky Duck Cafe in July and held Beer and Bible there for two months. Lucky Duck was our fifth location. In September, we met at Luigi's Italian Restaurant. Luigi's—our sixth location. In October, we moved to Texas Bay Seafood and Steak Restaurant. Texas Bay was our seventh location. We met in their banquet room. We tried meeting in their open

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<sup>22</sup> Gary Simpson, online conversation with author, January 2021.

public space; however, the noise was a factor, and we could not hear one another without yelling across the room. This was the same issue we encountered at the pub.

We observed that more of the community members were joining the conversation and less from FUMC members. This was one of the goals, reaching people we were not already reaching. We continued to move forward by staying visible, adaptable, faithful, and resilient. This was our last meeting place until the COVID-19 pandemic put a halt to our in-person public gathering.

### What We Learned

One of the draws to our group gathering is that we share a meal provided by the business place where we gather. An offering is taken up weekly, and although it is not enough to offset the meal expense, it pays about 25-40% of the bill, and we pick up the tab realizing that sharing a meal is an essential element of our time together. If sharing a meal was one of the highest forms of intimate relationship you could have with someone<sup>23</sup> in Jesus' day, it certainly can still hold today.

Realizing that our name is subversive and promiscuous, in a strange kind of way, it also affirms our identity as followers of Jesus, going into places where certain religious folks would frown. As we continue to press our way in, out, with, and through the community, we realize that food is something that we all have in common. It is in the power of a shared meal that can turn enemies into friends.<sup>24</sup> I am mostly very proud that

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<sup>23</sup> Leonard Sweet, *So Beautiful* (Colorado Springs: David C Cook, 2009), 77.

<sup>24</sup> Leonard Sweet, *So Beautiful*, 79.

our gathering is ecumenical and diverse in race and generation. We do not all belong to the same faith tradition, and some of our participants do not belong to any church at all; Beer and Bible is their church. While many people would love to change our name and drop the word "Beer," our core team wants us to keep it. The Beer and Bible name has already become a part of our identity, and in a strange kind of way, I enjoy challenging people to think differently, to broaden their thinking to include those on the margins.

### Our Impact

Beer and Bible is by far the most risk-taking mission that FUMC Taylor is currently involved with. Our name, Beer and Bible, has caused a stir in our community. Once, an individual entered our church building and screamed that we need to stop discussing immigration. We had various other comments from people asking why we discuss climate change and call us a false church. We are dealing with the good, the bad, and the ugly. We drown out strong opinions versus constructive feedback and continue to push forward, believing that this is where God is calling us to be out in the community. We discuss social-justice issues with a biblical reference that various faith leaders bring to the group. Here are some topics we have discussed: inclusiveness, love, immigration, race and racism, gun control, relationship, abortion, gentrification, domestic violence, suicide, homelessness, forgiveness, relationships, restorative justice, Black History Month, International Women's Day, environmental justice, economic disparity, Christianity and Islam, economic justice, funeral cost. Some of our invited guest speakers included: pastors from other faith traditions, laypersons, a rabbi, a priest, and imam

representatives from a neighboring mosque, and advocates from a social-justice organization in Austin. While we realize we cannot solve these social-justice issues globally, we can at least do our part at the local level, where we live, and begin an authentic dialogue. Our Beer and Bible gathering is undoubtedly playing a role in shaping my navigation skills and identity as a pastor. It is also helping us realize the moana in us as a bridge to the community.

Many of these topics are difficult, ones that many people do not want to discuss in church. We were able to tackle these issues because we held the conversations in unconventional spaces, outside our church building. When I remember that Jesus talked with the Samaritan Woman at a well, with Mary Magdalene at a tomb, with Nathaniel under a fig tree, with Zacchaeus at his house, I realize we are in good company.

### COVID-19 Impact on Beer and Bible

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, we have not met at a public space. Gathering in large sizes is either banned or discouraged. As I write this paragraph, December 2020, our city has limited public gatherings to five people due to the spike with COVID-19 cases. And, many people do not feel comfortable going into a public restaurant. Our last in-person gathering at the restaurant was on March 12. However, I missed most of the conversation because I attended the Taylor City Council meeting that evening to speak on another issue. The issue that evening pertained to the city's removal of a tomb display placed at the town square by the Ministerial Alliance. Some city-council members took issue with it, claiming city property should be free from displaying

religious images. Of course, they have no issue with displaying a Christmas tree because they have re-assigned its meaning, or a nativity scene because a birth story is a non-issue, except when it is thought of as a re-enforcement of a pro-life sentiment. Living out our mandate of social justice, members from the Beer and Bible attended another Taylor City Council meeting to speak on a for-profit immigration facility here in Taylor.

Nevertheless, the pandemic changed the meeting platform for Beer and Bible. We met via Zoom weekly and encouraged folks to gather around their tables with their dinner and choice of beverage. Folks had also been encouraged to pick up food from a local business to support local small businesses. Although we have committed participants, the overall participation has not been significant. We held three in-person gatherings over the summer at one of our church members' backyard. We were able to social distance, and we had more participation. This was a sign that meeting digitally is not going to be successful with Beer and Bible long-term. Rather, some form of an in-person gathering is vital.

#### Addition of a Second New Faith Community: Saturday Night Church<sup>25</sup>

Through our Beer and Bible experiment and ministry, we realized that the bar scene was not for everyone. Therefore, we decided to add a second new faith community on Saturday nights. We applied for the conference grant and were approved in February of 2020. We named this ministry for what it was, Saturday Night Church. This new

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<sup>25</sup> A playlist of Saturday Night Church. <https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLY7b9qkIeK0cVDUaSguUE8VzdT55st0m7>

additional community's theme was the same: create a third-space community where people can gather for conversation, food, and worship. We wanted to be the people who helped people see the "startling and stunning relevance of the things that the Lord has done in their daily lives."<sup>26</sup>

If the bar scene did not appeal to all, neither did our sanctuary. The sanctuary of our current church is traditional. Built in 1957, it was pre-VHS. Back then, they had something called Quadruplex or Quad, something utterly foreign in today's streaming world. While there is great value and veneration with older churches and buildings, the sanctuary speaks a particular language that is not understood or appreciated by certain segments of society, that is, younger generations, the "unchurched," "nones," and "dones." The Beer and Bible was created to fill this void by meeting people in public spaces. Yet, Beer and Bible is limited, with its language, appeal, and the people it reaches. Thereby, Saturday Night Church was our newest development, still, in the early stages and planning.

### Planning with the Team

When we launched it in February, we had a goal of starting with a once-a-month gathering and gradually moving to twice a month by spring and weekly by summer. The gathering would occur in our fellowship hall on a Saturday night at 5:00 p.m. with

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<sup>26</sup> Samuel DeWitt Proctor and Gardner C. Taylor, *We Have This Ministry: The Heart Of The Pastor's Vocation* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1996), 135.

contemporary music and a relaxed atmosphere, and it would be partially led by youth. The youth would perform a skit. We would also share a meal.

### Target Market Defined

Our target population was young families with children. The MissionInsite provided a picture of the demographics of Taylor, showing the town's population. The total population was more than 18,000 and included 25 percent, who were under the age of 17.<sup>27</sup> That calculated to 4,500 children and youth. Since we had a Children's Director with a young family and a Youth Director with a young family, it was a no-brainer that we would include them in our planning team. We would also make sure that children were going to take an active role in this ministry.

### Goal and Purpose

The goal and mission of Saturday Night Church were the same, to create a third space where people can gather for conversation, food, and worship that was less traditional, and more casual. Initially, our first gathering was in the church fellowship hall, but since the pandemic, our meeting space has been a digital format filming from different locations in the community. Perhaps, the pandemic forced us to align more with the third space ideas of meeting in a neutral zone like the internet and being present on social-media platforms. Nevertheless, the third space does not only refer to a physical

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<sup>27</sup> MissionInsite, "Demographics – Step 4," Accessed December 11, 2020. <https://peopleview.missioninsite.com/app/#!/welcome/demographics/step-4>

location, but it also comprises of an unconventional approach. Digital gatherings can be defined as third-space.

These third space worship gatherings would still be connected to the traditional "mother" church. One of the rationales of these new faith communities was that a church should never become complacent and stagnant but always create something new. Furthermore, these third-space faith communities will not be pressured into joining the traditional church; rather, the goal was to grow, spiritually, and numerically, all worship gatherings and spaces in their respective places. To help minimize any feelings of neglect, the people from the traditional church are part of the planning and are actively engaged with the people from the new faith communities. Understanding our mission and our reasons for creating New Faith Communities is critical. It is our mandate as a church to reach new people we are not already reaching.

#### Saturday Night Church Launch<sup>28</sup>

On our kick-off night, we had around 25 people in attendance. The setup was similar to a talk-show. I was the host, and the youth were the guests. The youth also prepared a skit. We had a church member who played guitar, and we had the lyrics on a screen for anyone who wanted to join in with the singing of contemporary songs. We had food ordered for everyone. We created a space on the floor toward the front for the children. There were a few items for the kids, and the Children's Director was present with the children throughout the service. We left an offering box in the back for anyone

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<sup>28</sup> See Appendix D.

who wanted to give. We also had a mission box as our church collected socks and other emergency essential items for the Taylor Police Department. They would hand them out to various "victims" they encountered or persons in need. Adults and children were able to move around as they pleased during the service. They could get additional food, drinks, etc., without interrupting the service. We wanted everyone to know that this was a new service and un-traditional gathering, and all were welcome to come in whatever attire they felt comfortable in. Our kick-off night was a success.

