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Renewing Communities: Renewal of the Church's Missional Identity

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RENEWING COMMUNITIES:
RENEWAL OF THE CHURCH'S MISSIONAL IDENTITY

by

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CHAPTER 1
YOUNG LIFE LOST

August 2013, just two weeks into my current ministry position, a thirteen-year-old girl in our community committed suicide. Brooke¹ was bursting at the seams with energy, charismatic, and loved, but deeply troubled by the abandonment of her mother, as well as her own addictions. Her funeral filled the sanctuary with people whose lives she had touched. Her Big Sister² spoke of the love and energy that easily flowed from Brooke, and her family's relationship with her. I remember thinking that Brooke must have lived her life to show the love and concern for others she was lacking in her own life. On top of the distress from such a young life lost, there were so many kids at the funeral that we had never seen before, a large unseen portion of our community that is missed when we just focus on those that come to us and the worlds they inhabit. Of course we tried to connect with them and extended an invitation, even asked for help from them in organizing a memorial event for Brooke, but in reality, we knew this would not happen. It left me feeling unsettled. As it stirred in me, one evening God sent one of Brooke's friends to me. Emily³ walked through the doors clearly distressed. Fairly new to the community she and Brooke had bonded over their shared life experience of abandonment

¹ Named changed for privacy.

² Big Sister through Big Brother Big Sister youth organization.

³ Named changed for privacy.

by their mothers. Emily was angry that their group of friends had seemed to move on, forgotten about Brooke and had continued to live their lives in the same destructive manner that had led to Brooke's suicide. She was angry with them and angry with God. The stirring in me continued over the unseen portion of our community and now began to bubble up in me in the form of questions of how we were going to reach these kids? What can we do? Over the months and years that followed kids continued to stop and spend time sitting around the memorial paver that was purchased in Brooke's memory, but they never came into the building and scattered if we walked out to greet them. I had also become very aware of the amount of kids that flowed through the church parking lot and property as a pass through on the way to another destination. Now boiling over, I was compelled to dive into this and do something about it, and God placed on my heart a vision of a community building on the very property that so many just pass through.

Laying the Foundation

Knowing that I would get nowhere fast if I just approached this with all heart and nothing to stand behind me I began research in the community. Not only did I create a snapshot of the community itself, but I also tried to determine the needs of the youth in the community by surveying families, interviewing school district staff, county human services staff, mental health professionals and other community leaders. Through this research I discovered that the Big Lake community had experienced a rapid population boom growing sixty-seven and a half percent between the 2000 and 2010 census, and with the estimated 2015 population numbers the growth has not slowed down. The community is rich in young families with children under the age of 18 in over fifty percent of the households, a number well above the national average of thirty-three and

half percent. While the community survey of families gave what turned out to be a somewhat privileged perspective, they were in agreement with focus groups that while the community's programs and services were appropriate for the community, they did not address all areas of need. They also agreed that what was available was underutilized due to barriers that prevented access to programs and services.⁴

Follow up research was conducted to not only determine if indeed there were identifiable barriers and how it was felt they could be overcome. This research not only confirmed the finding that many felt the programs and services available were underutilized, but it also identified where there were barriers. Not only did participant's responses and their explanations highlight a lack of effective communication, sense of community, relationships and collaboration to work towards the common good, but those responses pointed to the same areas as to what they felt was needed to overcome the barriers. Participants expressed both frustration and uncertainty as to how to effectively communicate and build community in a digital landscape that changes faster than they can keep up with and seems to spread criticism and negativity at a rapid rate.⁵

Renewal

So where do we go from here? Can we renew our communities in an age such as this, one in which people are connected like never before, yet disconnected? What role could the church have in the renewal of communities? Could renewing missional identities in our churches also renew our communities to work toward the common good?

⁴ For a summary of these research findings see appendix A.

⁵ For a summary of these research finding see appendix B.

CHAPTER 2

WHAT HAS HAPPENED TO OUR COMMUNITIES?

In *Bowling Alone*, Robert Putnam explores the social change in America over the last several decades, specifically social capital and the well-being of individuals and communities.⁶ Putnam examines what he calls the “silent withdrawal” from both community engagement and informal social connections or relationships, collectively known as social capital, and how it may have affected our propensity to work for the common good.⁷ Social capital has been found to promote the well-being of individuals and communities by allowing citizens to resolve collective problems easier, widen awareness of the ways in which their lives are linked and serve as conduits for the flow of information. When social capital is lacking in communities it magnifies problems and makes it difficult for communities to mobilize and achieve goals. Simply put, social capital makes an enormous difference in all our lives.⁸

What Has Changed?

