

2017

# Opening to Revelation: Building Discernment Processes from Practices that Best Inform Communal Decision Making

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OPENING TO REVELATION: BUILDING DISCERNMENT PROCESSES FROM  
PRACTICES THAT BEST INFORM COMMUNAL DECISION MAKING

by

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A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of

Luther Seminary

In Partial Fulfillment of

The Requirements for the Degree of

DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

ST. PAUL, MINNESOTA

2017

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## ABSTRACT

### *Opening to Revelation: Building Discernment Processes from Practices that Best Inform Communal Decision Making*

by

Chris Alexander

This sequential explanatory mixed methods research project investigates the spiritual discernment processes of a Christian congregation in the United Church of Christ. The study identifies most utilized and most helpful practices of spiritual discernment within the areas of prayer, conversation, community, and media. This research shows how engaging spiritual practices influences participation in decision making by Christian congregations.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Countryside Community Church for allowing me the opportunity to observe their unique conversation with God and their neighbors as they learn together how they might follow God's call into the world. I would like to thank Rev. Eric Elnes, Ph.D., Senior Pastor, for sharing his gifts for building an environment of discernment for our community and mentoring me in this leadership. I also want to thank Dan Loven-Crum, Will Howell, Patti Tu, and all the staff of Countryside Community Church for your ministry leadership as well as the support and encouragement you gave me for this project. And a special thanks to my journey partner team and to all the people of Countryside who participated in this project, granted me the time and the resources to conduct this research, and supported me with their insights throughout this process.

I also extend a deep sense of gratitude to my D.Min. cohort and my professors for their support and collaboration in this program. I literally would not have made it through this project without you.

And I especially want to thank my family: Rev. Scott Frederickson, Ph.D., Rachel Frederickson, Maddy Frederickson, Michael Coleman, and Asher Coleman for your continuous love and support throughout this project and in all of my questionable choices! Much love to all of you.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

*<sup>9</sup>At that place he came to a cave, and spent the night there. Then the word of the Lord came to him, saying, "What are you doing here, Elijah?"<sup>10</sup> He answered, "I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away."<sup>11</sup> He said, "Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by." Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake;<sup>12</sup> and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. <sup>13</sup>When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice to him that said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" (I Kings 19:9-13)<sup>1</sup>*

Elijah believes he is the last surviving prophet of his time. He has followed the calling of God throughout his life, entreating others to listen to God's voice in their own lives, and follow God's desires, not their own. Elijah calls for God to take his life, as he is tired of running and hiding. An angel twice appears to Elijah, beckoning him to get up and prepare himself for a journey. He travels to Horeb, the mountain of God, where he finds a cave in which to stop and rest. The voice of the Lord speaks to him in the cave telling him to stand on the mountain and wait for the Lord to pass by. As he waits for the Lord, there is a mighty wind, an earthquake, and a fire, but God was not in any them. It

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<sup>1</sup> All biblical references are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Holy Bible unless otherwise stated.

wasn't until Elijah heard God in the *sheer silence* that he went out to intentionally listen for God's voice.

How did Elijah hear God's voice in the silence and not in the mighty acts of the air, earth, and fire? How does someone distinguish between the voice of God and other voices they hear speaking? Something important is happening in this story of Elijah discerning God's voice that speaks to our current day communities. Elijah's experience of God shows the value of intentionally cultivating our own receptivity to God's voice in our lives. We are reminded to seek God's voice, not only in crisis, but in the decisions of our everyday lives and in the communities where we gather to live most fully into the people God created us to be.

Like Elijah, Countryside Community Church in Omaha, Nebraska seeks to hear the voice of God. We encourage each other to explore a variety of practices that help us intentionally listen for how God might be calling our community to participate in the life and being of God in the world. These discernment practices continue to expand and are utilized within our community through our various ministry settings, including worship, committee meetings, small group discussions, retreats, community conversations, and personal devotion time. The theological understanding of what we believe is happening at Countryside Community is a listening for and participating in the perichoretic life and being of God working in the world. Countryside Community stands waiting, like Elijah, *expecting* to hear God's voice in our discernment practices, and in some instances, refusing to act until we are sure we have heard God's call for our next steps.

Countryside's leadership has heard many stories of how these discernment practices have fostered a deep sense of belonging and connectedness to others and with

God. What we do not know is how widespread the participation in these practices really is in our community and the level of influence these practices may have in helping people make decisions regarding how Countryside Community participates with God in the world.

Many decisions concerning Countryside's ministry direction have been made in the last several years while we were also working on cultivating an environment of intentional listening and other practices of discernment. We worship, study, plan, and live into relationships with one another as we also practice communal expressions of prayer, meditation, scripture reading, and conversation together. All of these practices help us behave our way into a new way of thinking about how we are a church in the world. We believe that God's voice is actively participating with us in the decisions we make together concerning the ministries we cultivate as a community. We are unsure, however, just what the relationship is between the practices we use for discernment and the communal decisions we make concerning our ministries.

One example of this uncertainty concerns our participation in the Tri-Faith Initiative (an organization seeking to establish an interfaith campus of the three Abrahamic faiths: Judaism, Islam, and Christianity).<sup>2</sup> Countryside Community has a rich history of active participation in interfaith ministry, but what influence did our community's participation in discernment practices have in our decision to relocate six minutes west of our current location in order to participate as the Christian presence within the Tri-Faith Initiative? This question of influence can be asked concerning all of

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<sup>2</sup> More information concerning the Tri-Faith Initiative can be found at their website: <https://trifaith.org/>, accessed November 24, 2016.

the major decisions we have made in recent years. What influence does participation in these discernment practices have on whether or not Countryside Community ought to be a welcoming church to the LGBTQ community and perform same gender marriages? Did listening for God's voice in our community help us to discern the establishment of our online television ministry of Darkwood Brew? What about our Converging Paths ministry, or the start-up of our Community Cupboard food pantry that does much more than distribute food to the community?

The question of what influence our practices have on our communal decisions also applies to how we relate to one another in our life together. How might participating in these discernment practices influence how Countryside Community stewards our resources? Does intentionally listening for God's voice in our lives influence how we care for and support one another within Countryside's varied ministries of education, music, and worship?

My suspicion was that Countryside Community had begun to trust their practices of discernment and were allowing these practices to influence the decisions they made for Countryside's participation in the perichoretic life and being of God in the world. The purpose of this research was to test this suspicion. Further research on the discernment practices of Countryside included identifying those practices of discernment that we have developed and currently utilize together as a community, and then asking if these practices were helpful in the communal decisions we have made.

### **Research Question**

My research question is this:

*What practices currently encouraged in the discernment processes of Countryside Community Church are actually being utilized; which practices are most helpful*

*in informing our communal decisions; and how might we improve our discernment processes by further developing those practices?*

### Independent Variables

The independent variables of this research were the various practices currently encouraged as discernment processes at Countryside. These practices have included various types of prayer and meditation such as: reading scripture and other relevant literature on the topic being discerned, listening to a wide-range of experts in the relevant disciplines needed to inform our communal discernment, community conversations in both large and small group settings, and sharing stories with current members of the communities or neighborhoods most effected by our decisions.

In our worship, we participate in the prayer practices of the *Examen*, silent prayer, community-wide intercessory prayer, and guided meditation. We also model and encourage community prayer through the practice of centering prayer and guided meditations with our staff, boards, and committees, as well as in our small group development. Other prayer practices modeled and encouraged include devotional prayers, individual prayer, prayer journals, prayer walks (in general), and labyrinth walking (specifically), as well as prayer retreats.

Related practices within our processes include daily Bible reading and discussion groups on scripture. All groups are encouraged to engage scripture primarily through what we call *pneuma divina* (an adaptation of the practice of *lectio divina*), but we also make use of devotional scripture reading, the process of *Dwelling in the Word*, both large and small group Bible studies that concentrate on individual books of the Bible, as well as working with relevant Bible passages that follow the themes of our preaching and



worship series.<sup>3</sup> We also encourage the use of various types of literature such as poetry, novels, books on theology and community, and other writings speaking to our public voice in politics and civil society are also encouraged in the practices of our discernment processes.

Attendance at informative lectures and group conversation, in both small and large group settings, are additional practices within our discernment processes. Voices of ecumenical and interfaith partners from our larger community, as well as voices of communities or neighbors most affected by our decisions, are included in these conversations through forums and panel discussions. We also encourage experiential engagement with these groups in their own neighborhoods to encourage authentic participation with them in their daily living.