### COVID-19 Impact on Saturday Night Church

Once we launched Saturday Night Church in February, the pandemic hit us immediately in March. Thereby, we could not hold an in-person gathering in March as planned. We were disappointed, but our team decided that we could immediately make it digital. Our focus and target market would still be the same. The talk-show format could carry over without the live audience.

Not only did we take it digital, but we also decided to hold our gatherings weekly. At the time, we were recording our Sunday Worship on Wednesday evenings. Since our main planners of the Saturday Night Church were staff, we also recorded our Saturday Night Church on Wednesday evening. We set up the fellowship hall for our filming. Since the Saturday Night Church was going to be youth-led, we asked them to do skits from home whenever possible. They would then send them to me to include in our film editing. I could also film them at the church when our schedules permit. Our Saturday Night Church was getting the views we were hoping to receive.

## Tragedy

On May 16, 2020, we experienced a tragedy. One of our youth, Tyler Cobb, was tragically killed, along with another Taylor youth, Jace Gill, when their UTV flipped and landed on them. A third youth survived with injuries. The tragedy occurred when a group of parents and their teenage boys gathered for an outing at another church member's ranch. Tyler had been one of our faithful youth who was involved with the weekly skits. We canceled Saturday Night Church for the next couple of weeks. We held Tyler's memorial service at the high school football stadium to allow for social distancing. There were at least 600 in attendance, mainly high school students, teachers, and staff. In addition to Tyler's two brothers, also in high school, Tyler's mom, Shelli was the athletic director. The irony of this tragedy is that it happened on a Saturday night. When I received the call, I had just finished editing our Saturday Night Church and posted it to our Youtube channel and social media pages. For the evening, our topic was the post-resurrection story as told in John 14:15-21, a standard text at funerals. Tyler and his brothers performed our skit for the very last time.<sup>29</sup>

Shortly after the memorial service, we had to terminate our youth director for failing to meet his job requirements, particularly during this tragedy. The youth director, not knowing how to deal with a crisis was one thing. However, not being able to be present alongside me to minister to a family who still had two living youth, the church's

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<sup>29</sup> Saturday Night Church, FUMC Taylor, 5/16/2020 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9NKkt0GXbgg&list=PLY7b9qkIeK0cVDUaSguUE8VzdT55st0m7&index=8>

youth ministry, along with a community in crisis, were sufficient reasons to discern that someone was not called into this ministry and not ready for a leadership role.

It is fair to say that our Saturday Night Church has not recovered. Our church has not been the same. However, we are healing as we continue to move forward through this wilderness experience.

### A Mobile Saturday Night Church<sup>30</sup>

We continue to hold Saturday Night Church weekly whenever possible. We have tried inviting church members as guests. But our youth-led hopes for this new faith community has been paused for right now. We continued with a Talk-Show format, holding it in the fellowship hall most of the time. Due to family illness, I filmed our Saturday Night Church from my family's living room for several weeks over the summer of 2020.<sup>31</sup> The participation of my younger family members generated interest and views. In October and November, we held it outdoors at our annual Pumpkin Patch. This added some flavor and interest. Currently, we have taken Saturday Night Church on the Road meeting at both members' homes and in public spaces such as restaurants and parks.

### Traditional Sunday Worship 9 Weeks Snapshot

The impact of COVID-19 immediately changed the way we did worship. As the most technologically savvy person on board, I had to immediately figure out how to

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<sup>30</sup> See Appendix E and F.

<sup>31</sup> A few episodes of Saturday Night Church with my family in DFW. <https://youtu.be/laZjBupeAYA>

navigate the vast sea of the tech world. There were countless long hours of research, trial and error, and frustrations. The internet was not fast enough so sometimes it took five to seven hours, sometimes longer, to upload a worship service. We learned to shorten our worship service by eliminating some of the elements. Reducing the file size reduced the time it took to upload to YouTube and Facebook. Furthermore, we learned that shorter videos attracted a greater audience. We eventually switched to another internet carrier that provided a faster speed. In addition, as mentioned earlier, when we were able to gather for in-person worship, we spaced out the seating inside the sanctuary. We put signs on all the entryways saying that masks were required inside the building, and we also had hand sanitizers at all entryways.

#### Post - Survey *Questionnaire*<sup>32</sup>

Initially, we planned for a survey to capture individual stories. This survey was also intended to help us evaluate the success of simultaneously doing church in different spaces with a different populations. This proved to be more difficult than anticipated. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, our original plan to gather stories from participants was not feasible. The main reason was we could no longer meet in person. Without a face-to-face interaction, we lost a great deal of our Beer and Bible participants. Our in-person exposure in the community was reduced to zero. With the Saturday Night Church, we were only able to meet in person once, and that was at our kick-off night in February 2020, pre-COVID-19. The pandemic redirected our entire approach and ministry of

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<sup>32</sup> Appendix I.

Saturday Night Church to 100 percent digital. Thereby, only one questionnaire was sent out to all faith communities, including our traditional church members. Only 20 surveys were returned; however, based on the information provided and answered questions, most of the respondents, 68%, were current church members also attending our traditional Sunday worship. However, I was able to glean from their responses that the new faith communities were essential and that we needed to continue reaching out to people. When I asked what needed to improve with any three of the services, most did not comment on the NFC, except for one respondent who thought the Beer and Bible was too political, based on their one-time attendance. The other responders commented about music and how we need to include contemporary music and "modern" music in our traditional service. I thought these comments were interesting because one of the reasons for the Saturday Night Church was to offer an alternative worship style with contemporary music.

#### Context Advisory Committee, Peer Partner/Mentor, and Cohort

The members of my Context Advisory Committee have been very helpful throughout the process. Members of FUMC Taylor have been involved since the projects' inception, Beer and Bible and Saturday Night Church. They have been a part of the dreaming, planning, implementation and evaluation. Members of the community have equally contributed in a variety of ways. They have supported the project with their time, conversations, ideas, suggestions, and openness. They also have been a part of the evaluation.

Lastly, my peer partner/mentor, David Brawley has been a source of inspiration and strength. Brawley's project MAAFA<sup>33</sup> has encouraged me to tell my story, and my ancestors' story. Moreover, as Brawley asserts in his dissertation, it is not merely about re-telling stories; rather, it is "invoking memory to energize us through our current struggle."<sup>34</sup> Together with our fellow colleagues and partners in this DMIN cohort, James, Anita, Harold, Elaine, Brandon and Diane, our weekly Zoom gatherings and frequent texts, emails, and phone conversations at a critical time have been a source of support and encouragement. We created a digital third-space. Our talanoa have been resourceful and helped develop and shape this dissertation.

### Evaluation of the Project

Prior to hearing about two of the movements, Fresh Expressions and Table Church, our church launched Beer and Bible. The primary purpose of Beer and Bible was to be a church in the community. Sure, our church building was located in the community, but people perceived the church as a location and a building rather than being a part of the community and being a source of life. We described this New Faith Community as an ecumenical social justice happy hour to discuss current and relevant

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<sup>33</sup> MAAFA is described as the African Holocaust. According to David Brawley, MAAFA is a Kiswahili term coined by anthropologist and African Studies scholar Marimba Ani, meaning "great disaster."

<sup>34</sup> David Brawley, "Where Do We Go From Here? A Feasibility Study and Re-Orientation of Sacred Memory in a Community Church Context," (May 2020). Doctor of Ministry.

topics to people's lives. The secondary purpose of starting a New Faith Community was to reach a younger and unchurched population.

The addition of the second new faith community, Saturday Night Church, was also to reach more younger people and those who did not belong to any church. Since we moved away from the bar scene, we were no longer exposed to the younger crowd. In some ways, the Saturday Night Church can be viewed as a second attempt to reach young people since the first attempt to stay connected with a younger crowd did not reach as far and was not sustainable.

Our original intent with this project was partly to evaluate our new faith communities, Beer and Bible, and Saturday Night Church's effectiveness using Len Sweet's concept of MRI from his book *So Beautiful*. Sweet explains that M=Missional, R=Relational, and I=Incarnational.<sup>35</sup> The M also creates Missionaries, the R also creates Disciples, and the I creates World Changers. According to Sweet, these three things, which make up the DNA of a church are also the secrets of life, or as Jesus would put it, they are the Way, the Truth and the Life. When the church fully lives out its purpose and calling, the result is so beautiful.<sup>36</sup> It was the goal of this project to evaluate our existing new faith community of Beer and Bible and Saturday Night Church and to expand our MRI.

Again, the pandemic mostly wiped out our initial plans since our original audience was supposed to be in-person. But with our third-space thinking caps on, we

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<sup>35</sup> Leonard Sweet, *So Beautiful* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2009), 27-31.