Although the tendency is to name the changing family structures and surge of online or digital networks for the deterioration of communities, they are only pieces of the puzzle. To get a wider view we must first zoom out and examine trends in

⁶ Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2000).

⁷ *Ibid.*, 115.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 288-289, 315.

community engagement and social capital before moving on to the possible causes of the trends and why social capital plays such a large role in the health of communities.

While Americans are still more engaged in their communities than citizens in many other countries, and the Internet making it possible to connect with others like never before, we are disconnected in many ways. Even though we tripled the number of volunteer associations in the last three decades, they have fewer members, and those that do have a large membership generally have less face-to-face interaction, acting as a façade of formal affiliation.⁹

Political participation has done no better with the frequency of nearly every form of community political participation declining. Petition signing, campaign involvement and running for office, dropped nearly fifty percent and voter turnout dropped twenty-five percent.¹⁰

While there is debate over religious participation data due to the lack of consistency of what, and how data is reported, by examining time dairies between 1965 and 1995 it was evident that religious participation fell nearly fifty percent.¹¹ This is significant because a church is first and foremost the people, and more than half of the volunteering and philanthropy is religious in character; supporting a wide range of community engagement well beyond conventional worship and is associated with greater

⁹ Ibid., 49, 183.

¹⁰ To chart political participation trends Putnam analyzed Roper survey's from Cornell University. Ibid., 41.

¹¹ Putnam analyzes research by Stanley Presser and Linda Stinson found in the *American Sociological Review* 63 (February 1998) and a paper presented by Sandra L. Hofferth and Jack Sandburg at a meeting for the American Sociological Association in 1999.

attention to the needs of others.¹² Religious organizations are one of the single most important sources of social capital and a crucial dimension of community. However, in the last several decades' religious organizations have tended to have an inward focus on their community building activity, focusing on reaffirmation of their religious and lifestyle boundaries within the culture and individual piety rather than outward engagement with the community.¹³ Religious organizations serve to promote social capital directly by providing social support to its members and the community, and indirectly as an incubator for civic skills, community norms, community interest and recruitment. Additionally, religious organizations have deeper informal social connections that spill over into greater secular involvement.¹⁴

In the workplace, although ninety-two percent of executives say they encourage employees to become involved in the community, in 1999 only twelve percent of volunteers participating in a national survey say someone in the workplace recruited them.¹⁵ This is perhaps due to the structural changes we have seen in the American workplace in the last few decades that focused on short-term financial returns, improved technology and management techniques. Due to the competitive global marketplace many employers began outsourcing, downsizing, restructuring, and adding short-term

¹² These conclusions are drawn by Putnam's research and analysis of DDM Needham Lifestyle surveys, National Election Studies and measures of civic engagement in the Roper Social and Political trends survey's. Ibid., 66-67.

¹³ Drawing on research by Wade Clark Roof in *Americas Voluntary Establishment: Mainline Religion in Transition*, Putnam concluded that individually and congregationally church-goers are more likely to engage in activities within their own religious community rather than the broader community. Ibid., 77.

¹⁴ Ibid., 66.

¹⁵ Ibid., 88.

consultant or independent contractor job classifications, all serving to inhibit workplace social ties due to increased anxiety about job stability.¹⁶

Informal social connections, or leisure activities such as having friends over for dinner or cards, chatting with neighbors, neighborhood barbeques, bowling leagues and family dinners have all been on a downward trend in the last few decades as well.

Overall, Putnam states that

“we spend less time in conversation over meals, we exchange visits less often, we engage less often in leisure activities that encourage casual social interaction, we spend more time watching (admittedly, some of it in the presence of others) and less time doing. We know our neighbors less well, and we see old friends less often.”¹⁷

However, even as we have seen above the general decline in community engagement and social capital, volunteering saw an upward trend in the 1990's. While this seems like a move in a positive direction there are two important pieces to this trend that can add additional insight. First, a bubble of a generation of Americans that were born between 1910 and 1940 that historically were more engaged in community affairs than their successors and predecessors not only reached retirement age, but benefited from improvements in health care and finances which meant they were living longer and more active lives.¹⁸ At the same time, the so-called millennial generation showed higher levels of volunteerism without parallel when compared to their immediate predecessors.¹⁹ Another important piece of this is that by the year 2000 the type of activities we

¹⁶ Ibid., 90.

¹⁷ Ibid., 115.

¹⁸ Ibid., 132.