### Dependent Variable

The dependent variable in this research was the overall processes of discernment at Countryside Community Church, and how we might continue to improve these processes in ways that keep us open to God's voice as we deepen our practices. We assumed that our processes of discernment had a critical influence on the decisions we have made as a community concerning God's calling to us as a congregation. To determine if our assumptions were correct (or not), we needed to collect data on which of our currently encouraged practices are actually being utilized by our community, and if they are being used as an influence on our communal decisions. Our testing gave us the collected data to more accurately develop those practices that have shown to best suit our

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<sup>3</sup> Pat Taylor Ellison and Patrick R. Keifert, *Dwelling in the Word: A Pocket Handbook* (St. Paul, MN: Church Innovations, 2011).

community and thus expand our discernment processes in a way that better informs the future decisions of our community.

### Intervening Variables

Intervening variables that affect the processes of discernment at Countryside Community included demographic categories such as age, gender, education, and church background. Additional intervening factors include the types of decisions we are discerning and any material considerations for making those decisions, like finances, location, feasibility, and sustainability. People make decisions based on a number of factors. This research was designed to study the practices of our current discernment processes and if they are being utilized by our community to help make communal decisions. We wanted to know how we might improve our discernment processes in order to better center our decision making on what God is calling us to be about in the world. Studying the relationships of these intervening variables to the independent variables helped us account for other factors of influence in our decision making, and in so doing, helped us seek additional practices that will improve our overall discernment processes.

### Importance of This Study

My personal desire as a child of God is to be attentive to God's presence all around me. I wish to participate with God most fully as the person God created me to be. It is my calling and my passion, as a spiritual leader at Countryside Community Church, to provide opportunities for our community to be seeking the presence of God in our neighborhood and participating with God wherever God meets us and leads us. I believe I am living into this calling and passion by continually working in my community to develop better tools for practicing intentional listening, engagement in our

neighborhoods, and community-wide conversation. This research allows me to identify those practices that are most helpful to our community in discerning God's calling for our ministry, and thus enables me to improve our overall discernment processes for the whole of our congregation.

We have a favorite poem at Countryside Community written by the thirteenth century Sufi mystic Jalāl ad-Dīn Muhammad Rūmī called *Love Dogs* that helps us describe an important aspect of our discernment processes:

One night a man was crying,  
 "Allah, Allah!"  
 His lips grew sweet with the praising,  
 until a cynic said,  
 "So! I have heard you  
 calling out, but have you ever  
 gotten any response?"  
 The man had no answer for that.  
 He quit praying and fell into a confused sleep.  
 He dreamed he saw Khidr, the guide of souls,  
 in a thick, green foliage,  
 "Why did you stop praising?"  
 "Because I've never heard anything back."  
 "This longing you express  
 is the return message."  
 The grief you cry out from  
 draws you toward union.  
 Your pure sadness that wants help  
 is the secret cup.  
 Listen to the moan of a dog for its master.  
 That whining is the connection.  
 There are love dogs no one knows the names of.  
 Give your life to be one of them.

- *Translated by Coleman Barks*<sup>4</sup>

Countryside Community discovers our *yearning* to participate with God through active participation in practices that connect us to the perichoretic life and being of God. Our

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<sup>4</sup> Rūmī Jalāl al-Dīn and Coleman Barks, *The Essential Rumi* (San Francisco, CA: Harper, 1995).

practices together deepen our relationships with ourselves, our neighbors, and with God. An important step in providing tools for making decisions centered on what God is already doing in our neighborhoods is continually reviewing our practices for their usefulness within the overall development of discernment processes.

The importance of this study for the larger church centers around learning best practices that help all Spirit-seeking faith communities to better recognize and participate in the perichoretic life and being of God. All communities intentionally listening for God's voice among them can benefit from hearing how practices are utilized in other communities. Each congregation must discover which practices are most meaningful to their specific community, but learning the importance of encouraging practices that build confidence in the validity of God's voice and sharing ideas for practices with other communities, is something the larger church needs to do together. This research benefits the conversation surrounding this task. Countryside's experience with developing discernment processes which lead to centering decisions on what God is calling us to be about in the world has much to offer to other faith communities in helping them to seek their own unique conversations with God and engaging with God in their neighborhood.

### **Theoretical Lenses**

Diana Butler Bass wrote *Christianity after Religion: The End of Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening*, and in it describes a shift of thinking that is taking place in our time. The shift begins from the modern assumption that our believing leads to behaving in certain ways that are designed to open us up to a sense of belonging within our communities, and moves to the postmodern understanding that our belonging within our communities shapes our behaviors which inform our beliefs. She writes,

For the last few centuries, Western Christianity ordered faith in a particular way. Catholics and Protestants taught that belief came first, behavior came next, and finally belonging resulted, depending on how you answered the first two questions. ... It was not always that way. ... New theologies shifted away from emphasizing Christian practice toward articulating Christian teachings, as everyone attempted to prove that their group's interpretation was true or most biblical.<sup>5</sup>

The resulting effect of this shift is that today, if someone wants to join a church, they would first look to the church's creeds and doctrines to see if the church's beliefs matched their own. Only when they have found a belief structure they can agree with will a person then take the time to learn any new worship practices or engage in any community practices with that church. Butler Bass challenges this order of activity and calls for us to look to Jesus to discover an alternative order to which we are called. She continues,

There is something odd about this pattern. ... Long ago, before the last half millennium, Christians understood that faith was a matter of community first, practices second, and belief as a result of the first two. Our immediate ancestors reversed the order. Now, it is up to us to restore the original order.<sup>6</sup>

The implications of this shift in thinking are important to our community life together as church. Butler Bass' challenge to restore the original order of *belonging, behaving, and believing* leads us to explore how our practices help us to behave our way into believing. Chapter three of this research explores four theoretical lenses from the social sciences that help Countryside Community interpret our communal practices and the influence they have on the decisions we make regarding our ministries together.

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<sup>5</sup> Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity after Religion: The End of Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening* (New York, NY: HarperOne, 2012), 201.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 202-203.

## Practices

The first lens is the definition of practices and how we use them within our communities. Dorothy Bass defines practices as those acts that arise from our fundamental needs and the conditions in which we live.<sup>7</sup> Margaret Wheatley, Miroslav Volf, and Alan Roxburgh join Bass in the discussion of practices and how they help shape our beliefs and therefore the decisions we make.<sup>8</sup> It is important for faith communities to understand how the actions we take actually affect how we understand the world around us. Some of our practices are handed down to us through our traditions, both individually through our families, as well as corporately through our institutions like churches or educational systems. Other practices are learned within new environments where we find ourselves along our life's journey. All of our practices, whether assumed or created, provide spaces for us to construct a reality in which we reside. This is why the practices we utilize matter. If our practices create reality then the practices we choose to participate in are fundamental to how we interpret and participate in the world around us.

Countryside Community encourages those types of practices that open our community to the presence of God among us. The desire is to recognize the activity of God and participate with it. Such practices include various types of prayer and meditation, reading and discussing scripture, and participating in conversations that open

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<sup>7</sup> Dorothy C. Bass and M. Shawn Copeland, *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People*, 2nd, Kindle Edition ed., The Practices of Faith Series (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2010), Kindle position 572-573.

<sup>8</sup> Margaret J. Wheatley, *Leadership and the New Science: Discovering Order in a Chaotic World*, 3rd ed. (San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler, 2006); Miroslav Volf and Dorothy C. Bass, *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2002); Alan J. Roxburgh, *Joining God, Remaking Church, Changing the World: The New Shape of the Church in Our Time*, Kindle edition (New York, NY: Morehouse Publishing, 2015).

us to learning new perspectives on a variety of topics. It is important for us to understand what practices are and how they influence our behavior in order for us to review the practices we encourage. We want our practices to open us to the revelation of God and move us to make decisions centered on where we see God's activity already moving in the world. To accomplish this task we must constantly be seeking information from several disciplines on how we can make the best use of our practices together.

### Emergence Theory

The second theoretical lens that informs this research is the theory of *emergence*. New sciences like quantum physics are changing the way we view and interpret the world around us. Organizational theorist Margaret Wheatley uses the principles of this new science to help us reimagine how we relate to this world.<sup>9</sup> Emergence theory is that which helps us understand how change happens. Reductionist science helped us understand change by breaking the world down into parts and then watching to see what happens when change occurs in any one of the given parts. This perspective on the world assumes that everything that will ever be already exists and that the parts are simply rearranging themselves into new constructs. Emergence theory challenges this assumption by observing that the world consists of entities in relation to one another. When these separate entities connect with one another, new life emerges that has implications far beyond what either of the individual entities brought with them into the relationship. This world perspective is utterly unpredictable and dependent on the openness of the individual entities to relate to one another.

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<sup>9</sup> Margaret J. Wheatley, *So Far from Home: Lost and Found in Our Brave New World* (San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2012).