<sup>36</sup> Leonard Sweet, *So Beautiful*, 31.

were able to ride a third wave in the digital world. Since this is a new wave we are riding out, we are not yet skilled with our MRI in the digital world. While the third wave can take us further, we are not yet sure of the direction we are heading, whether further into the deep or closer to land. I believe we are making progress with the digital tidal wave, for we are exploring other areas such as Tiktok, the most popular social-media app globally, with over a billion users. Its users are young, tech-savvy, and trendy. As we enter into this new market, with its savvy one-minute video limit, we realize that our investment of time cannot be immediately measured. However, we need to plant the seed anyway; others will water it, and we will leave the growth to God.<sup>37</sup>

Furthermore, contrary to the cultural understanding that a Christian or pastor needs to lead, Leonard Sweet argues in his book, *I Am A Follower*, that the correct strategy is not to lead but to follow. The church already has a leader, and that is Jesus. Moreover, to follow Jesus is not to imitate him, but to incarnate.<sup>38</sup> About this Sweet says, "To be an incarnation disciple of Christ is to make Christ's way your way, Christ's truth your truth, Christ's life your life."<sup>39</sup> This is what we are attempting to do with our New Faith Communities. By listening to Jesus' call, following him around town, reading the signs of our time, utilizing current tools such as technology, being open to news of being the church, and adapting with our culture and society. The questions that we repeatedly ask ourselves to ensure we are staying on task with the MRI are: Is our way Jesus' way?

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<sup>37</sup> 1 Corinthians 3:6-7.

<sup>38</sup> Leonard Sweet, *I Am A Follower: The Way, Truth, and Life of Following Jesus* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2012), 193.

<sup>39</sup> Sweet, *I Am A Follower*, 193.

Is our truth in unison with Jesus'? Does our life align with Christ? Our identity is found in Christ, and our prophetic voice and being in society aligns, not with the kingdom of Caesar, but with the kingdom of God.

### Feasibility and Sustainability

With our context advisory committee's assistance, we met via zoom to discuss worship attendance and the financial impact, both investments and expenses, of these new faith communities. We evaluated sustainability. We asked about the needs and costs of both staff and volunteers and marketing, food, music, and supplies. Our expenses were significantly reduced due to COVID-19. However, we utilized some of our Saturday Night Church grant money to purchase filming equipment and a mobile sound system to utilize in our in-person traditional Sunday worship when holding it outdoors.

Both of the new faith communities are sustainable long-term. However, as the main leader of our gatherings, I need to do a better job in leading others to take ownership and leadership roles of the NFC and carry it forward. Initially, with the Beer and Bible, the group would gather in person even if I was out of town or had other engagements. However, I am observing that with the digital gatherings during the pandemic, unless I initiate the gathering, it does not happen. This is partially attributed to my need to be in control, and laypersons not being technologically savvy. This is an area we will work to change. Looking ahead at a post-pandemic NFC, other followers of Jesus will need to lead the way.

Being aware that the church was slowly sinking at sea, the projects: Beer and Bible and Saturday Night Church emerged as lifelines to First United Methodist Church. However, as with any lifeline, the church must be willing to be saved and be willing to grab hold of the lifesaving effort. Since the first lifeline, Beer and Bible, did not reach as far and there was a communication breakdown, another lifeline, Saturday Night Church, was created and offered. Just then, a tidal wave, the pandemic, hurled in unexpectedly, and many feared its damage and disappeared with the high waves. However, fortunately, through the grace of God, there is still hope with the next wave. Perhaps the third-space church can reimagine itself in a post-pandemic world. Instead of viewing the COVID-19 pandemic as a problem and a life exterminator, we can re-look at it as an opportunity and the lifeline that the church has been looking for. This is not to ignore or dismiss a global pandemic and knowing that it has killed countless thousands; rather, this may be the only opportunity during our lifetime—as a church—to quickly think and act on this monster of a tidal wave. We can no longer return to the good old days. We can only move forward and follow to where Jesus is already waiting.

## CHAPTER FIVE

Spirit lead me where my trust is without borders  
Let me walk upon the waters  
Wherever You would call me  
Take me deeper than my feet could ever wander  
And my faith will be made stronger  
In the presence of my Savior<sup>1</sup>

### Spirit Lead

How might the church look if we genuinely allowed the Spirit to lead us without creating borders? Where might the church be today if we got out of the boat and walked, swam, paddled, rode, surfed on the waters towards Jesus? What might the church look like if instead of us trying to save ourselves, we trust in the Holy Spirit, we trust in Jesus to go into the deep and allow the moana, the waters of the ocean, to move us? We can ride and navigate the waves, as it is the waves' nature to roll, recede, rise and fall, but they are always moving. The church can also roll, recede, rise and fall, but always moves. Moreover, if we truly understand and accept our roles as stewards of God's creation, then we would be more responsible creatures on earth. We would realize that the power of the moana covering more than 70 percent of the earth's surface truly serves as the living and life-giving bridge to all.

### Looking Ahead

If we do not learn how to navigate the sea of change in our society, in the moana, we will not only sink but also drown and die. This is indeed the rationale behind the

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<sup>1</sup> Oceans by Hillsong, last stanza

project I undertook. I saw the need, the inertia within the church, and the opportunity that is presented.

As people die daily, so do churches. As babies are born daily, so are churches. If we do not desire a premature death or a death that could have been prevented, we need to read the signs of our time correctly and do something about it. Nevertheless, everything has a shelf life. Perhaps some things and ways of being the church need to die in order that new life may rise.

Indeed we can no longer be involved with our faith in observation-only; we need action. We can no longer consider ourselves Christians on Sunday mornings only; we also need to live and act out our faith the other six days. If we live an MRI life, mission-filled, relational-filled, and incarnational-filled life, we can live our divine purpose as a church and as followers of Jesus. We can individually and collectively live into our prophetic-fire divine calling.

The noise we encountered at the bars and restaurants was a sign. As with traditional worship, we are always seeking discernment as to how to interpret current meaning. Perhaps we needed a better plan. Nevertheless, life is about learning with and without noise. Furthermore, there is no better way to learn than to understand our own mistakes and failures. *Not trying* is not acceptable. Life is filled with risks, and I believe that the church needs more risk-takers, people not afraid to try and fail and try again.

We can either learn to present Jesus through the noise or somehow learn and make waves some other way. We need to stop multitasking and focus on only one thing at a

time. We need to stop contributing to the noise and being a "noisy gong and a clanging cymbal."<sup>2</sup>

Only then will we be able to renew our energy and spirits and live a more purpose-filled life. No doubt, we will become better gospel messengers. We will be more focused. Ruben Habito, a Catholic-Buddhist professor of Christianity and World Religion at Perkins and my former mentor and seminary advisor, always encouraged his students to be fully present. As a matter of fact, we would start each class session with five minutes of silent meditation/prayer. We were encouraged to focus on our breath and our breathing and to center ourselves. Likewise, Namsoon Kang, professor of Christianity and World Religion at Brite and my former mentor and seminary advisor, closed the door at the beginning of each class session. She would say something like, "You are here. Everything outside this door stays out there." I will admit it took me a while to understand what Kang was encouraging us to do. She wanted us to be fully present.

Indeed, we multitask even when we eat. We need to focus on the food we have in front of us, appreciate where it came from, and think of how it ended up at our table. We need to savor every bite of our food and not just gulp it down because we are in a rush to the next task or need to make an oral argument. In many ways, multi-tasking does not work as well since we are not giving our full attention to the task at hand whether that's a conversation, reading, eating, or driving. Things can wait. Enjoy and appreciate the moment. Be present. Be fully present. Give thanks to God. Praise God for every breath we take.

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<sup>2</sup> 1 Corinthians 13:1.

What would happen if the church focused on just one thing instead of trying to do everything? What if, instead of longing to return to the ways of a pre-COVID-19 church, we can imagine what we can do differently and what we can do better? Thom Rainer argues for a post-quarantine era that is less focused on buildings and more outwardly focused on the community:

Now we have a new opportunity before us. We have seen that the church can survive, even thrive, without the everyday use of buildings. And, though we certainly advocate the importance of gathering in person, we also see the opportunity in the post-quarantine era to use our facilities for greater and more efficient purposes.<sup>3</sup>

Since the pandemic has slowed the church down in many ways, it gives us an opportunity to rethink our ministries and the number of ways we are the church. We can truly focus less on the building and more on the people in the community. Of course, the church can survive and thrive without the building, just as it did in the early days. The building should only serve as a meeting space. The third-space faith communities are mobile and are always on a voyage.

### Shared Learning Experiences

No doubt, the church needs to seize our opportunity to reach the digital world and beyond during this quarantine season and post-quarantine future. On March 10, 2021,

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<sup>3</sup> Thom S. Rainer, *The Post-Quarantine Church* (Carol Stream, Illinois: Tyndale Momentum, 2020), 14.