¹⁹ Ibid., 133.

volunteered for shifted from “community projects”, to volunteering as a personal service, or more “one-to-one” volunteering. This millennial generation is an entrepreneurial generation that seeks meaningful work and opts to build or support organizations that are more responsive to fulfilling needs in direct ways and feel as though they are connecting to something bigger than themselves.²⁰

Since social capital is about connectedness and relationships, it is also important to look at what lies at the very heart of relationships. At the heart of all relationships is honesty, trust, and mutual care and concern, as they are what help us navigate the inevitable frictions we encounter in community life. Once again we see a decline in all areas, even when the inevitable comparisons to the “good old days” are factored out by comparing responses to standard questions such as, “generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted, or you can’t be too careful when dealing with people?” questions pollsters have been asking Americans for decades.²¹ While opinion surveys and other measurable indicators of this decline, such as crime rates and the massive expansion of the legal profession to not only handle legal matters, but matters to protect oneself from potential litigation when trust is no longer enough; lived experiences can provide us with other indicators of this decline.²² When honesty, trust, and mutual care and concern break down the social fabric of our lives and communities fray, road rage and admonishing our children not to talk to strangers are just two examples of what we have probably all experienced.

²⁰ David Bornstein, *How To Change The World: Social Entrepreneurs and the Power of New Ideas* (New York: Oxford university Press, 2007), 9, 212.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 137.

²² *Ibid.*, 147.

Possible Causes

So what has caused all these downward trends in social capital and community engagement? It is not uncommon to hear opinions that point to changing family structures, whether it be single parent households, shared custody, or dual income homes. Electronics and social media serving as replacements for real face-to-face interactions, the mobility, ability, and frequency of people moving in and out of communities as well as changes from generation to generation are also frequently named as a culprits for this decline. But just how much of a factor do these play in the downward trends?

While there is no denying the changes we have seen to traditional family structures and the impact it has had on our culture, particularly in regards to pressures it puts on families for their time and money, researchers have found that it plays a very small role in the decline of community engagement, perhaps as small as ten percent.²³ Examining time diaries they contrasted those that feel least harried, with those that feel most harried and found that while those most harried spent less time engaging in other activities, including sleeping, they showed no less participation in organizational activity.²⁴ Likewise, declines in social capital and community involvement do not appear to show disparity between the affluent and those under economic distress.²⁵ While the number of women entering the workforce in the past several decades is significant, and no doubt has changed family structures and impacted the amount of free time for women

²³ Ibid., 283.

²⁴ Conclusion of Putnam's work that examined demographic data and their correlation with DDB Needham Life Style Survey Data. Ibid., 192.

²⁵ Based on the authors analysis of general Social Survey, DDM Needham Life Style archives and the Roper Social and Political Trends archives he makes this generalization. Ibid., 194.

who historically bore a disproportionate amount of the responsibility for organizing social and community activities, it still only appears to be a small portion of the puzzle.

Our mobility, sprawl and suburbanization have had an effect on community engagement for a couple reasons. First, more time spent in the car commuting means less time in the community with friends and neighbors, and less time to attend community meetings or participate in community projects, in short, less time in community life. Second, it has been associated with increased social segregation and has been linked to decreased community involvement.²⁶ However, like changes in traditional family structures this is thought to play only a small part in the decline of social capital and community engagement, also thought to be as little as ten percent.²⁷

Prevalence of electronics and social media is an area often cited for much of our culture's problems, and was no doubt one of the most powerful social trends we saw at the close of the twentieth century that continues today. But it is also an area that needs much more exploration. While research has identified that television viewing has served to privatize our leisure time substantially, the effects of mass communication, particularly social media networks, are not as clear. Although the internet makes possible the enormity of our reach, broadens the scale to share and contribute to collective efforts and increases the particularity of the ties we form, online connections do not appear to actually increase the number of those we feel close to, only the number of loose connections and acquaintances.²⁸ The power of these networks to quickly connect and

²⁶ Ibid., 214.

²⁷ Ibid., 283.

²⁸ Nicholas A. Christakis and James H. Fowler, *Connected: The Surprising Power of Our Social Networks and How They Shape Our Lives* (New York: Hachette Book Group, 2009), 275-276.

share information and the vastness of the reach is remarkable. Often social media networks are used to not only spread information, but also to get instant affirmation or feedback. These networks provide opportunities to become a part of something larger than ourselves and can magnify whatever they are seeded by, and are a powerful tool that can be used in positive and negative ways to spread information and misinformation.²⁹ When social networks are organized around people that consider the others more than just acquaintances, they have actually been found to enhance face-to-face communication. But when they are not and there is not already a relationship in which a high value is placed on trust, social behavior can easily break down and result in behavior that would not happen in most face-to-face situations. While this area still needs further research it is estimated to account for perhaps twenty-five percent of the decline in social capital and community engagement.³⁰

The largest contributor to the decline in social capital and community engagement, felt to account for nearly fifty percent of the decline, is the generational succession and the passing of a generation that was deeply engaged and embedded in their communities being replaced by less active children and grandchildren. While the so-called millennial generation did show a promising increase in volunteerism compared to their immediate predecessors, it was on a more personal one-to-one basis as opposed to community projects. Although generational succession is considered a crucial factor in the decline of church participation, political matters (including voting and campaigning), association membership, social trust and other areas associated with informal social

²⁹ Ibid., 31.