Wheatley describes consequences of this lens for interpreting how we humans relate to one another as families, friends, and organizations. I cite several theologians in this lens who join Wheatley in discussing how emergence theory changes how we explore our institutions and discover new ways to behave that allow us to be more fully open to how God is acting in the world. Landon Whitsitt describes this theory as it relates to the *open source* movement for learning and for how churches might use it to reimagine themselves.<sup>10</sup> Peter Rollins uses this theory to rethink heresy and orthodoxy in our churches.<sup>11</sup> Mark Lau Branson gives an example of how emergence theory has been used to develop new approaches to the practice of conversation through the practice of appreciative inquiry.<sup>12</sup>

Countryside Community uses emergence theory to speak to the importance of our practices and processes in discerning God's calling for our community. We assume that God is continually creating new things and calling us to visions and dreams that we could never imagine on our own. We understand that we are related to and dependent on one another, the world, and God, so that when we connect, whole new creations emerge. This worldview allows our community to be ever open to the Spirit who moves among us and leads us to follow God's will for us in the world.

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<sup>10</sup> Landon Whitsitt, *Open Source Church: Making Room for the Wisdom of All* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2011).

<sup>11</sup> Peter Rollins, *How (Not) to Speak of God*, Kindle edition (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2006).

<sup>12</sup> Mark Lau Branson, *Memories, Hopes, and Conversations: Appreciative Inquiry and Congregational Change* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2004).



## Abundant Community

Sociologists Peter Block and John McKnight share their insights on how communities become self-organizing “abundant communities” when gifts within the community are shared and acted upon through communal practices.<sup>13</sup> A community must base its structure on an emergent system of organization to encourage the sharing of these gifts rather than mandating a certain system that closes off our natural sense of creativity and discovery from within the system.

Dwight Zscheile adds to this discussion of building community by arguing that open conversation and the sharing of ideas for innovation are also necessary. Only when a community is allowed to learn from one another can they ever move beyond the ways things have always been into new perspectives and practices that allow for creative activity and the encouragement of new ways of relating with one another. Nancy Ammerman’s research has shown that, without this sharing of gifts within a community, individuals tend to isolate themselves and act only on the basis of individual achievement leading to the deterioration of the community itself.<sup>14</sup>

Ammerman tells us that churches play a vital role in helping people connect to one another in meaningful ways that lead to positive communal practices. Sociologists like Robert Bellah, conservationists like James Speth, and leadership consultants like Ron Heifetz and Marty Linsky agree.<sup>15</sup> The church fills an important role in building abundant

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<sup>13</sup> John McKnight and Peter Block, *The Abundant Community: Awakening the Power of Families and Neighborhoods* (San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2010).

<sup>14</sup> Nancy Tatom Ammerman and Arthur Emery Farnsley, *Congregation & Community* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997).

<sup>15</sup> “Speth, James Gustave: America the Possible.(Book Review),” *Kirkus Reviews* (2012); Ronald A. Heifetz and Martin Linsky, *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive through the Dangers of Leading*

communities through providing safe places for shared conversation and working collaboratively in our neighborhoods to bring people together to address the issues facing their community. Countryside Community strives to fill this role for our community and uses this lens to help us review our communal practices, making sure our practices lead us toward safe and open conversations with our neighbors.

### Five-Phase Discernment Processes

The fourth theoretical lens explores two models for building discernment processes in a community. The first process to be explored is offered by Craig Van Gelder and his use of the 5A's: Attending, Asserting, Agreeing, Acting, and Assessing.<sup>16</sup> The second is offered from Peter Senge and also incorporates the use of five tools that lead a community through a process of shared conversation about who they are and the gifts they share with one another.<sup>17</sup> Each of these models is designed to engage the community with one another as they face the ever-changing patterns of the societies in which they live. Countryside Community uses models such as these in developing our own discernment processes. These models, and many others, teach us to include everyone in the process and allow people the opportunity to engage at any point along the way.

All of these theoretical lenses remind us that we are in relationship with one another, the world around us, and with God. How we behave within these relationships is

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(Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 2002); Robert N. Bellah, *The Good Society* (New York, NY: Knopf: Distributed by Random House, 1991).

<sup>16</sup> Craig Van Gelder, *The Ministry of the Missional Church: A Community Led by the Spirit* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007), 95-120.

<sup>17</sup> Peter M. Senge, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*, Revised and updated, Kindle edition (New York, NY: Doubleday/Currency, 2006), 128-251.

dependent upon our capacity to see these relationships as positive forces for change and growth. We must evaluate our practices for discernment based on whether they move us deeper into these relationships or not. Margaret Wheatley helps clarify the importance of this lens for building discernment processes for our community,

We need to get reacquainted with our home planet if we are to understand how we landed up here; we need to see as clearly as possible how life's reliable dynamics interacted with human will to emerge as this life-destroying mess. With such clarity, we can develop insight and discernment. We can wisely choose right action, those actions that make sense in the present circumstance. Without discernment, we act from blind hope, not from clear seeing.<sup>18</sup>

### **Biblical and Theological Lenses**

Chapter four of this thesis discusses three biblical lenses and three theological lenses that inform this research. Each of these lenses provide a framework for interpreting the conversation surrounding the practices we utilize at Countryside and whether they are an effective tool for informing the communal decisions we make. These biblical and theological lenses speak to where we look for direction and authority in our conversations with one another and with God.

#### I Kings 19:9-13

The first biblical lens is the story of Elijah from I Kings 19:9-13 with which this introductory chapter began. God calls to Elijah through the sound of *sheer silence* while he cowers in a cave for fear of those wishing him dead. Elijah has somehow lost his confidence in himself and the God that has been a constant presence with him throughout his life as a prophet, but still he seeks God's direction and guidance when he is drawn to

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<sup>18</sup> Wheatley, *So Far from Home*, 24-25.

the mouth of the cave through the silence. Elijah must practice intentional listening and be attentive for God's activity if he is to continue to follow where God is leading him. This biblical lens is helpful to Countryside Community because it describes the importance of taking the time to wait on God's voice to guide us. The cave in which Elijah hid provided a safe place to be still, pray, and listen for God to provide guidance and direction in our lives. The role Countryside plays for those seeking God's guidance is to provide such safe places for people to intentionally listen as they discern God's voice among all the other voices calling to us from several directions at once. Elijah was given this time and space to listen and wait on God amidst all the disorder, fear, and chaos.

#### Exodus 13:21-22

The second biblical lens comes from Exodus 13:21-22 where God's people are led through the wilderness following a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. We must trust where God is leading us once we are able to discern God's voice calling us. The Israelites were given signs for direction but needed to stay attentive to them and learn to trust that God would always be present with them. This story from Exodus connects us to a people who behaved their way into believing God's promises. Countryside Community seeks to be attentive to the activity of God that promises to bring us into our most abundant futures. Our practices help us to be attentive followers.

#### Acts 15:4-29

The third story comes from Acts 15:4-29. This story exemplifies for us how the Spirit sent by God into the world is already creating new life in community all around us. We must continue to be attentive to the continual movement of the Spirit once we discern God's voice. We must trust where God is leading us by trusting that God is calling and

sending us into places of new life, even if those places challenge our current practices and traditions. Countryside Community is reminded through this biblical lens that we need to constantly be reviewing our practices to make sure they are open to the movement and flow of the Spirit who leads us to be most truly loving in our actions.

The biblical examples of Elijah, the Israelites being led through the wilderness, and the first century Christians modeling discernment, help us frame how our own community might discern God's voice in our midst. There are also three theological lenses that informed this research: *perichoresis*, *spiritual practices*, and *processes of discernment*. Each of these concepts help us to recognize how God has moved throughout history and allows us to participate in the creative activity of God's presence among us.

### Perichoresis

The theological lens of *perichoresis* speaks to the relational nature of God within the triune relationship of Godself. This research traces the history of this theological term and how it has been defined and applied by theologians such as Michael Lawler and Jurgen Moltmann.<sup>19</sup> David Tracy relates this lens to our practices in the church, saying that when we identify God through a triune community we claim that *being* in relationship is more than merely saying that we are somehow related to one another in creation.<sup>20</sup> We mirror the triune relationship of God and participate in it as we exist in

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<sup>19</sup> Jurgen Moltmann, "Perichoresis: An Old Magic Word for a New Trinitarian Theology," (Nashville, TN: Kingswood Books, 2000), 111-126; Michael G. Lawler, "Perichoresis: New Theological Wine in an Old Theological Wineskin," *Horizons* (1995): 49-66.