Governor Abbott fully opened Texas at 100 percent.<sup>4</sup> To date, April 8, 2021, according to the CDC, over 556,106 people died from COVID-19 in the U.S. alone since the pandemic started.<sup>5</sup> However, 175 million vaccines has been administered. We need to read the signs of our time. Some of our shared learned experiences included the following:

1. Know your context and culture. The church must take time to learn the history of its mission field, what is happening in the present and the future outlook. We cannot assume we know the town if we are not out and about in the community.
2. Make sure you have enough people-support from the congregation. As Gary Simpson repeatedly emphasized to our DMIN cohort, ministry is not done in isolation, and it is not a solo endeavor. Simpson goes on to say, "This project is not to be done in a cubicle but in community."
3. Ensure that the lay support is not only mission-focused, but also grounded in the Christian faith and committed followers of Jesus.
4. Be prepared for resistance and criticism, especially when starting a "radical" ministry like Beer and Bible.
5. Be prepared to continue the mission even if everyone abandons you.
6. Be persistent, committed, and courageous.
7. Be willing to take risks. It is ok to try and fail. Nevertheless, always try to do something new.
8. Continue to motivate your people. When trying something new, it is important to be a cheerleader to the team, giving encouraging words and hope.
9. It is of extreme importance that the pastor and leaders stay encouraged and motivated. Whatever way you need to stay encouraged and motivated, do it.

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<sup>4</sup> Office of the Texas Governor, "*Governor Abbott Lifts Mask Mandate, Opens Texas 100 Percent*" Accessed April 8, 2021 <https://gov.texas.gov/news/post/governor-abbott-lifts-mask-mandate-opens-texas-100-percent>

<sup>5</sup> Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), "COVID Data Tracker," Accessed April 9, 2021 <https://covid.cdc.gov/covid-data-tracker/#datatracker-home>

Do not wait around for someone to motivate you; daily positive self-talk is critical.

10. There will be naysayers. Listen. Discern. Move on. Do not let negative talks persuade and discourage you if you genuinely feel that the Holy Spirit leads you to Go.
11. As pastor, you need to lead your flock to follow Jesus into the community. Unless a layperson is passionate about a particular mission area, the pastor will have to initiate the steps, purpose, focus, implementation, and follow-up.
12. We learned that we need to be flexible. Things do not always go as planned; therefore, leaders must be quick and willing to try new things and adapt to the environment.
13. We need to speak the language of the people.
14. We discovered that we are adaptable and resilient.
15. Most pastors will experience failures and disappointments in their ministry, sometimes one too many times. With each failure and disappointment are learning opportunities to do better next time.

This project could not have been possible without the church. Any ministry of the church cannot be a singular act. It is a group activity, always. The lyrics from this song summarizes it: "I am the church. You are the church. We are the church together."<sup>6</sup> Often, churches work with a silo mentality and rarely acknowledge that God has already been at work. No doubt, this is the approach that the church has mistakenly taken. May we drop this mentality and expand our way of being as navigators on a mission, contributing to the rising sea, but powered by the wind of the Holy Spirit.

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<sup>6</sup> Richard K. Avery and Donald S. Marsh, "We Are the Church," 1972, *The United Methodist Hymnal* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1989), 558.

If we were asked if these two New Faith Communities: Beer and Bible and Saturday Night Church, were a success at this point, I believe it would be the wrong question. The right question is one of semiotics, and that is, did we read the signs of the time correctly? Did we act on it? My response is yes, we are reading the signs of the time, and yes, we are doing something about it. However, are we reading it correctly and acting accordingly? Are we doing enough? Is our analysis of the terroir accurate? How do we measure our impact? These are questions whose answers are yet to be determined. We can affirm that the tides changed tremendously during the pandemic; thereby, our approach adjusted, reoriented, and adapted.

Taylor, whose outward appearance is a tan, black-haired, middle-aged Texas small-town with a touch of 70s hippies and millennium pizazz, is anything blended on the inside. It does not need a representation on the inside; it needs action, especially with those who hold power to influence. Whether they are leaning right or leaning left, there needs to be a mesh of faithful risk-takers willing to go into the streets and incarnate Christ. This is what it means to be prophetic individually and collectively as a church and community. We have tried and continue to try to incarnate Christ through our third-space New Faith Communities.

I have learned that being prophetic is not always oral; it can also be through actions. I have learned that when it is not oral coming from the pulpit, action is required. Prophetic non-action is an oxymoron and is not an option. Being prophetic does not always come from the pulpit; it also takes place on the streets, at city council meetings, at schools, on the playgrounds, at the bar, in restaurants, in coffee shops, in conversations,

in living rooms, in community, and always with people. Through this voyage, I have learned that I am resilient, persistent, and focused. However, I am also flexible, considerate, adaptable, and always open to learning.

### Implications

In the larger context, this work implies that pastors need to know who they are and their strengths and weaknesses. While one's pastoral identity may have already been defined, a third-space identity will continue to be stretched, challenged, negotiated, refined, expanded, and always becoming. A homogenous and historical identity is displaced and replaced with an identity of hybridity. In a third-space community, cultural knowledge is continuously revealed, integrated, and open.

It is—and without doubt, many churches are—divinely appointed. The question becomes, will those churches rise and accept the appointment? Unlike the UMC appointment system, where the Bishop appoints pastors to churches, the church or clergy can request a change if the appointment does not work out. At this present age, churches are located in a particular community for a purpose. It is a divine appointment that cannot be switched out; it must be lived out in the community. Its lifespan is dependent on how well it lives into its appointment. To be a follower of Jesus, we must be able to point and lead others to a new life in Christ. It is a matter of word and deed, of what we say and do. It should be an organic part of our identity as followers of Jesus. This coronavirus pandemic is an opportunity and sign for all churches. We cannot go back to doing church the way we have always done it. We must decide if we want to continue following Jesus

because there is no turning back, "I have decided to follow Jesus, no turning back, no turning back."<sup>7</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Kalia



Image drawn by Talafungani Finau with specific moana symbols for this project. Talafungani is my niece who currently lives with her family in Aotearoa (New Zealand).

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<sup>7</sup> "I Have Decided to Follow Jesus," Anonymous, *The Faith We Sing*, Pew Edition, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000), 2129.

It is at this space, third space and place, a *tā* and *vā* (time and space), where we truly discover who we are, what we are capable of, and the strength of our faith. In a church, regardless of its size and meeting space and place, whether in-person or virtual, whether in a house, park, bar, cathedral, or at The Table—Jesus must be the host and the Holy Spirit must be the wind who creates the waves and directs the voyage.

The path ahead may seem impossible, fearful, and uncertain, as it was for the first century Christians. Nonetheless, they adapted because they had a message to share; they had good news about a resurrected Savior named Jesus. They knew the path would be difficult, with small and big waves to overcome. They may have been uncertain where the tides would take them, but they trusted in the One who rules the hurling seas. They trusted in the One who gave them the mission to begin with, and told them to "Go." Jesus said, "I'll be with you as you do this, day after day after day, right up to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:19-20 The Message).

Likewise, when our Pasifika people, thousands of years ago, set out to explore the moana, the voyage was filled with uncertainty. Yet, on a *kalia* with the community, they trusted the signs of the skies, its interconnection and relation to nature, mind, and society. They were determined to find new life. They embraced the raging moana and learned its power and its ability to be the bridge to life on new land.

With the COVID-19 pandemic, we do not know how long it will last and the full impact on the church and society. Thereby, we must continue to navigate the sea, learn of its strength and its ability to deliver and bridge us to the next new life. There is yet to be a conclusion to this voyage, and *talanoa* (conversation). In a third-space, it is always an

open dialogue because we are always on a voyage. In between *tā* and *vā* (time and space) is a moving canoe ready to explore. Wherever the moving space, third-space, present space, the past serves as a guide to the future. As the moana is already filled with life and helps sustain it, the present moving space is also filled with life. The moana is a life bridge, connecting people, land, and new life. As a follower of Jesus, he is the master moana navigator and bridge. Jesus is the connecting point from the past, future, and present life, whether at sea, land, earth, or in the heavens.

For each chapter of this paper, I had at least one soundtrack. Chapter One— my talanoa (story) was told through two hymns, “‘Eiki Koe ‘Ofa ‘A ‘Au” and “Blessed Assurance.” Chapter Two and Three — I used Wesley’s hymn “A Charge to Keep I Have,” a traditional hymn, to talanoa (tell) about the context of my current charge and culture. Chapter Four and Five—I used the contemporary song “Ocean” to talanoa (speak) about creating third-space faith communities. The genre and metaphors of the song also contextualizes the present culture and points to the future.

Indeed, I invite others to become a part of the *talanoa* (conversation) to voyage and to search and create their own third-space faith communities. Everyone is invited to intentionally become moana navigators, search for new life, and to realize everything is interconnected and woven together. Join with your own canoes, or there is plenty of space on this *kalia*.

The voyage continues

## Community Moana Navigators



### Appendix A

#### Beer and Bible Timeline

January - June, 2018 Discussions and discernments about a new faith community with lay committees of the church

June 2018 Committee discussion and approval of bar ministry.

Location is chosen.

The name Beer and Bible was chosen.

Grant application submitted to the conference.

Funding received, \$10,000.

July - August 2018 Weekly Meetings with Beer and Bible core team.

Divided responsibilities.

Worked on the logo.

August 2018 Received marketing and promotional items including t-shirts and 2-sided coasters (one side showed Beer & Bible, and the other side showed Texas Beer Company).

Implementation of the project, kickoff month.