³⁰ Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, 283.

connections are the result of changing individual habits. Still other forms such as club meeting attendance, family dinners and visits with friends and neighbors are the result of a combination of the two.³¹ Political scientists measuring generational changes that tracked the value put on patriotism, money and self fulfillment found a societal shift from community focus to individual and material values when comparing those born before 1934 with three succeeding generations.³² Data collected from 1965-1998 supports this conclusion finding that the number of college freshman citing being well off financially as essential, or very important, increasing from about forty-five percent in 1965 to nearly seventy-five percent in 1998. Other various forms of community engagement dropped from a high of nearly sixty percent to under thirty percent, with the lowest being fewer than twenty percent during the same time period.³³

Why Does Social Capital Matter?

Why does social capital matter in our communities, can it be renewed and what role could a church play in the renewal? As stated earlier, social capital has been found to have salutary effects on both individuals and communities and impact collective efficacy to solve collective issues. Within social capital there are two further distinctions to be made, bridging and bonding social capital. Bonding social capital acts as a glue that holds people together and is rather narrow and specific. Bonding social capital is important for supporting specific reciprocity, exclusive identities, and solidarity that creates strong in-

³¹ Ibid., 265.

³² Here Putnam drew on political scientist ,Wendy Rahns work and analysis that included a 1998 Wall Street Journal/NBC News poll. Ibid., 273.

³³ Here again Putnam draws on Rahn's research as well as U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics and UCLA surveys to reach these conclusions. Ibid., 260.

group loyalty, and often strong out-group antagonism such as country clubs, fraternal organizations, and at times as we saw above, churches.³⁴ While bonding social capital is good for the individual to navigate life, bridging social capital is crucial for progress.³⁵ Bridging social capital has broader connections and identities and is more inclusive. Examples are community activities, team sports and ecumenical groups that serve as the grease to help communities navigate issues smoothly. While bridging social capital is the hardest to create, it is essential for communities to work towards the common good; and although it is complex, bridging and bonding social capital are both needed for greater community cohesion.

Although we have been focusing on the decline of social capital, it does not mean that we have seen a steady decline in social capital and community engagement throughout American history. Instead there have been ups and downs, collapse and renewal.³⁶ As we saw above religious communities are the single most important source of social capital both directly and indirectly. But because they have also seen a decline in participation over the last several decades, they have turned increasingly inward for their own survival and well being, resulting in the salutary effect of social capital also declining. However, history shows that religion has played a major role by creating social capital in every period of community revival in America.³⁷ So what does this

³⁴ Ibid., 22-23.

³⁵ Mark S. Granovetter, "The Strength of Weak Ties", *American Journal of Sociology* 78 (1973)1360-1380.

³⁶ Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, 25.

³⁷ Putnam notes three periods of what he terms "awaking's", 1730-1760, 1800-1830, and again in the late nineteenth century, Ibid. 409.

mean for us today? Could renewing a true missional identity in our churches also renew our community?

CHAPTER 3

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE A MISSIONAL CHURCH?

Missional Past

Missional is a word that has received a lot of attention in the past couple decades. Specifically, becoming a missional church. There is no denying that many churches today are struggling to break free of traditional models of Christendom that focused inward and functioned more as a social club with programs and events designed to serve the needs of the members within the walls of the church. To access those privileges you needed to be part of the church. The local church maintained a position in the community that focused on hierarchy, power, was defined by the functions of the church and more or less dictated the shape of the neighborhood. In many ways the church itself was seen as the place where God's reign, truth and righteousness were embodied, and mission was church-centered, not God-centered. This created strong bonding social capital, but did not promote bridging capital. In these models mission was merely a function of the church with a come to us attitude, or as a good work that could be checked off a list, turning people into mere objects. The typical and traditional patterns that developed in Christendom were sustained by churches putting emphasis on growth in numbers and membership, not Christ and trust in the Spirit working through them. These patterns can no longer sustain the church, and as mentioned above the generations to sustain them are passing away and the generations succeeding them are not filling the void, we are in the midst of a disruption.