<sup>20</sup> David Tracy, "On Naming the Present: God, Hermeneutics, and Church," *America* 173, no. 11 (1995): 24.

relationship with one another and to the world. The implications of this lens hold great importance for the role of the church in the world.

Craig Van Gelder and Dwight Zscheile speak to the church's role, saying that the church participates in the life and being of God through its openness to others.<sup>21</sup> Michael Welker suggests that because the church mirrors the life and being of God it is both the bearer and the revelation of God through the Spirit in the world.<sup>22</sup> How then must we evaluate our communal practices and ministry decisions as a church called and sent by the Spirit to participate with God in the world? We are called to be the revelation of God, which means our practices and our ministries must mirror the relational nature of God. We must always make room for one another as we live into the inexhaustible love of God for creation.

### Spiritual Practices

The second theological lens speaks to our spiritual practices. These practices are framed by their relationship to the life and being of God, through the Son and the Spirit. Miroslav Volf claims that all practices are shaped by what God is already doing in the world.<sup>23</sup> This understanding suggests that our practices are not distinct from our belief but are integral to them. Our practices do not justify our belief nor do they make us worthy of

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<sup>21</sup> Craig Van Gelder and Dwight J. Zscheile, *The Missional Church in Perspective: Mapping Trends and Shaping the Conversation*, The Missional Network (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 107.

<sup>22</sup> Michael Welker, *God the Spirit*, 1st English-language ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1994), 21.

<sup>23</sup> Volf and Bass, *Practicing Theology*.

participation with God in the world, rather our practices allow us to constantly seek God's presence and open us to hearing God's guidance and direction for our lives.

Spiritual practices are many and varied and often reflect the cultures from which they were derived. Many of the *new* practices are adaptations of ancient practices. We open ourselves to a revelation of God that we might not have otherwise experienced and we deepen our connection to one another as we study the practices of many different cultures and contexts. It will be most helpful to Countryside Community to build this lens into their discernment processes so that the evaluation of our practices might include a requirement of representing diverse cultures and interpretations of the sacred.

#### Processes of Discernment

The last of the theological lenses used to inform this research is processes of discernment. This lens helps Countryside Community see that the relationship between our practices and the decisions we make concerning our ministries is much closer than we might have imagined. The United Church of Christ claims a tradition of meeting regularly as a congregation where opportunities to encounter God are sought. Martin Copenhaver speaks to this tradition saying that these communities gathered more for the purpose of discernment than they did for making decisions.<sup>24</sup> Countryside Community Church comes from this tradition and understands most fully that making decisions through communal conversation and prayer in order to provide opportunities for encountering God is the true definition of what it means to discern. Discernment is itself

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<sup>24</sup> Martin B. Copenhaver, "Decide or Discern: A Congregational Process," *The Christian Century*. 127, no. 26 (2010): 29.

a spiritual practice in this sense, and spiritual practices are in themselves a process of discernment.

Dwight Zscheile suggests that what grounds every practice or discernment process is the desire to seek God's present activity already happening among us and claiming that activity as fundamental to our identity.<sup>25</sup> This lens encourages Countryside Community to evaluate their practices and processes in ways that lead us to discover our identities within the life and being of God in the world. If our practices are designed with decision making in mind without the understanding that decision making is discernment, then we need to re-design these practices by framing them biblically and theologically through the lenses offered through this research.

### **Research Methodology**

The first aim of this research was to determine which of the practices currently encouraged at Countryside Community are actually being utilized by our membership. The second aim was to determine to what extent the practices being used are helpful to our membership when discerning God's call to ministry in our neighborhood. A sequential explanatory mixed methods research design allowed me the flexibility to survey a larger number of people concerning their use of practices, as well as interviewing one-on-one just a few members of our community to dig deeper concerning the influence of our practices on the decisions we made regarding the ministry initiatives taken since 2010.

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<sup>25</sup> Dwight J. Zscheile, *The Agile Church: Spirit-Led Innovation in an Uncertain Age* (New York, NY: Morehouse Publishing, 2014).



Much of our effort in developing discernment processes is based on the assumption that we are all using at least some of the practices that have been introduced in our community, and that these practices are important for informing the decisions we make as a community regarding the ministries we initiate and maintain. This assumption is based on more than just a feeling, since many of our practices we actually participate in together within our worship and small group ministry development. To what extent these practices are used, by whom, and for what purposes, however, was a big part of the assumption that had yet to be tested.

### Research Design

A census survey was the first step in the research design. A questionnaire was made available to every member of the congregation over the age of eighteen. The questions asked were designed to gather information regarding demographic information such as age, gender, level of education, and church background; how the member currently participates with Countryside Community; what discernment practices they have used; and if they utilized these practices when making decisions concerning Countryside's ministry initiatives. A series of questions concerning attendance at congregational meetings, additional factors that played a role in their decision making, to what extent they believed their practices influenced their decision making, and sharing their comments concerning the overall processes of discernment at Countryside, were added to the survey in order to cross reference their responses to variables present in the research. A separate page listing the five major ministry initiatives at Countryside Community since 2010 was also developed as part of the introduction to the questionnaire for the purpose of further clarification.

The second instrument developed for this research was a qualitative protocol for one-on-one interviews with a purposive sample of the population who responded to the questionnaire. I chose to interview six participants in this nonprobability quota sample from all those who identified themselves as willing to be interviewed. The aim of the sample was to find representatives from each gender who had participated in the discernment processes for all five of the ministry initiatives identified in the research.

This protocol included questions designed to determine which practices the members utilized, and why they chose these specific practices. Another set of questions was aimed at determining to what extent the member's practices were helpful to them in making decisions concerning the communal ministries at Countryside. Additional questions were developed to ascertain if the member's decisions might have been different if they had not utilized their practices, and if there were other factors that contributed to their decisions such as influence from church leadership, financial concerns, or location issues.

Each of these instruments were field tested by a select group of people from our community including staff members, journey partner team members, and at-large members from the congregation. These selected participants were not included as participants in the final research design. Additional questions regarding the role of God in the discernment process were added to the qualitative protocol on the recommendation of the field-testing group.

## Analysis

A total of 307 responses to the questionnaire were collected via SurveyMonkey or printed copies distributed through the church office.<sup>26</sup> Data from these questionnaires were collected and analyzed using SPSS software.<sup>27</sup> Quantitative data were then tested through independent t-tests to highlight any relationships between variables such as age, gender, education, and church background and the practices that were being utilized.

All six interviews were audio-recorded, and all qualitative data were transcribed using the online software named Transcribe. All transcribed data were then coded using the process suggested by Kathy Charmaz that includes developing *in vivo*, focused, and axial codes, and the relationship between the axial codes is then explained in theoretical coding.<sup>28</sup>

## Other Matters

### Definition of Key Terms

*Missional Congregation:* Craig Van Gelder tells us that a missional congregation is one that is “living into all that the Triune God intends the church to be in light of its creation by the Spirit.”<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> SurveyMonkey Inc. Palo Alto, CA, USA [www.surveymonkey.com](http://www.surveymonkey.com), accessed November 24, 2016.

<sup>27</sup> IBM Corp. Released 2015. IBM SPSS Statistics for Windows, Version 23.0. Armonk, NY: IBM Corp.

<sup>28</sup> Kathy Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*, 2nd edition (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2013).

<sup>29</sup> Van Gelder, *The Ministry of the Missional Church*, 182.

*Perichoresis*: Dwight Zscheile explains, “literally means ‘whirl,’ ‘rotation,’ ‘circulating or walking around.’ With regard to the Trinity, it describes a relationship of dynamic mutuality, equality, openness, and shared participation among Father, Son, and Spirit. This divine community is composed of the relationship of genuine others; otherness is constitutive of God’s Trinitarian life.”<sup>30</sup>

*Practices*: Dorothy Bass has defined practices as “things Christian people do together over time to address fundamental human needs in response to and in light of God’s active presence for the life of the world.”<sup>31</sup>

*Discernment*: Martin Copenhaver helps us understand this term saying, “in spiritual discernment we seek to discover what God is doing and what God would have us do in response. A group discernment process is essentially a process of listening carefully to God.”<sup>32</sup> □

*Decision Making*: This is the communal conversation within an organizational structure designed for determining what actions can be taken in response to what they feel God is already doing in the world. This study seeks to concentrate on those decisions regarding the ministry initiatives of Countryside Community Church as we engage God, each other, and our neighborhood.

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<sup>30</sup> Dwight J. Zscheile, *Cultivating Sent Communities: Missional Spiritual Formation* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2012), 14.

<sup>31</sup> Volf and Bass, *Practicing Theology*, 18.

<sup>32</sup> Copenhaver, “Decide or Discern,” 30.