November 2018 — Held Beer and Bible at Curbside Coffee and on the Sidewalk

December 2018 — Location changed to Taylor Station Bar

January - March 2019 — Location changed to 4th Street Grind Coffee & Deli

April - June 2019 — Location changed to Squirt's Burgers and Wings

July - August 2019 — Location changed to Lucky Duck Cafe

September 2019 — Location changed to Luigi's Italian Restaurant

October 2019 — March 2020 Location changed to Texas Bay Seafood and Steak Restaurant

October 2019 - Development of prospectus and recruitment of the Context Advisory Committee

December 2019 - Submission of prospectus

March - November 2020 — Pandemic Impact. Primarily Zoom gatherings and occasionally in-person.

I took nine weeks sample for evaluation.

April 2020 — Meeting with Context Advisory Committee.

November 2020 — Met with Context Advisory Committee.

December 2020 — Submission of Dissertation

## Appendix B

### Nine-Week Snapshot Of Beer And Bible

Below is the nine weeks snapshot of Beer and Bible. I selected both In-person and Digital because both formats will likely carry forward post-pandemic. A hybrid approach of doing church and being the church will be the way forward for post-pandemic faith communities.

#### Beer and Bible In-Person and Digital<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> In the Attendance/Views column of the table, little a = attendance, little v = views. If a gathering does not show a v, it means that it was not posted to social media.

Date	Format	Conversati on Leader	Topic	Scripture	Attendan ce/Views
Week 1 3/12/20	In-person	Gary	Paul in Rom	Acts	22 a
Week 2 3/19/20	Zoom	Sela	Do Not Worry	Matthew 6:25-34	12 a
Week 3 6/4/20	Zoom/FB	Anne	Race & Culture	Acts 10:34-35	35 v 7 a
Week 4 9/3/20	Zoom/FB	Maureen	Race & Culture	1 Corinthia ns 12:13	45 v 8 a
Week 5 9/10/20	ZOOM/ Youtube	Bunnie	Race & Culture	2 John 1:12	39 v 9 a
Week 6 9/17/20	Zoom/ Youtube	Brian	Race & Culture	Acts	20 v 8 a
Week 7 9/24/20	Zoom/ Youtube	Sela	Race & Culture	Acts	14v 8 a
Week 8 10/1/20	In- person/ Youtube	Sela	Race & Culture (2yr anniversary)	Acts	43 v 14 a
Week 9 11/5/20	In- person/ Youtube	Sela	Anxiety	Philippian s 4:6	50 v 11 a

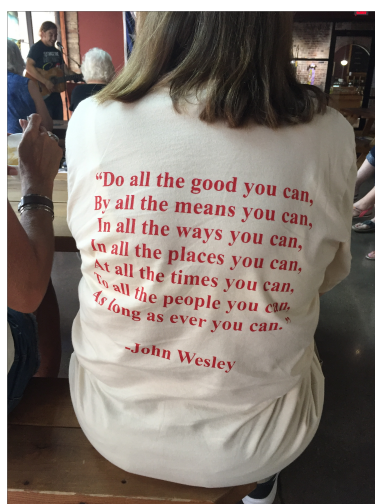
## Appendix C Beer and Bible on the Road

### Central Texas Annual Conference of the UMC



“Do all the good you can...”

### Promotional T-shirts

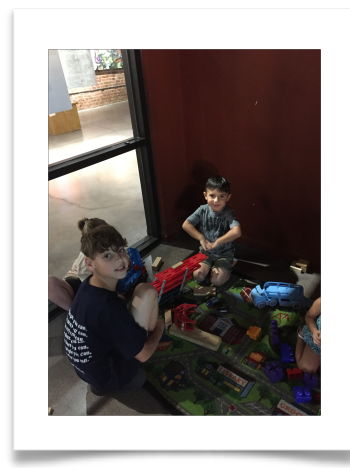


## Location One: Texas Beer Company



Promoting our relationship with the business owner—a coaster with our Beer & Bible logo on one side, the Texas Beer Co. logo on the other side.

## Children's Space



## In-Between Third-Space Locations, Two & Three: Sidewalk and Coffee Shop

### Curbside Coffee—next door to Texas Beer Company



On the Sidewalk outside of Texas Beer Company. Our logo was also drawn on the sidewalk by a local artist.

There were more of us than the space could accommodate. We borrowed chairs from next door and some were seated outside of the coffee shop on sidewalk.



#### Location Four: Taylor Station Bar



#### Location Five: Fourth Street Grind Coffee & Deli



#### Celebrating International Women's Day!



### Location Six: Squirt's Burgers and Wings

Rev. Bunnie Stark leading our conversation.



### Location Seven: Lucky Duck Cafe

#### The Table

#### Serving Communion



Location Eight: Luigi's Italian Restaurant

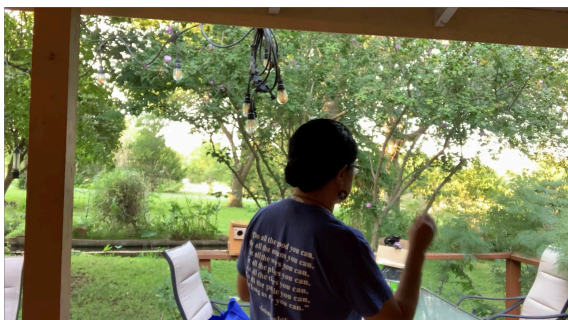


Location Nine: Texas Bay Seafood and Steak Restaurant

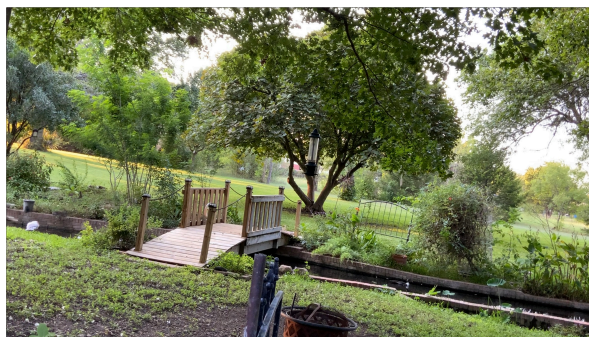


Locations Ten & Eleven (COVID-19 Pandemic Spaces): Socially distanced and with masks: Zoom and the Gray's Backyard

Gray's Backyard



Gray's Backyard



Monthly Mission—Wellness Kits for the Homeless



Invitations to Restaurant Patrons



## Appendix D

### Saturday Night Church Timeline

January 2020 Discussion and discernment regarding a second New Faith Community

February 2020

- Decision made on a new faith community
- Target market defined
- Name and location are chosen.
- Grant application submission.
- Grant received in the amount of \$10,000.
- NFC Saturday Night Church launched an in-person gathering
- Context Advisory Context recruitment
- Submission of revised project proposal to include a second new faith community

March 2020

- The impact of the pandemic forced us to go digital 100%. All services are posted to the church's Youtube channel and Facebook.<sup>9</sup>
- Decision made that for each of the services, we would include a skit led by the youth.
- Weekly topics would be on the lectionary gospel.

March - May 16, 2020—Weekly Digital Saturday Night Church Talk-Show format

June - August—Continued with weekly digital Saturday Night Church

November 2020

CAC included some of the Beer and Bible CAC members and staff.

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<sup>9</sup> First United Methodist Church, Taylor, Texas [https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCLUxjW\\_\\_ydoi2ApirFrQ72A](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCLUxjW__ydoi2ApirFrQ72A)

## Appendix E

Below is a table of the Nine-Week snapshot of our Saturday Night Church.

Saturday Night Church Timeline      Format (Digital Only)

Date	Hosts	Guests/ Special Music	Skit	Topic	Scripture	Views
Week 1 3/28/20	Sela, Tiffany, Matt, Julia	Clayton, Conner, Tyler Music: Ron	Clayton, Conner, Tyler	Do The Right Thing	2 Samuel - Story of David and Nathan	120
Week 2 6/27/20	Sela & family	Sela's family	Sela's family	Prayer/ Lament	Psalms 13	90
Week 3 7/11/20	Sela, Tiffany	Sela's family	Sela's family	Sower & Seeds	Matthew 13:1-23	72
Week 4 7/18/20	Sela, Tiffany	Jacob, Frank, Jr. (Sela's nephew)	Sela, Tiffany	Wheat & Weed	Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43	48
Week 5 7/25/20	Sela, Tiffany	Sela's nephews	Sela, Tiffany	Mustard Seed & Yeast	Matthew 13:31-33	57
Week 6 8/1/20	Sela, Tiffany	Brian, Beth, Jim	Sela, Tiffany, Brian	Fish & Bread	Matthew 14:13-21	68
Week 7 8/8/20	Sela, Tiffany	Brian, Beth, Marsha, Gary, Anne, Sandra, Shirley	Sela, Tiffany, Brian	Convo on Faith	Matthew 14:22-33	58
Week 8 8/15/20	Sela, Tiffany	Brian, Brenda	Kacie, Marsha, Tiffany, Sela	Heart & Faith	Matthew 15:10-28	63
Week 9 9/5/20	Sela, Tiffany	--	Sela, Tiffany	Conflict & Resolution	Matthew 18:15-20	50