Mission in the Nature of the Church

In the midst of this disruption the Spirit is calling us to be the authentic church that is not afraid to step out of the walls of the church and bring light to all the hurting places in our world. To engage and invest in God's people, not something that has been totally lost, but something that must be renewed. Mission must be recognized in the very nature of the church and our participation in the Triune God's story of redemption for all of creation.

The missionary character of God was first expressed in creation when "God formed the world in which the crowning touch, human beings, became participants in creation's full development."³⁸ After the fall, God's missionary character is again expressed in the work of redemption with the sending of His Son into the world to restore a right relationship.³⁹ Then, through Jesus we were gifted with the Spirit, God's presence in the world, to act as our guide as sent and gifted disciples. Called not to be our own blessings, but for the sake of all. Just as God poured out His love for us by sending Jesus and the Spirit into the world, God gathers and sends us as the body of Christ into the world to participate in His redemptive mission as we wait for what is yet to come.⁴⁰

"The church in each place is to be the sign, instrument and foretaste of the reign of God present in Christ for that place; a sign, planted in the midst of the present realities of the place but pointing beyond them to the future which God has promised; an instrument available for God's use in the doing of His will for that

³⁸ Craig Van Gelder, *The Essence of the Church: A Community Created by the Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), 30-31.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁴⁰ Craig Van Gelder and Dwight J. Zscheile, *The Missional Church in Perspective: Mapping Trends and Shaping the Conversation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 27.

place; a foretaste-manifesting and enjoying already in the midst of the messianic tribulations, a genuine foretaste of the peace and joy of God's reign."⁴¹

Designed to live in community we are drawn together by the Spirit forming a vast mosaic of people. Which like each unique member of the Trinity itself, we are each uniquely gifted, never diminishing the other and using our gifts together as the body of Christ to participate in God's mission. A beautiful mosaic of shared relationships in the created world, and a life of mutual personal responsibility and care, a community that works toward the common good.⁴² The church's missional identity can only be found through attentiveness to the Spirit's activity in us, through us and around us as we share life with those in the community and is embodied in the relationships with our neighbor.⁴³ Our mission and ministry is found and flows from the genuine engagement with our neighbor, and the organization of the church should be designed to support that ministry.⁴⁴

Challenges

To renew a missional identity is to seek to become contextual, but engaging in this identity forming activity does not mean that a church must leave behind its historic traditions of Christian faith. In fact, a healthy tension between change and continuity is ideal because if a church focuses too much on what has been, and not enough on the contextual realities, or vice versa, the church can either over, or under contextualize its

⁴¹ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2007), 97.

⁴² Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 69.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 150.

⁴⁴ Craig Van Gelder, *The Essence of the Church: A Community Created by the Spirit*, 37.

identity, loosing either their confessional identity or their missional identity.⁴⁵ Holding these identities in a healthy tension and reading both through the lens of the gospel can provide fresh insights that complement each other.

Living in a consumer driven culture that emphasizes competition and individuals, being present and engaged in a meaningful life rich in relationships in a way that engages the community, is responsive to changing needs and builds social capital is a challenge. Recapturing a missional identity in the church requires a presence in the community of people we are called into relationship with, not comfortably sitting in the walls of the church and assuming that we know what they need. When the church has a presence in the community, relationships with mutual care and concern for each other are built. Through the relationships with our neighbors, the church and ourselves are also transformed as we encounter Christ in each other.

However, I argue that as important as the relationships with individuals in our communities are ecumenical collaborations with other churches. Instead of viewing them as competition, we should recognize that they too have a unique calling and their own unique stories in which God's is active and we should collaborate to form a larger body of Christ working towards the common good.

This is a holistic and deeply relational approach to ministry that should be fluid and part of everything we do. This is an approach that weaves together the neighborhood's unique stories, cultures, hopes and desires, the Spirit's activity and lived out faith to engage in God's mission in our communities as the Spirit's attentive servants

⁴⁵ Craig Van Gelder, *The Ministry of the Missional Church: A Community Led by the Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2007), 54-55.

and as witnesses to all those we encounter.⁴⁶ Renewing an authentic missional identity that is true to the Triune God's mission for creation, the body of Christ becomes deeply rooted and woven into the fabric of the community, not just part of the community. As we saw above the church has played an important role in reviving communities in the past and is an important source of social capital for communities directly and indirectly. By renewing their missional identity a church moves beyond the walls of the church in which they have already created strong bonding social capital, into the community creating bridging social capital which is crucial for communities to work towards the common good.

⁴⁶ Leslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 61.