## Ethical Considerations

Confidentiality was maintained for all respondents, and individuals are not identified by name in the project's written report. Questionnaire responses were given a number, and only I have access to the number-email correlations. Informed consent forms were used with all interviews and implied consent forms were attached to all questionnaires. Both the questionnaire and the interview protocol were drafted following the Institutional Review Board (IRB) guidelines for content and procedure.<sup>33</sup> These instruments avoided what the IRB considers sensitive questions.

Informed consent was given by Countryside Community Church Council to allow for the use of Countryside's name and the names of their ministries in this research. Representative faith leaders of The Tri-Faith Initiative also gave informed consent for the initiative to be named within this research. Rev. Eric Elnes, Ph.D. also provided informed consent for the use of his name and the use of his sermon content and published materials in this research.

I led and conducted this research within a ministry context in which I am one of the pastors. I am aware that this brings bias and power issues to the project. I am personally passionate about the ministry of discernment practices and believe that they can play an important role in the decision making of the wider congregation. I asked my journey partner team to make me aware of any unhelpful influence I might bring to the process. Each of the interview participants were told that their experiences, perspectives, and contributions are valuable and legitimate and therefore could never be construed as

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<sup>33</sup> Institutional Review Board of Luther Seminary <http://www.luthersem.edu/irb/>, accessed November 24, 2016.

wrong. This was done to solicit more authentic responses. I intentionally encouraged people to share in their own words rather than trying to use unfamiliar theological language.

I drew upon Charmaz's guidelines for controlling bias in asking questions, both in the questionnaire and the interview protocol.<sup>34</sup> The questionnaire and the interview protocol are attached as appendices A and B. The interview protocol was implemented by asking each participant to sign an informed consent form. The questionnaire included an implied consent form within the introduction explaining that participation meant they were providing their implied consent. These forms also can be found as appendices C and D.

All samples were drawn from adults who are over the age of eighteen and who are not considered vulnerable by IRB standards. All data are kept on a password protected external hard drive that resides in a locked file drawer in my office, to which I am the only one with access. These records will be kept until May 31, 2020, and then destroyed. This study presented no risks to the participants of the research project. The benefits of this study have helped Countryside Community Church grow in its missional development of discernment practices and decision making by helping us to engage the wider community more effectively.

### **Summary**

The reporting of this research is accomplished in the following chapters. Chapter one provided an overview of the research. Chapter two describes the historical

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<sup>34</sup> Kathy Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2006).

background information to this research, including a detailed explanation of the decisions made concerning the five major ministry initiatives at Countryside Community Church since 2010, and a look at the historical leadership that helped to foster the environment conducive to congregational engagements with discernment processes. Chapter three discusses the four theoretical lenses used in this research to help interpret the data gathered and Chapter four frames the discussion biblically and theologically by looking at three biblical models for discernment and three theological concepts that point to the activity of God in the world and how we might find ways to discern our callings to participate with God.

Chapter five outlines the methodology and research design used for this study, while Chapter six reports the results of this study and compares the data for relational insights that might better inform our research. Chapter seven discusses my conclusions from these data, including identifying any additional questions that were raised from this research. All instruments used in this research as well as additional resources that were helpful in the process of this research are collected in the appendices.

It is often important to look behind us to review where we have been as a community in order to find insights that help us to move forward into our calling from God to participate in the life and being of our neighborhood. The next chapter reviews the historical background that helped inform the questions developed for the research that in turn informs how Countryside Community steps forward into our future.

## CHAPTER 2

### HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Countryside Community Church is a congregation of the United Church of Christ. Our identity, polity, and organizational structure for decision making are therefore framed by the Congregationalist understanding that the greatest expression of the Body of Christ is found in the local congregation. Each individual congregation is considered uniquely engaged in a conversation with God concerning the ministries they cultivate to participate with God in the world. Countryside Community's communal decisions are thus made within a community-wide discernment, which includes engagement with those communities surrounding our congregation who are most directly affected by our decisions.

The organizational structure of Countryside Community Church identifies the congregation, as a whole, as the highest authority for decision making concerning our worship life and ministry engagement in our neighborhood. The regional and national offices of the denomination exist for providing resources and opportunities for collaborative ministry, but not as a compelling authority in the decision making of the congregation. An annual meeting of the congregation elects leaders, whom we designate as *Moderators*, to serve our congregation for our community-wide conversation and discernment. These moderators consist of The Moderator, The Vice-Moderator, and The Vice-Moderator-elect. Our church council consists of elected representatives who



collaborate in cultivating ministries in the areas of youth; adult and children's education; worship, music, and the arts; pastoral care; administration, communication and finance; collaborative ministry with community partners, and our fellowship with one another and with our community, in both large and small groups settings. All decisions for the congregations are introduced and recommended through these boards.

Several significant ministry initiatives have been introduced since 2010 through these boards and recommended for discernment by the congregation. These ministry initiatives were discerned through various levels of congregational discussions, and at different times within the history of the congregation's experience with spiritual practices. The decisions made by the congregation regarding each of these ministry initiatives were explored in the order in which they were made in order to allow us to recognize any patterns that emerged regarding the relationship between the communal engagement of spiritual practices and the decisions made concerning ministry initiatives.

### **Countryside Community Cupboard**

The first of these ministry initiatives was the recommendation in 2009 to begin the Countryside Community Cupboard. Two members from our congregation did the research, filed the necessary licensing, secured community foundation grants, and ran a fundraising appeal to endow this community food pantry at Countryside. These two members reported that they had spent time in prayer and were following their call from God to feed the hungry and they were asking the congregation to join them in their call and passion. The information concerning who the ministry would serve; how the ministry would be governed, funded, and facilitated; and how the ministry was viewed as following Christ into the world to care for those in need; was made available to the

church council in February of 2010. The council members attending voted to establish this ministry as an ongoing ministry of Countryside Community Church.

Countryside Community Cupboard currently distributes food to over 350 families per month, and utilizes volunteers from those receiving food as well as volunteers from another congregation within our neighborhood. The distribution of food is the primary goal of this ministry, though many other services and relationship-building programs have been developed alongside of the food distribution. Countryside Community Cupboard also presents a story time for children and distributes free children's books to any who wish to receive them or take them home for children in their own neighborhoods. Free hearing screenings are offered and a warm meal is served to all in attendance as they wait their turn for collecting their food. We also offer nutrition and cooking workshops to help our neighbors learn how to prepare the foods they receive. Arts and crafts activities for all who attend are provided often by our Family Activities committee, and during appropriate seasons, Countryside Community Cupboard collects and distributes school supplies, backpacks, new clothing for back to school, coats, hats, and mittens.

The initial discernment of call for this Community Cupboard ministry was accomplished primarily by just two members of our congregation, who then invited the rest of the congregation to discern if this might be a calling for the whole community to follow God into our surrounding neighborhoods. The congregation made this decision just one year after the idea of spiritual practices had been introduced to the community by the leadership of the church through worship and in small group development. Many members of the congregation did not yet understand or value these practices, nor had they

begun to participate in these practices outside of those utilized within our Sunday morning worship.

### **Darkwood Brew**

Darkwood Brew is the second significant ministry initiative introduced to the congregation. The Senior Pastor, Rev Eric Elnes, Ph.D., and the worship planning team began the discernment of this ministry initiative early in 2009 and proposed a two-year pilot program to the congregation in 2010. Darkwood Brew was designed in response to the need for small group resources that reflected our progressive Christian tradition and in response to a pressing need to create a third worship experience. Darkwood Brew is an internet television program streamed live to audiences all over the world, as well as to our own members who participate in worship with us from their own living rooms. Biblical scholars, religious leaders, social activists, scientists, artists, and musicians from all over the world were scheduled for conversation with our community through internet conferencing and live chat room technology.

Live stream broadcasting allows viewers (from places like Cameroon) to ask questions of our guest speakers (from places like Amsterdam) and get immediate responses, so we can all be a part of a conversation in real time. This ministry involves local and traveling jazz musicians; baristas trained to create and serve specialty coffee drinks for the many folks who physically attend the coffeehouse service; deacons who set up and re-set our Common Grounds Coffeehouse for the show; scripture readers and communion servers for each week; and the volunteer directors, floor managers, camera crews, and sound technicians needed to create the show for live broadcast. It takes more

than fifty volunteers and a handful of part-time staff to bring this ministry to life each week.

The ministry initiative of Darkwood Brew was originally funded by an outside grant that provided for the remodeling of Countryside's fellowship space into a broadcast studio and coffeehouse. This grant allowed for the purchase of all the technology and equipment needed to accomplish a live weekly broadcast. A team of volunteers was gathered to facilitate the show and a smaller advisory committee was set up to supervise the budget, plan for the production of the show, and schedule the guest speakers. The ministry's budget included hiring a producer, director, project manager, music director, and social media coordinator. All other crew for Darkwood Brew consists of volunteers. The producer and project manager work together after the live broadcast to edit the one and a half hour recorded show in order to produce a twenty minute recorded segment. This is used as a small group discussion resource, and includes pause points with discussion questions to facilitate small group conversation.