## Appendix F — Saturday Night Church

### First and Only In-Person Gathering Pre-Pandemic

Youth Led



Children's Space



### During Pandemic Digital Gathering Only

Church Talk-Show Setup



Youth Acting



## Appendix G

## Saturday Night Church with Family During Quarantine



## Appendix H

## Saturday Night Church On the Road

## Masfajitas— Mexican Restaurant



## Murphy Park



## Saturday Night Church in Members' Homes

Galnor's



Barr's



Church Playground



Beckermann's



## Appendix I

## Traditional Sunday Morning Worship, First United Methodist Church, Taylor, Texas

## Traditional Church Building



## Church Outside Pre-COVID



## FUMC Traditional Sanctuary



## Church Outside During Pandemic



## With Masks and Social Distance

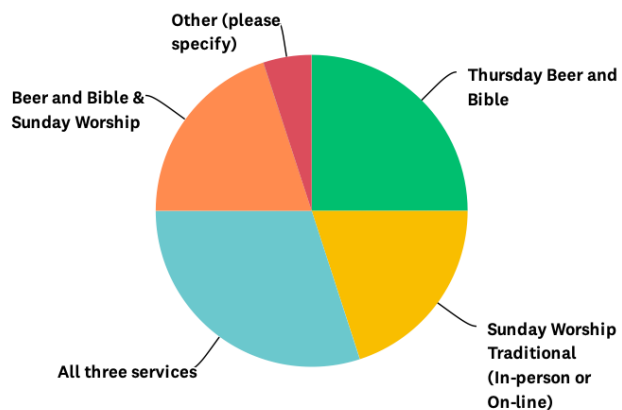


## Appendix J

### Post Questionnaire Survey

## Q1 Which service(s) do you attend?

Answered: 20 Skipped: 0

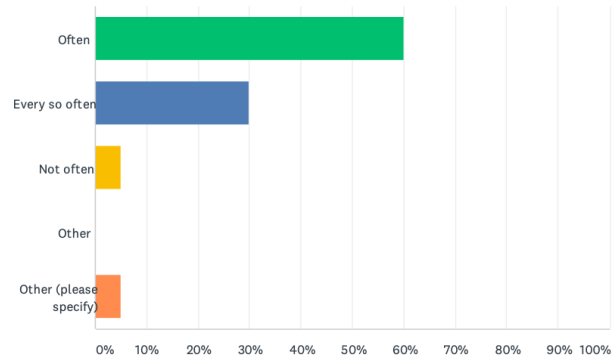


ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Thursday Beer and Bible	25.00%	5
Saturday Night Church (Digital only)	0.00%	0
Sunday Worship Traditional (In-person or On-line)	20.00%	4
All three services	30.00%	6
Beer and Bible & Sunday Worship	20.00%	4
Saturday Night Church & Sunday Worship	0.00%	0
Saturday Night Church & Beer and Bible	0.00%	0
Other	0.00%	0
Other (please specify)	5.00%	1
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>20</b>

New Faith Communities: Beer and Bible and Saturday Night Church @ First United Methodist Church, Taylor, Texas.

## Q2 How often do you attend?

Answered: 20 Skipped: 0

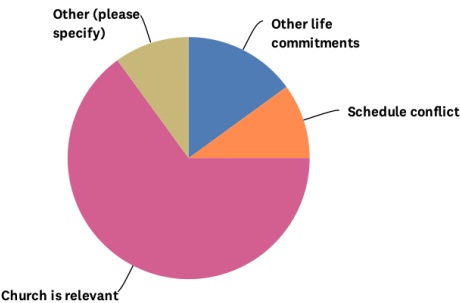


ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Often	60.00%	12
Every so often	30.00%	6
Not often	5.00%	1
Other	0.00%	0
Other (please specify)	5.00%	1
TOTAL		20

New Faith Communities: Beer and Bible and Saturday Night Church @ First United Methodist Church, Taylor, Texas.

Q3 Why do you attend often, every so often, or not often?

Answered: 20 Skipped: 0

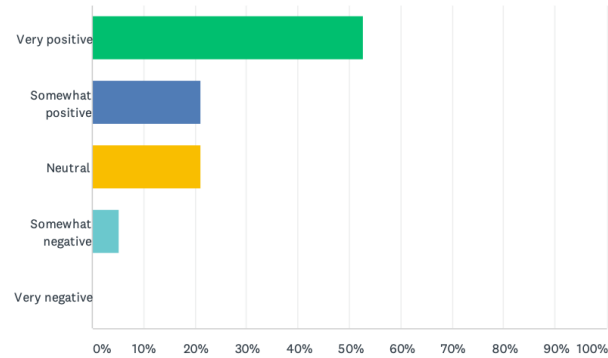


ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Church not relevant	0.00%	0
Other life commitments	15.00%	3
My life is too busy	0.00%	0
Attending elsewhere	0.00%	0
Schedule conflict	10.00%	2
Church not a priority	0.00%	0
Church is relevant	65.00%	13
Other (please specify)	10.00%	2
TOTAL		20

New Faith Communities: Beer and Bible and Saturday Night Church @ First United Methodist Church, Taylor, Texas.

Q4 What was your first reaction to the new services, Beer and Bible (2yrs old) and/or Saturday Night Church (10 months old)?

Answered: 19 Skipped: 1

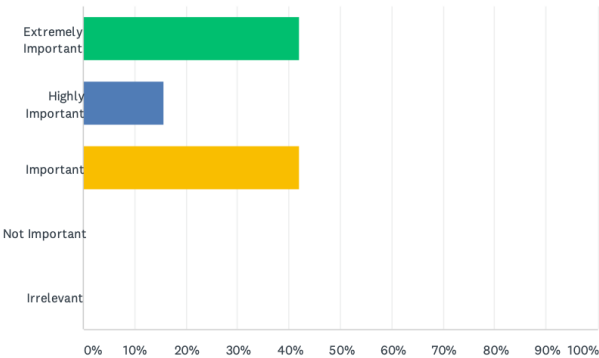


ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Very positive	52.63%	10
Somewhat positive	21.05%	4
Neutral	21.05%	4
Somewhat negative	5.26%	1
Very negative	0.00%	0
TOTAL		19

New Faith Communities: Beer and Bible and Saturday Night Church @ First United Methodist Church, Taylor, Texas.

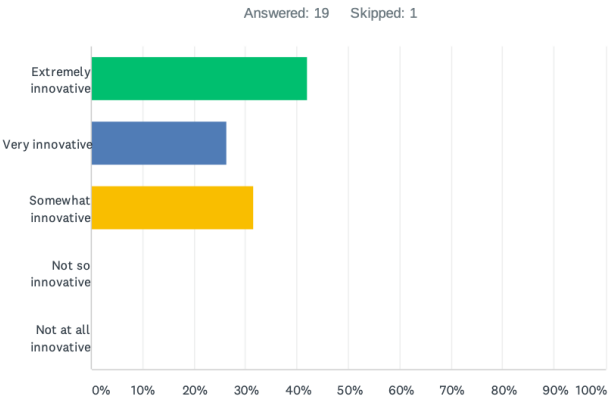
Q5 How would you rate the importance of the new services?

Answered: 19 Skipped: 1



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Extremely Important	42.11%	8
Highly Important	15.79%	3
Important	42.11%	8
Not Important	0.00%	0
Irrelevant	0.00%	0
TOTAL		19

Q6 How innovative is the new services?

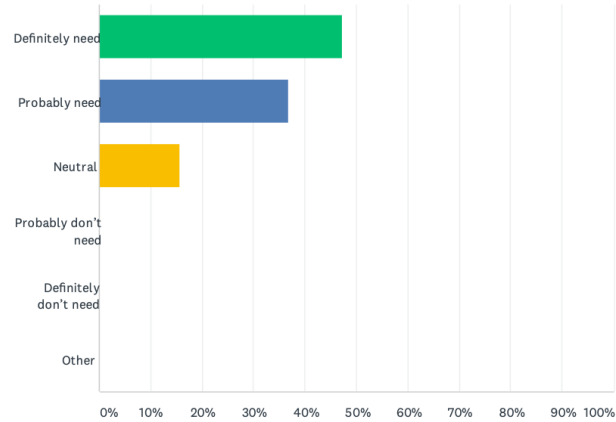


ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Extremely innovative	42.11%	8
Very innovative	26.32%	5
Somewhat innovative	31.58%	6
Not so innovative	0.00%	0
Not at all innovative	0.00%	0
TOTAL		19

New Faith Communities: Beer and Bible and Saturday Night Church @ First United Methodist Church, Taylor, Texas.

Q7 When you think about the new services, Beer and Bible and Saturday Night Church, do you think of it as something you or others need or don't need?

Answered: 19 Skipped: 1

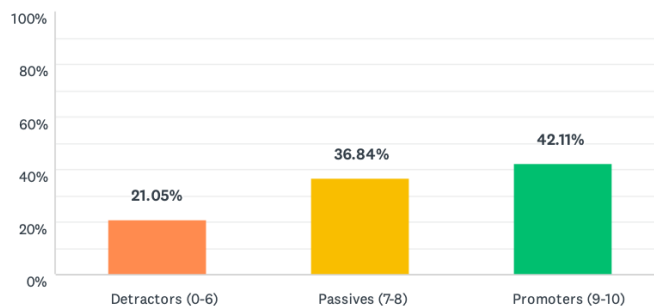


ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Definitely need	47.37%	9
Probably need	36.84%	7
Neutral	15.79%	3
Probably don't need	0.00%	0
Definitely don't need	0.00%	0
Other	0.00%	0
TOTAL		19

New Faith Communities: Beer and Bible and Saturday Night Church @ First United Methodist Church, Taylor, Texas.