CHAPTER 4

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

This is a dense area to enter with many layers of practices that will take time and patience to cultivate. Practices that knit people together as the body of Christ and build a life together by cultivating social capital through common habits, attitudes and actions. In the book *The New Parish*, the authors focus on a concept that is based on the focus of the church on the parish (community) they are in, their local neighborhood, not the local church.⁴⁷ This concept focuses in directly on social capital by defining their community as all the relationships where the local church lives out its faith together, a shift that is needed to renew missional identity.

Practices

Specific practices are identified by the authors to work towards this missional model, *presencing*, *rooting*, *linking* and *leading*. *Presencing* in the new parish requires genuine deep listening and discernment of the Spirit's activity. Being present and engaged in the shared life in your neighborhood, caring for each other and forming meaningful relationships, shaping a unique body of Christ. The practice of *rooting* is continuing to listen, discern and act, becoming a part of the neighborhood. Collaborating with others is described as *linking* with other unique bodies of Christ and groups in the

⁴⁷ Paul Sparks, Tim Sorens and Dwight J. Friesen, *The New Parish: How Neighborhood Churches are Transforming Mission, Discipleship and Community* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2014).

community, participating in God's mission and addressing the needs of the community as a larger body of Christ.⁴⁸ *Leading* in a way that allows for multiple leading styles, gifts, skills and character qualities God is longing for us to discover. Dismissing the old definitions of leadership that can put leaders in boxes is another important practice that must be engaged. In addition to these practices cultivating a new culture of discipleship within the church, grown alongside the old culture in which the confessional identity is not diminished, but moves forward and recognizes the value of each generation, their experience and gifts is important.

Movement Towards New Practices

The practice of presencing can already be seen in this context through the deep listening and research that has been done and will continue to be done through rooting. Some movement toward linking has already been done. First with the formation of an ecumenical youth group several years ago that adults have begun to follow the example and collaborate for adult ministry. While these ecumenical partnerships are going well, the undercurrent of the culture of competition still lingers and they would benefit from rooting activity as I will discuss below. Partnerships were formed for the building of the larger community ministry project to help meet the needs of the youth in this community through previous research.⁴⁹ Through these collaborations and research this project will continue to move forward as we renew the community and trust in the Spirit's guidance. Other potential community partnerships are currently being developed that were

⁴⁸ While the authors use linking as a way to collaborate with other communities to address needs and responsibilities outside their community, in the context of this research the term linking will refer to collaboration with other churches and groups within the local community.

⁴⁹ For a summary of these research finding see appendix B.

identified through this research and those relationships will continue to deepen and be explored to discern how we can work together to renew this community. Leading and growing a new culture of the church for which this research is being conducted is an ongoing process, one in which a new vision and mission statement were born. Leadership is learning how to lean into the vision, cultivate a culture of discipleship and keeping God and how we are called to participate in His mission fluid in this place central. However, because these will certainly take time to develop I will focus on the practice of rooting so that suggestions as to how the church can play a role in addressing some of the needs of the community in the present, build social capital and begin to renew our community can be put forth.

Present Practical Focus

Rooting in this community is an important piece of renewing not only a missional identity, but also building bridging social capital that is crucial for the renewal of the community. By acting on what has been gleaned from deep and continued listening in the community, using, and building on the social capital ties that were nurtured to participate in the life of the community; there are some simple things that can be done now to not only continue to discern the missional identity of this body of Christ, but root in this community.

Existing Practices

Adapting existing ministry practices of the church that already involve a presence in the community to be more intentional and attentive in interactions with the neighbor and deepening the transformational relationships; would not only help cultivate a new culture, but reveal the visions, dreams, passions and gifts of the neighbor as well as the

barriers to those being realized. Research identified others in the community as potential partners that also desire to see the community renewed some of which have already proven to be fruitful creating opportunities to be part of the community. Two new collaborations with the community have been formed that will not only help to root and know our neighbors, but to be present and active in the community, giving them eyes to see, and ears to hear not only how God has called the church to participate in His mission, but how God is already at work in this community. The ecumenical partnerships that already exist would greatly benefit from engagement in these opportunities and rooting in the community to be able to move beyond fellowship and worship collaborations. To further work towards collaborations that are rooted and responsive to the neighbor and let go of the culture of competition that hinders them.

Fresh, Fluid Approach

In The Community

What if we invited, listened and invested in the millennial generation and their innovative spirit and desire to make a difference? What if the church showed them we want to join them in making a difference? Bringing together the energetic millennial spirit with the wisdom of experience of older generations is important, perhaps of even greater importance to this community that is rich in young families. Hosting a think tank community event in which community leaders, advocates, school administration, local program and service representatives, civic groups, business owners and the general community are brought together with the goal to better our community; one in which specific concerns and topics are discussed as well as an openness to others being brought forth could be beneficial. Held in a community park could bring together the young

families and all generations connecting people, concerns and ideas. It would also serve to connect the various organizations leaders and drive up awareness of what is already available in the community. It would be important to host this at one of the community parks or green areas located in the area of our community that many of the unseen in our community reside and can easily access, serving to raise awareness of this segment of our community as well. Critical would be to have follow up meetings arranged for shortly after the event to keep the energy going, pairing those with passion, energy and desire with those with resources and connections to make it happen. This approach would help to build social capital between generations by creating opportunities to build relationships.