The first official broadcast of Darkwood Brew was on January 4, 2011. A total of thirty-six, six-to-eight-week, worship series resources for small group ministries have been developed from just over five years of weekly broadcasts of Darkwood Brew. These resources are currently available through download with a subscription membership to Darkwood Brew or the DVD can be purchased through the Darkwood Brew online store and through Cokesbury church supply house.

The congregational discernment for the start-up of Darkwood Brew was more involved than the decision to begin Countryside's Community Cupboard. The technical nature of the information and the large demand for volunteer and paid staff to accomplish

such an expansive worship experience were just a couple of the reasons why the conversation demanded a more focused congregational discernment. This discernment included prayer in worship, small group conversation, and encouraging the whole community to prayerfully discern what God might be calling Countryside to be about within the possible reach of this broadcast ministry.

The decision to begin a two-year pilot project period for Darkwood Brew was made by the 2010 annual meeting of the congregation. This decision included a provision for a second review of the ministry initiative after the two-year pilot project period expired. A special congregational meeting was called in January of 2012 to specifically review the ministry initiative of Darkwood Brew and determine if it would continue to be an ongoing ministry of Countryside Community Church.

Information shared at this congregational review included financial and technical support data for the ministry, as well as interviews and testimonials regarding the reach and value of the ministry to congregational members, the international audience, and Darkwood Brew's following on social media. Prayers for discernment were specifically encouraged in this review process, as well as guided meditation time for seeking God's voice within the discussions. Small groups that utilized Darkwood Brew resources (from within the congregation and around the country) were interviewed regarding the value of the resources for small group discussion, as well as their opinions concerning the impact of the small group materials on the lives of participants.

The congregational decision was to continue Darkwood Brew as an ongoing ministry at Countryside Community Church. This decision expressed the value placed on this ministry for continuing to expand and explore additional methods of spiritual

practice, community conversation, and alternative worship practices that help both the congregation at Countryside, and its international audience, to develop discernment processes that seek out the activity of God that surrounds us and calls us to participate.

### **Congregational Designation as “Open and Affirming”**

The next significant ministry initiative decision made at Countryside Community resulted from a whole different approach than either of the decisions mentioned above. A discussion began at the monthly church council meeting in September 2011 regarding the process for officially designating Countryside Community as an “Open and Affirming” (O&A) congregation of the United Church of Christ (UCC).<sup>1</sup> This designation was established to identify a congregation as being fully welcoming to the Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual, Trans-sexual, and Queer (LGBTQ) community. Council representatives sat in silence after the presentation of the proposal to initiate the congregational process for discerning this designation. One council representative finally spoke up and said, “I thought we already were a designated O&A congregation.” Everyone else in the room shook their head in agreement.

The Moderator explained the year-long process designed by the UCC’s national office for congregational conversation and discernment of this designation. The process required an official vote of the congregation, or of the congregation’s official representative body, to approve the designation. One of the council representatives asked if the year-long process was a requirement, or if a council vote alone would be sufficient

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<sup>1</sup> “Open and Affirming (ONA) is the United Church of Christ's (UCC) designation for congregations, campus ministries, and other bodies in the UCC which make a public covenant of welcome into their full life and ministry to persons of all sexual orientations, gender identities, and gender expressions.” [http://www.ucc.org/lgbt\\_ona](http://www.ucc.org/lgbt_ona), accessed on March 31, 2016.

to claim the designation for the congregation. After searching the requirements from the national website, it was determined that a council vote would be sufficient. A representative made the motion, it was seconded, and a unanimous decision to designate Countryside Community Church as an “Open and Affirming” congregation of the UCC was accomplished.

Countryside Community has a significant history as a community leader in advocating for the rights of the LGBTQ community. Our clergy established the *Heartland Clergy for Inclusion* group in June of 2011 who produced the *Heartland Proclamation*, now signed by 270 Christian clergy within the ten states of America’s heartland.<sup>2</sup> This proclamation affirms the created lives of people in the LGBTQ community, apologizes to them for any injustice toward them caused by Christian religious communities, and calls for an end to violence against this community.

The discernment for officially designating Countryside Community Church as an O&A congregation of the UCC was accomplished through the ongoing practice of a community who truly believes no one stands outside of God’s love and grace. Through worship practices of prayer, scripture reading, and an open table for sacraments, Countryside Community Church *behaved their way* into discerning God’s call to love our neighbor. No additional congregational discernment was necessary to make this particular ministry decision.

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<sup>2</sup> From the Heartland Clergy for Inclusion Website: “We are Christian clergy from the Heartland states who are grounded in the witness of Scripture, convinced of God’s unconditional love for all people, and advocating justice for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender persons.” <http://www.heartlandproclamation.org/>, accessed on March 31, 2016.

### Converging Paths

Another significant ministry initiative, called Converging Paths, was a five-year pilot ministry project created in a partnership between Countryside Community Church and The Northeast Theological Center (formerly a Theological Seminary).<sup>3</sup> The project was introduced in 2013 as an experiment in providing theological education through congregations for lay leaders serving communities who believe that God is already working in the world. These communities also believe that we, as God's people, participate with God in this Spirit-driven activity by discerning our vocational callings through dwelling together in God's Word, in conversation with our church, and in dialog with the communities in which we live.

The project was designed to establish a space and process by which people might be able to explore and reclaim the theological concept known as "vocation," while discerning their personal vocational callings from God. This discernment included participation in *journey groups* specifically oriented toward spiritual practice, community conversation, *Dwelling in the Word*, and supporting one another through listening to each other's stories, as we journey together seeking meaning and purpose in our daily living. After a time discerning with one another in these journey groups, the hope is that in deepening our relationships with one another and with God, we might begin to intentionally listen for what God is already doing in our communities and where we might be called to participate with God in the world. Vocation is claimed at Countryside

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<sup>3</sup> A pseudonym was used for this organization since an informed consent for use of their proper name was not obtained.



Community by anyone who believes they are called to participate in a unique conversation with God, and acting out of this uniqueness with God in the world.

A UCC minister was called to Countryside Community to direct this pilot ministry in its first year. A licensed minister was employed in its second year to accomplish the follow up work of maintaining and resourcing our existing journey groups. This licensed minister was also tasked with developing and supporting journey groups from our Darkwood Brew community.

Countryside now has nineteen groups after two years of developing our Converging Paths ministry. Each group consists of eight-to-twelve people, meeting together on a regular basis, *Dwelling in the Word*, praying together, supporting one another, and seeking to hear God's voice among them. These journey groups vary in their practices. Some meet weekly, some meet monthly. Some meet at the church, others in people's homes or in restaurants, while others meet online or via conference calls. Some are using a seventy-two-week curriculum entitled *By This Way of Life*, developed through Darkwood Brew and designed to be a resource for deeper discussions on each of the twelve *Phoenix Affirmations* developed and edited by our Senior Pastor, Dr. Eric Elnes, Ph.D.<sup>4</sup> This resource is the foundational theological frame for discerning all of our ministries at Countryside Community and is therefore a regular starting point of study for our journey groups.

Other journey groups are using a variety of curriculum resources developed outside of our congregation, or studying specific books of the Bible together. In addition

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<sup>4</sup> Eric Elnes, *The Phoenix Affirmations: A New Vision for the Future of Christianity* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2006).

to regular journey group meetings, Converging Paths has developed prayer retreats and large group gatherings for all journey group participants, in hopes of broadening our conversations with one another and sharing experiences and stories among these groups.

Countryside Community Church had five years of experience developing and practicing various spiritual practices and other discernment methods for making decisions for our congregation at the time we were discerning whether or not to enter this partnership with the Northeast Theological Center to develop our Converging Paths ministry. For this discernment we encouraged prayer and meditation, interviewed our already existing small groups for their insight, and developed a call committee who discerned that we would need an additional clergy member at Countryside to focus their called ministry in the area of Converging Paths. This committee researched the needs of the position, interviewed our candidate for his own sense of call for this ministry, and made a recommendation to church council to pursue the partnership with The Northeast Theological Center. A special congregational meeting was called in November 2013 and approved this ministry with a start date of January 2014. They also approved the call of a third pastor to Countryside Community Church.