### Q9 How likely is it that you would recommend our new services to a friend or colleague?

Answered: 19 Skipped: 1



DETRACTORS (0-6)	PASSIVES (7-8)	PROMOTERS (9-10)	NET PROMOTER® SCORE
21.05%	36.84%	42.11%	21
4	7	8	

Q10 In your own words, what are the things that you like most about these new faith communities: Beer and Bible and Saturday Night Church? How about Traditional Church?

Answers: 15 Skipped: 5

1. Options
2. Beer and Bible is needed.
3. Good
4. Creativity
5. Fellowship and meet other people
6. Beer and Bible spreads our Christian values and I'm not likely to randomly socialize with a lot of the people I've met at Beer and Bible. I also like our traditional service because of the sermon, hymns and other music.
7. Beer and Bible was a community outreach...before covid. Saturday Night Church sounds like a relaxing night...before covid.
8. Open and friendly
9. B'nB important bridge to community. Sat services offered Bible lessons; traditional church remains essential whether in person or online.
10. We have not attended but we certainly recommend all of the wonderful resources of our church to any one we meet. The traditional service meets our needs at this time because we love our faith family and the wonderful traditions we have grown to be apart of. It is nice to have options and if we are going to grow to have to meet everyone's needs
11. Fellowship and an opportunity to grow in Christ
12. B&B- I love hearing other's perspectives on social justice issues. Traditional church- it is my family.
13. I am not sure what you mean by new services. I watch the Sunday service either late Sunday or Monday. Haven't been able to coordinate meal prep with Beer & Bible.
14. Includes folks who don't or can't come on Sundays
15. Beer and Bible especially in this season allows me to attend without having to leave home.

Q11 In your own words, what things do we need to improve in these two new faith communities: Beer and Bible and Saturday Night Church, or Traditional?

Answers 15 Skipped 5

1. Like them all online
2. Continue doing it.
3. Keep it up
4. Not sure
5. Continue trying to reach out to people.
6. Beer and Bible needs the Covid pandemic to go away. Traditional - We need more exposure in the community, but I need to think about that.
7. In person meetings for beer and bible and Saturday night church. Traditional - try to recruit more children
8. More modern music
9. B'nB- find way to include & appeal to new people across community. Sat. Nite services no comment as have seen only 3. Traditional-under the oaks terrific anytime weather permits- let's continue. Live streaming is not a deal breaker for us; You Tube is still fine after edits. If could find way to have choir offer Pre-recorded music for online service or via sound system outside would be a treat
10. The traditional service needs to have more variety in music ( maybe more modern) hymns to attract younger parishioners.
11. Not sure how it is now, but at the first Beer and Bible, which is the only I attended, it was very political. I did not like that.
12. Get people to participate.

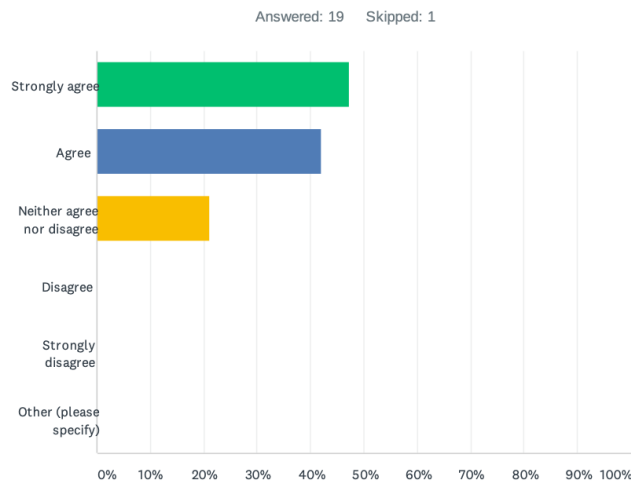
Q12 If you used to attend, why did you stop attending? What needs to change for you to attend again?

Answers 13 Skipped 7

1. Attending
2. Currently attending
3. N/a
4. I attend often.
5. N/a
6. Need to have this current Covid situation to calm down before I feel comfortable inside again. I already spend all day with students in an enclosed space.
7. Covid. Attend virtually
8. Work
9. N/A
10. NA
11. Covid under control.
12. No covid
13. Schedule conflict with my Church meetings occasionally.

New Faith Communities: Beer and Bible and Saturday Night Church @ First United Methodist Church, Taylor, Texas.

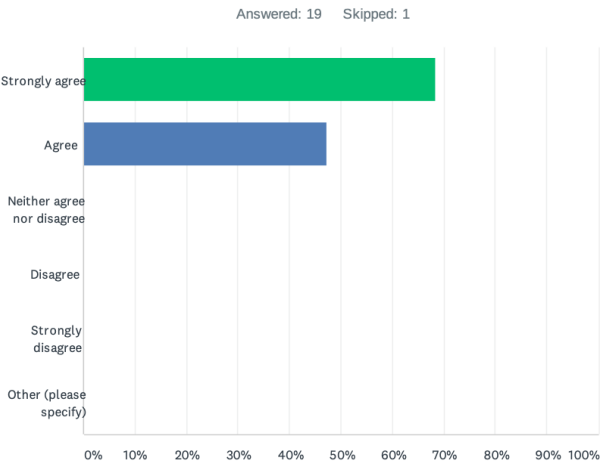
**Q13** As the US population grew younger, research showed that this population became less Christian. The study also showed these eyeopening facts about the Christian faith generation gaps and who claimed to be a follower of Jesus: Silent Generation (born 1928-45) at 84%, Baby Boomers (1946-64) at 76%, Generation X (1965-80) at 67%, and Millennials (1981-96) at 49%. These percentages carried over in representation with church attendance but on a greater sliding scale. How do you feel about this study?



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Strongly agree	47.37%	9
Agree	42.11%	8
Neither agree nor disagree	21.05%	4
Disagree	0.00%	0
Strongly disagree	0.00%	0
Other (please specify)	0.00%	0
Total Respondents: 19		

New Faith Communities: Beer and Bible and Saturday Night Church @ First United Methodist Church, Taylor, Texas.

Q15 Do you think that the church has a role to reach people?



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Strongly agree	68.42%	13
Agree	47.37%	9
Neither agree nor disagree	0.00%	0
Disagree	0.00%	0
Strongly disagree	0.00%	0
Other (please specify)	0.00%	0
Total Respondents: 19		

Q16 If you agree that the church needs to reach more people, who might that be? And, how do you think we need to reach them?

Answered:16 Skipped: 4

1. People who are lost and need help.
2. All
3. Young families
4. Youth
5. Neighbors
6. All people who don't go to church
7. Young people. Need more contemporary music.
8. The beer and Bible idea of taking the church to the people will expose Christianity to more of the non church going population in my opinion.
9. Young families, offer family fun nights or more activities for the youth
10. Those who feel left out or marginalized
11. Have already seen serving food plays role in attracting attendees; many new age churches have totally different music styles, live musicians, separate services for diff formats & attendees.
12. Continue outreach programs as Covid allows
13. Younger population. Appeal to the demographic with more contemporary services.
14. Selfishness of time seems to be the primary issue. Many people I have heard from claim they don't have enough time off so they do not want to give the day up.
15. I don't know how we can reach people
16. Continue to use technology to reach the unchurched.

Q17 What do you think the following statement means from Matthew 28:19 “Go, therefore, and make disciples....”?

Answers:14 Skipped: 6

1. Share the gospel.
2. Make disciples
3. Go and love all
4. Go make friends
5. Church to get out more
6. Share Jesus
7. It doesn't say have the people come to me. We go to them.
8. Spread the word
9. Doesn't mean it always happens inside the building
10. Call to action, command to all people claiming to follow Christ; speaking of Jesus to any people, any age, anytime, anyplace.
11. Reach out to people that you perceive are lacking in faith.
12. Take the word of God to the people so that they may know Him and follow Him.
13. Evangelism.
14. There is still work to be done

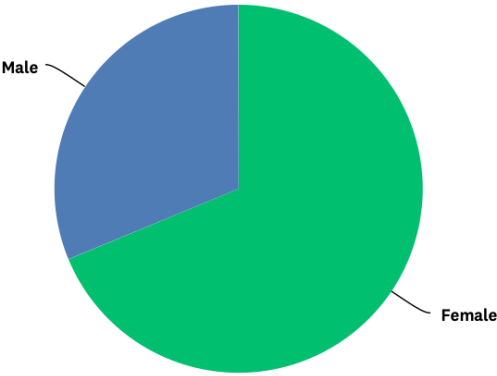
Q18 Do you have any other comments, questions, or concerns?

Answers 11 Skipped 9

1. Not right now
2. Nah
3. Nope
4. No
5. The Covid vaccine can't get here quick enough.
6. No
7. Is this survey for your dissertation?
8. I do not think this survey is gathering any accurate information because of its wording.
9. No
10. No
11. Not at this time

Q19 What is your gender?