With the Schools

There is an opportunity for the church to build social capital and help renew the community with the local school district. The school recently joined a program called Creating Entrepreneurial Opportunities in which the classroom is not located in a school facility, but rather in local businesses. Students learn from exposure in the real-world provided by business leaders acting as mentors in the community. This program is available to all students and they are given the opportunity to start real businesses and learn from their successes and failures as a mentor comes along side them. The church could work on networking business leaders within the church to act as mentors to students interested in their particular line of work. Again, creating opportunities for building relationships.

With Local Groups

The church also has a relationships with several local Boy Scout groups that meet in their building. These scouts are eager to help with projects at the church and they could be asked to participate in creating some simple recreational options on the property that so many youth pass through. Things such as basketball hoop on the edge of the parking lot and the open space, as well as other ideas that the scouts themselves would be included in deciding.

Using Social Media

To address the negativity often found on social media the church could launch into posting daily snapshots of not only the extraordinary people and things going on in the community, but the ordinary everyday activity of God working through the people. Positive attitudes and joy are like a contagion, so instead of ignoring and not utilizing the social media because of the negativity, engage it in a positive manner.

Optimistic Future For the Church and the Community

The church, if attentive to the Spirit's work and actively in the community it is submerged in, can not only renew it's own missional identity, but be a part of reviving American communities once again. Through genuine engagement, care and concern for their neighbor, the church can help rebuild social capital that has been lost in the culture of individuals and competition. While no model can provide an exact road map, nor can it ever remain static, it is clear that through renewal of a missional identity that focuses outward, instead of inward, the church and the community can both be revived through reciprocal webs of relationships of caring people that work towards the common good.

Appendix A

DETERMINING THE NEEDS OF THE YOUTH IN THE BIG LAKE COMMUNITY RESEARCH CONCLUSIONS SUMMARY

When examining the results of this exploratory research the results will be used in conversation with U.S. Census data and a community profile compiled for the City of Big Lake in July 2015. Both an online survey and focus groups were conducted. I will also use identified needs that were received from the Sherburne County Children's Mental Health Collaborative, obtained through attendance to one of their meetings. At this meeting I was able to glean a good list of identified needs for the children in Sherburne County even though it was not an official focus group. The group this day had 15 attendees from Health and Human Services, juvenile probation as well as many mental health professionals.

The online survey collected some basic demographic information that was used to filter out twelve of the two hundred-thirty seven survey responses of those that did not have children under the age of 18 in their household. The results of the time of day desired for opportunities was not surprising because of school and working families. Due to the population targeted for this research the household engagement in opportunities in the community results were also not surprising with nearly eighty-eight percent involved in sports and fifty-one percent in church life. When respondents were asked what elements they would find important to include in opportunities for youth, the top response was recreation, followed close by community involvement/community building and fitness with the arts and music following behind. However, when asked to choose just

one element, community involvement/community building was the element receiving the most selections at forty-one percent. Recreation dropped to second with twenty-seven percent and faith formation moving up from a position of sixth most important, to third most important. When bringing the open response portion of the online survey into the conversation with these results I found both recreation and community involvement/community building elements to have interesting results that will need further exploration and defining.

Both the online survey and the focus groups did not rate the opportunities the community provides for youth well giving ratings of neutral, fair or poor in seventy-eight percent of the online responses and fifty-seven percent of the focus group responses. Results were similar when asked if they felt the community was meeting the needs of the youth with online responses of “no” sixty-two percent of the time and focus group responses of “no” seventy-two percent of the time. Overwhelmingly, ninety-one percent and seventy-five percent respectively, the focus group participants felt this was attributed to the fact that there were too many barriers to access opportunities in the community. In contrast, in the online survey open responses only eleven percent cite barriers to access available opportunities, and thirty-seven percent of the responses indicated that the opportunities the community already have in place need improvement. Interestingly, when participants in focus groups were asked to identify areas of need for the youth in the community they cited areas of emotional need sixty-five percent and fifty-seven percent of the time. One-hundred percent of the participants did not think these needs were being met, with the majority citing removing barriers to access opportunities as the way to help meet the need forty percent of the time.