### **Tri-Faith Initiative**

The most recent ministry initiative decision made by Countryside Community Church was in response to an invitation in October of 2013 to consider relocating our congregation six minutes west of our present location to participate as the primary Christian partner of the Tri-Faith Initiative. This Initiative formally began in 2006 with the intention of meeting the vital need for “building understanding, respect, and trust among the three Abrahamic faiths—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, while upholding

the right to proclaim one's own religion and serve God in their own way.”<sup>5</sup> The original Tri-Faith partners purchased a thirty-five acre campus and set out to build an intentional community where a synagogue, a church, and a mosque could be built. The worshipping communities of each faith partner would coexist as neighbors and friends, while each continued to worship within their own faith traditions. A fourth structure is also planned for the campus that will house a collaborative ministry site and educational center that focuses on the history of the three faith traditions. This interfaith campus is designed to provide further evidence to our world that multi-faith communities *can* peacefully coexist with mutual respect and acceptance, thereby strengthening the entire global community.

Countryside has a rich history of active participation in interfaith ministry, but the decision to sell our current facilities, purchase new property just west of where we already are, and raise up to twenty-seven million dollars to construct a new church building on that property, was asking us to commit to an entirely new level of participation. Countryside voted on April 2015 to accept this invitation. This decision came after a year and a half of prayer and community discernment and Countryside is now celebrating with our Jewish and Muslim brothers and sisters at the prospect of standing side-by-side as neighbors at the Tri-Faith campus.

The discernment process in making this decision as a congregation was the most extensive process we have used in our congregation to date. Discernment included encouraging prayer and mediation by all members of our community, as well as establishing two main committees: The Research Team and The Dream Team. These

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<sup>5</sup> Quoted from the mission statement of the Tri-Faith Initiative. <https://trifaith.org/>, accessed August 8, 2015.

committees were developed to conduct research and participate in community conversations with each of the participating faith communities, as well as neighborhood representatives within both our present neighborhood and within the neighborhood of the Tri-Faith campus. Countryside initiated a congregation-wide *Forty Days of Discernment* in May of 2014 to focus on the specific question of whether or not we felt we were being called as a congregation to participate in the Tri-Faith Initiative. During this forty-day period, we scheduled classes on Jewish and Muslim faith traditions and history, provided lectures from experts in the area of interfaith ministry, and offered small and large group discussions and dinners. We offered faith community conversations, developed meditation walks on the open land on the Tri-Faith campus, scheduled tours of the synagogue that has already relocated to the shared campus, and offered open chapel time for prayer and meditation. We utilized multi-media by presenting documentary films on interfaith topics, and we developed a specific small group utilizing the Darkwood Brew resource entitled *The Faith of Jesus in a Pluralistic World*. We also scheduled small group conversation sessions to consider the benefits of re-locating as well as the benefits of staying put.

The only issues not discussed during this forty-day discernment period were the financial considerations of relocating. This was intentional. It was important to our research committee that our congregation focus first on whether or not God is calling us to this ministry. This committee's assumption was that if we are not called to this ministry, then the financial data and feasibility studies would not matter and we would not have spent lots of money to develop them for no purpose. The planning committees and council agreed that this discernment would be accomplished in two phases:

discerning our congregational calling from God, and then, if we agreed in our being called, we would proceed with a visioning process that would research all of the facility and monetary resources needed for the relocation.

The invitation to participate in the Tri-Faith Initiative could not have come to our congregation at a better time in our history. We had more than seven years' experience of being a congregation intent on developing ministries designed to participate with God in the world at the time of the invitation, and our spiritual practices and discernment processes reflected this communal maturity. This ministry initiative decision has been the fullest expression of congregational discernment in our history to date. It is still astonishing to me that Countryside Community Church seemingly made the decision to take on the laborious and expensive task of relocating our congregation for the primary reason that they feel called by God to participate in the ministry of the Tri-Faith Initiative.

The data obtained in this research project regarding discernment processes and decision making can help Countryside Community gain clarity concerning discernment in general. This research provided us insight into what practices encouraged in the discernment processes of this communal decision were actually utilized and if our congregation felt these practices were helpful toward making significant ministry decisions as a congregation. With this research, we can now point to an established relationship that allows us to continue discovering practices and developing processes that remain centered on God. Our future decisions can continue to follow the path of our promised future in the life and being of God best as we center our ministry decisions on God's calling for our community.

## History of Leadership

Many factors contribute to an environment conducive to a community-wide discernment process made up of spiritual practices: listening for God's calling to our community, structuring organizational learning in our community, and researching and assessing our communal resources and responsibilities. Leadership is itself a key factor in creating an environment for discernment, and Countryside Community has had Rev. Eric Elnes, Ph.D. as its Senior Pastor since 2008. Dr. Elnes is particularly strong in the area of what Lee Bolman and Terrence Deal call "The Symbolic Frame."<sup>6</sup>

In their book, *Reframing Organizations: Artistry, Choice, and Leadership*, Bolman and Deal recommend that leadership learn to reframe their vision of organization in a variety of ways in order to get a better sense of their context and be more open to creative solutions to the problems and roadblocks that their organization may be facing. Countryside's leadership has strength in all four frames described by Bolman and Deal, (The Structural Frame, the Human Resource Frame, The Political Frame, and the Symbolic Frame), but the current leadership has placed the strongest emphasis on the Human Resource and Symbolic frames.

Bolman and Deal describe the human resource frame as an approach where building relationships is a top priority. "The human resource frame centers on how characteristics of organizations and people shape what they can do for one another. ... Good leaders are sensitive to both task and process. They enlist others actively in

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<sup>6</sup> Lee G. Bolman and Terrence E. Deal, *Reframing Organizations: Artistry, Choice, and Leadership*, 3rd ed. (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2003).

managing both. Effective leaders help group members communicate and work together, while less effective leaders try to dominate and get their own ideas accepted.”<sup>7</sup>

The leadership of Countryside Community led by Dr. Elnes is committed to small group prayer and conversation as the primary method of a discerning community. This leadership focuses on building relationships among community participants and encouraging each group to discern where the mission of God is already at work in the world and how we as a community might participate with God. The vision of the community and the ministry initiatives that allow us to live into God’s calling for us is thus determined from what emerges out of community conversation rather than from a hierarchical mandate. Bolman and Deal continue “... The human resource frame focuses on the relationship between the individual and the organization, but people at work relate mostly to others. ... Relationships, then, figure prominently in both individual job satisfaction and organizational effectiveness.”<sup>8</sup>

Countryside’s leadership is also exceptionally strong in what Bolman and Deal describe as the symbolic frame. The idea behind this frame is that the community is allowed to practice change in a variety of ways in order to determine which change best suits the community. Countryside’s leadership often proposes a variety of options for living into what the community discerns God is calling us to be about through ministry. The community is then allowed to practice what each scenario would create among us and use those experiences to determine which ministry decision best suits our perceived calling to participate with God. The importance of this frame in leadership in our

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 111, 179.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 161.

community is that the decisions are made as a community rather than smaller groups of leadership making decisions on behalf of the whole community. This leadership best suits the congregational polity of the community and allows each individual a role in communal decisions. Bolman and Deal write,

We may be restless, frustrated, or searching to renew our faith. We therefore mount a new play called *Change*. ... The drama allows us to resolve contradiction and envision solutions to our problems. Old conflicts, new blood, borrowed expertise, and vital issues are attracted onto the stage, where they combine and begin to produce new myths and beliefs. Change becomes exciting, uplifting and vital. The message is heartening and spiritually invigorating. There is always hope; the world is always different. Each day is potentially more exciting and full of meaning than the next. If not, change the symbols, revise the drama, develop new myths—or dance.<sup>9</sup>

The influence of the leadership is only minimally studied in the research due to the need to focus primarily on the actions of the community as a whole. I am convinced, however, that the leadership of Countryside plays a major role in making possible the development of an environment that leads to the growth in discernment practices and processes that influence our communal decisions.

An example of this leadership influencing communal decisions came during the congregational meeting to vote on our participation in the Tri-Faith Initiative. Dr. Elnes asked the congregation to join him in a guided group meditation at the very beginning of the meeting. The practice began with the congregation closing their eyes and taking some deep breathes in and out to settle themselves. The next step into the meditation was to raise a question that we wished to discern. Next we were asked to find that place inside of each of us that is a safe place, where no voices of judgment could penetrate and arrows or

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 256.



stones of fear just bounce off and fall away. There is a sense of wellbeing and joy in this place.

This place we find inside ourselves is safe from anything from the outside, as well as anything from the inside. There is no judgment here from others, from ourselves, and even from God. This is the place where our deepest desires come to the surface, without any resistance, expectation, or comment. This is the place where we can listen for a voice that is free of ego, and fears nothing, not even death. This voice we are to listen for is our *true self*. When we hear this voice we feel a sense of surrender, to ourselves and to God. God has created this place so that we hear what our souls most deeply desire without worrying what God may or may not think. Once in this place we were asked to simply bring forward the question that was identified earlier in our meditation and listen to how our true selves respond to it.