Answered: 16 Skipped: 4

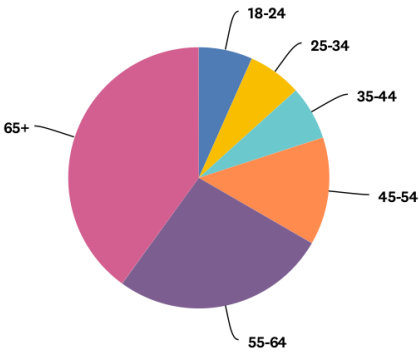


ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Female	68.75%	11
Male	31.25%	5
TOTAL		16

New Faith Communities: Beer and Bible and Saturday Night Church @ First United Methodist Church, Taylor, Texas.

Q20 What is your age?

Answered: 15 Skipped: 5



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Under 18	0.00%	0
18-24	6.67%	1
25-34	6.67%	1
35-44	6.67%	1
45-54	13.33%	2
55-64	26.67%	4
65+	40.00%	6
TOTAL		15

## Appendix K

### Peer Partner/Mentor

David Brawley, Senior Pastor of St. Paul Community Baptist Church, Brooklyn, NY.  
 “Where Do We Go From Here? A Feasibility Study and Re-Orientation of Sacred Memory in a Community Church Context”

### Context Advisory Committee

Rev. Kathleen Amboree, AA

Kathleen Eason Amboree is pastor of The Imperfect Church in Taylor Texas. She was born on leap year February 29 1960. Kathleen graduated from Taylor High School in 1978. She married and traveled to Republic of Panama, Anchorage Alaska, and Anniston Alabama. Kathleen attended college and received an associate degree from Temple Jr College. She worked for Taylor ISD as a paraprofessional in 1990-1995. She is a mother of three children all grown and grandmother of five. Kathleen answered her call to ministry in 1983, and she has been preaching, teaching, and pastoring ever since. She loves fishing on land and sea. In other words, the fish in the water and the human souls on the land. She is thankful to The Living God for allowing her to meet and greet Pastor Sela of the The United Methodist Church in Taylor, Texas, where Kathleen resides with her husband David Amboree. Kathleen is thankful for the Beer and Bible Fellowship that her entire family is a part of. She can be reached at 512-468-9544 , her email is [kathleen.eason@sbcglobal.net](mailto:kathleen.eason@sbcglobal.net)

Anne Barr, BA, MS

Anne was born and raised in Austin, Texas. She grew up in an active Methodist household that included two older sisters. Her father was an integral part of establishing at least three new Methodist churches in Austin. Anne was active in the church, participating in Sunday school, MYF, WSCS, and singing in the choir.

Anne graduated from Stephen F. Austin High School and then went on to earn an MS in Mechanical Engineering from the University of Texas at Austin. She worked toward her degree for almost twenty years, while still helping support her family and raising three daughters. Her professional career included design and manufacturing engineering and included aerospace, oil-field-related and electronic-chip manufacturing equipment. Both in college and then during her career, she learned and practiced the process for problem solving. During her career she was selected to work on proposal teams as well as to lead the teams.

Anne retired in 2003. She then gave more time to her passion of gardening and joined the Master Gardener Program of Texas A&M Extension Office. She maintained an

active membership for ten years during which time she served on the board except for one year.

Upon moving to Taylor in 2018, she became active in the Taylor Garden Club and Taylor First United Methodist Church (FUMC). Since joining FUMC, she has lead a team to create a church directory, served on the Evangelism Board, worked on fund raisers, supported Beer and Bible, and shared her passion for gardening by helping maintain the church landscaping.

**Marsha Beckermann, BA-Psychology, BS, Bio-Chemistry**

Marsha is a lifelong active methodist in Texas. She retired from the University of Texas in Austin. She and her husband, Raymond, reared their sons at FUMC Taylor, and their families remain methodists. Following her parents' example, Marsha has been active on every committee, UMW and projects since 1982. Marsha is currently Lay Leader and delegate to the Annual Conference. "Rev Finau is one of the best "shepherds" we have ever had. I am proud to support her in seeking a Doctorate of Ministry."

**Tiffany Charles, AA**

Tiffany Charles began her journey at First United Methodist Church in August, 2016, when she joined the Mother's Day Out team at the church as a toddler teacher. The next year, Tiffany became the director of the MDO program. She began teaching Sunday school at FUMC, and year later, became the Director of Children's Ministries. Tiffany joined in serving Saturday Night Church, assisting with the children and providing activities during the early Saturday-evening services. When the Saturday services went virtual due to the COVID-19 pandemic, she joined as a panel guest with other church staff. Tiffany was born and raised in the Taylor community and was Baptized, confirmed, and attended elementary school at the Evangelical Lutheran Church of St. Paul's in Taylor. Tiffany now lives in nearby Coupland with her husband and three children and appreciates the similarities between her Evangelical Lutheran upbringing with the United Methodist faith. Having regularly visited Baptist churches for many years of her life as well, she feels that her experiences with this more contemporary style of worship is also helpful with her contributions to the target audience of younger families for the Saturday Night Church outreach ministry.

**Maureen Gray, BA, MA**

Maureen was born into a traditional Roman Catholic family, but converted to Methodism in 1993. The most significant difference between the two faiths was the congregation's involvement in the operation of the Methodist church. Going to Mass was obligatory, rather than joyful, and Methodism's universal acceptance at the Lord's table was transcending. In addition, the Methodist Church's teaching that God loves us despite our flaws drew Maureen to this faith. After moving to Taylor, TX in 2000, she and her husband, Brian, and three children became active at First United Methodist Church of Taylor. Maureen taught youth Sunday School for several years, served as administrative council chairwoman, served on SPRC, trustees, and currently chairs FUMC Taylor's

Pumpkin Patch. She and Brian also sing in the church choir. Overall, Maureen's service has been rather conservative. She prefers evangelizing by example rather than overt conversion. Beer & Bible created an intriguing way to reach out to the community. To gather in an open forum with others of all faiths, ethnicities, and socioeconomic backgrounds was a way to expand God's love to all. Maureen has participated in Beer & Bible since it began and plans to continue as long as possible.

Brian Gray, BS

Brian is a life long Methodist. He is 61 years old, and has been a member of Taylor United Methodist Church since 2001. Brian has served as the Chairperson of Administrative Council and on various committees multiple times. "Churches have been losing members throughout the country for years, and need fresh, new ideas to bring people to the teachings of Jesus Christ. The Beer and Bible meeting on Thursdays have brought people together I would not normally meet in my daily life. Ideas of this type bring church to the people rather than trying to get people to come to the building. I support Sela's effort in this and others like it."

Rev. Bunnie Stark, BA, MATS

Reverend Bunnie L. Stark acknowledged her call to ministry in 1995 and currently serves as pastor to Allen Chapel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Taylor, Texas. She was employed by the Federal Government for 31 years and retired with honor on August 1, 2002. She received the Albert Gallatin award for meritorious service. She holds a Bachelor of Arts in Christian Ministry in May, 2003 from Austin Graduate School of Theology. During her undergraduate studies, Reverend Bunnie earned the distinction of being listed as an All-American Scholar. She received her Master of Arts in Theological Studies from Austin Graduate School of Theology in December 2004. She currently serves on the Board of Examiners for the Southwest Texas Conference in the Tenth Episcopal District of the AME Church. She also serves on the Advisory Board for the Conley-Guerrero Senior Activity Center in Austin, Texas. She is the wife of Eugene Stark and they have been married for forty-nine years.

Rev. Travis Summerlin, PhD

Travis Summerlin is the pastor of the Tenth Street United Methodist Church in Taylor, Texas and the Thrall United Methodist Church. He is an elder in the Central Texas Conference of the United Methodist Church and serves as the registrar of the South District Council on Ministry in that conference. A native of Waco, Texas, he is a graduate of Baylor University from which he holds the B.A.(1976) and the Ph.D. (1984) in Religion with an emphasis in historical studies. He also holds the M.Div.(1979) from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth. He has 45 years of pastoral experience, having served pastorates in Satin, Texas and Jones Prairie, Texas while a student at Baylor. Since becoming a member of the Central Texas Conference, he has served as chaplain of the Methodist Children's Home in Waco(1987-1994), as pastor of

First United Methodist Church of Cross Plains, TX(1994-1996), Oakdale UMC, Stephenville, TX(1996-2001), Everman UMC, Fort Worth(2001-2003), FUMC, Mart, TX(2003-2006) and Tenth Street UMC, Taylor, TX and Thrall UMC since 2006. He also served as a lecturer on the religion faculty of Baylor University (1984-1987) and as an adjunct faculty member at Tarleton State University in Stephenville, teaching New Testament Studies(1996-2001).

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# Appendix L: W.C. Martin UMC, Annetta UMC, Bethel UMC

## Martin Tongan Ladies



## Martin Tongan Youth



## Family singing at Annetta



## Martin New Year's Eve Preachers



## Bethel UMC



## Annetta UMC



## Appendix M: Famili

Mom: Lile Meleane Finau

Dad: Tevita Vaiola Finau