Appendix B

DISCOVERING BARRIERS TO PROGRAMS AND SERVICES FOR YOUTH IN THE BIG LAKE COMMUNITY RESEARCH CONCLUSIONS SUMMARY

While the majority of participants did indeed believe that the programs and services available in the community were appropriate, they felt that they were under utilized and that other needs in the community were not being addressed. The top barriers that emerged from interviews to utilizing programs and services were communication (including language barriers), logistics (transportation, waiting lists, tools to access information and lack of facilities) and stigma. Within that, participants also commonly spoke of frustration and uncertainty as to how to effectively communicate in a digital age in which ways to communicate change quickly. I also found that many times agencies, groups, or even school buildings did not communicate and share information about available programs and services with each other.

Interestingly, parents themselves were also identified as barriers beyond laws concerning parental consent. Sadly, participants indicated that sometimes parents are in denial of need or unconcerned and preoccupied with their own lives and problems. Given that communication emerged as a barrier to access it is not surprising that even though most believed that there was enough information available, communication methods were not viewed as effective, except by a few that found it effective when communicated in a crisis or need based situation. Although public awareness and educating elected officials were listed as ways to meet and address needs of community

that are not being met, participants only viewed increasing awareness and educating officials as a part of the possible solution to meet the needs of the community. However, across all areas of questioning, including how a church or other community organization could help meet the needs of the community and overcome barriers, community partnership, collaboration, networking, and relationships were cited. Taking into account the frustration with effective communication in this digital age, and at times lack of communication between groups, how could this be done?

Another level of this research was directed to broad research into how identified barriers might be bridged by Saron Lutheran Church and to help refine and determine further research. In *Bowling Alone*, Robert Putnam explores the social change in America over the last several decades and specifically social capital and the well being of individuals and communities.⁵⁰ Putnam examines what he calls the “silent withdrawal” from both civic and informal social connections or relationships, collectively known as social capital, and how it may have affected our propensity to work for the common good.⁵¹ Social capital has been found to promote the well being of individuals and communities by allowing citizens to resolve collective problems easier, widen awareness of the ways in which their lives are linked, and serve as conduits for flow of information, making it difficult for communities that lack social capital to mobilize and achieve goals.⁵² These are all areas cited by participants in this research. When given the chance for an open response at the end of interview participants also added many comments that

⁵⁰ Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 115.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 288-289.

are very encouraging and show their desire and understanding of the importance of social capital. Comments included “relationships are key”, they “don’t want to just be in the community, they want to be part of the community”, “we need face-to-face communication”, “too often the human face is removed”, “we, as a culture are too disconnected”, “we need to go to the community, not expect them to come to us”, “we need a community investment group to work together and think through difficult conversations” and “we need a sense of community that draws people together.”⁵³

Additionally, in the open responses participants also commented on the effect of social media in our culture. Comments included, “the onslaught of social media has changed how things operate”, “social media is a blessing and a curse, we spend way too much time dealing with misrepresentations of situations”, “social media blows everything out of proportion”, “we need to better educate on the dangers of social media” and “we had to hire a communication specialist to respond to social media and put out fires.”⁵⁴ So, the question is not are we lacking in social capital, but how do we renew it, particularly in light of the changing landscape of a digital culture? Putnam is hopeful, and optimistic about the new spirit of volunteerism that is bubbling up from the millennial generation, and that perhaps they are actually not less engaged, just engaged differently, and I believe we should be too.⁵⁵

Saron Lutheran already has a good community presence, and as a faith community, important incubators of community and sources of deeper informal social

⁵³ Molly Schroeder, research notes, March 4, 2016.

⁵⁴ Molly Schroeder, research notes, March 4, 2016.

⁵⁵ Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, 26, 133.

connections, Saron can play an important role in that renewal.⁵⁶ More research on this subject and what role Saron Lutheran could play in renewal of social capital in the community will be the subject of further research.

Through this research, and my own relationships with members of this community I have been able to connect with not only people that have a passion for this community, but a drive and desire to make changes. I have connected with three other individuals that share my vision for a connected and caring community and churches that dwell in and respond to the community. We have already made plans to visit a center in Braham Minnesota to talk to a director that has succeeded in building a community center of sorts that is different than your typical recreational community center and completely run by volunteers in May. I have also developed a partnership with the Food and Nutrition Director of the local school district. Together we are working on a plan for Saron Lutheran volunteers and staff to plan and implement activities with children and families served by the summer meal program to continue to build our relationship with the members of our community. Collectively, and trusting God for His continued guidance on this project, time, trial and error and further research into these and other options will be needed as we continue to deeply listen and dwell in the community.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 66.

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