We sat in that meditation for twenty minutes prior to introducing the question of our congregational participation as the Christian presence in the Tri-Faith Initiative. Each of us was given space and time in this meditation toward our discernment of this question. Though the meditation was individual in a way, it was also importantly communal. The energy that filled the room opened space for all of us to come together in common prayer and sacred conversation with God and with one another. It was a conversation that included conflict and dissention, but it was a conversation that was framed in the activity of God already among us and Spirit-led to help us find our way to where God was calling us to participate in the world. The leadership in this example is steeped in the symbolic frame as defined by Bolman and Deal and is an important factor

in modeling the use of spiritual practices for discerning our life together in our community.

Another example of the important leadership of Dr. Elnes for building this environment open to discerning is the introduction of *The Phoenix Affirmations* as the foundation for our vision at Countryside Community.<sup>10</sup> These twelve affirmations of the Christian faith were developed by a group of pastors, theologians, and church professionals who were tired of explaining their faith on the basis of what they did not believe (for example, *I am a Christian but I do not read the Bible in a literal interpretation*). The affirmations instead make a positive statement of what it is about Christianity that brings them joy in their faith.

The twelve affirmations of faith are described within a framework of what is referred to as “The Three Great Loves: Love of God, Love of Neighbor, Love of Self.”<sup>11</sup>

#### Love of God

- Affirmation 1: Walking fully in the path of Jesus, without denying the legitimacy of other paths God may provide humanity;
- Affirmation 2: Listening for God's Word which comes through daily prayer and meditation, through studying the ancient testimonies which we call Scripture, and through attending to God's present activity in the world;
- Affirmation 3: Celebrating the God whose Spirit pervades and whose glory is reflected in all of God's Creation, including the earth and its ecosystems, the sacred and secular, the Christian and non-Christian, the human and non-human;
- Affirmation 4: Expressing our love in worship that is as sincere, vibrant, and artful as it is scriptural.

#### Love of Neighbor

- Affirmation 5: Engaging people authentically, as Jesus did, treating all as creations made in God's very image, regardless of race, gender, sexual orientation, age, physical or mental ability, nationality, or economic class;

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<sup>10</sup> Elnes, *The Phoenix Affirmations*.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., xx.

- Affirmation 6: Standing, as Jesus does, with the outcast and oppressed, the denigrated and afflicted, seeking peace and justice with or without the support of others;
- Affirmation 7: Preserving religious freedom and the Church's ability to speak prophetically to government by resisting the commingling of Church and State;
- Affirmation 8: Walking humbly with God, acknowledging our own shortcomings while honestly seeking to understand and call forth the best in others, including those who consider us their enemies;

#### Love of Self

- Affirmation 9: Basing our lives on the faith that, in Christ, all things are made new, and that we, and all people, are loved beyond our wildest imagination—for eternity;
- Affirmation 10: Claiming the sacredness of both our minds and our hearts, recognizing that faith and science, doubt and belief serve the pursuit of truth;
- Affirmation 11: Caring for our bodies, and insisting on taking time to enjoy the benefits of prayer, reflection, worship and recreation in addition to work;
- Affirmation 12: Acting on the faith that we are born with a meaning and purpose; a vocation and ministry that serves to strengthen and extend God's realm of love.<sup>12</sup>

*The Phoenix Affirmations* was edited by Dr. Elnes and introduced to Countryside Community when he was called as their Senior Pastor in 2008. From the beginning of his call, Dr. Elnes introduced the framework of these Three Great Loves that became the primary lens for our congregation to begin listening for God's voice among them. These voices of God, neighbor, and self, became foundational consultants for discernment of all kinds within the ministry at Countryside. Now these voices are essential elements for creating the environment that allows us to see the value of taking the time to listen intentionally to one another and to God in each of our conversations.

This environment for discernment developed by Dr. Elnes and the leaders of Countryside has led our community into a diversity of practices that provide the time and the space necessary for seeking the will of God for the ministries of our community.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

These practices are developed into discernment processes that deepen our relationships with God and each other while we explore the opportunities for ministry with our neighborhood.

### **Summary**

Countryside Community will have a greater understanding of how to further develop our overall communal discernment in order to participate more fully with the life and being of God in the world through exploring the nature of our practices.

Countryside's learning environment, the evolution of the practices which make up the discernment processes currently encouraged at Countryside, and the relationship between these processes and the ministry decisions made by this community are the focus of this project.

This research is framed by this historical lens and fueled by Countryside's capacity to explore and engage in our unique conversation with where God is calling us to serve in our communities. We do not pretend to know God's will for our ministry together based on denominational or cultural assumptions of what the role of the Christian congregation ought to be in our neighborhoods. Instead we take the time to listen, to one another and to God, as we practice our way into becoming most fully who we hear God calling us to be as a community led by God's Spirit among us.

## CHAPTER 3

### THEORETICAL LENSES

*Reality changes shape and meaning as we are in it. It is constantly new. We are required to be there, as active participants. It can't happen without us, and nobody can do it for us.*<sup>1</sup>

Margaret Wheatley is describing *our* reality; the reality we face every day as a community of creation. In this reality, humanity is constantly seeking ways to interpret what is happening all around us, all the time. We seem compelled within this process to not only observe what is happening, but also to discover meaning within it. Wheatley continues, “One quality particular to human beings is the need to know ‘Why?’ We need to understand and ascribe meaning to things. ... With meaning as our centering place, we can journey through the realms of chaos and make sense of the world. With meaning as our attractor, we can recreate ourselves to carry forward what we value most.”<sup>2</sup>

One way of making sense of the world around us and carrying forward those things we value most is by developing discernment practices. These individual and communal discernment practices help us to participate in community decisions regarding our congregational ministry in our neighborhood. This study examines the five major congregational decisions on ministry made at Countryside Community since 2010 (described in the last chapter) from a variety of lenses in order to gain a better

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<sup>1</sup> Wheatley, *Leadership and the New Science*, 192.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 133-134.

understanding of how participation in discernment practices may, or may not, have had an influence on the outcomes. I concentrated on four distinct lenses for interpreting my research, as I looked toward literature from social scientists and others, like Wheatley, who are working in the areas of organizational and community development. The four lenses include: *practices*, *emergent theory*, *abundant community*, and two, *five-phase discernment processes of decision making*.

In the introduction to this research, I discussed how Diana Butler Bass observed a shifting of the natural ordering of faith to belonging, behaving, and believing. This shift allows relationships to be the basis for developing communal practices, which then lead to shared experiences that inform our faith and transform our being in the world. To address this shift, we need to take a closer look at how our behaviors or practices in our congregations deepen the belief in our community's participation with God. What are the practices of a community of faith? How do we learn them? How do they influence what we believe and how we make decisions? These are the questions explored next, in order to help interpret and evaluate the relationship between our practices at Countryside and the most recent ministry decisions of our community.

### **Practices**

Many theologians and social scientists alike are asking about the relationship between practices and believing and what impact *practices* have on building a communal environment for interpreting the world around us. To better understand our role as a participant in the world, both as an individual and as part of a faith community, we too must explore this relationship in our own contexts. Miroslav Volf asks the question this way: "Do we first accept Christian beliefs and then engage in Christian practices, or the

other way around? ... In most cases Christian practices come first and Christian beliefs follow—or rather, beliefs are already entailed in practices, so that their explicit espousing becomes a matter of bringing to consciousness what is implicit in the engagement of practices themselves.”<sup>3</sup>

Does it matter what types of practices we use if it is true that practices actually shape belief? This question is answered differently in each community, but it is a question that each community ought to be asking as each community discerns together their community’s participation with God. It is important to understand what practices are and how our communities are using these practices before we can evaluate their influence on our community life and the decisions we make. Dorothy Bass defines practices as follows: “Practices address fundamental needs and conditions through concrete human acts.”<sup>4</sup> Margaret Wheatley describes practices as those ways of behaving within our communities that allow us to literally live into a new way of being in the world.<sup>5</sup> Wheatley goes on to say how current science supports this theory of behaving our way into being by describing how our brains actually change, physically, based on our environment and how we think. Science tells us we can expand the capacities of our brains just by repeating what we do, or how we think about something, even if it is just for a short amount of time. Wheatley writes, “Our brains change as we interact with our environment, as we live our lives. Our brains respond to what we do and, perhaps more astonishingly, to what we think. Our thoughts and actions, if repeated even for only brief

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<sup>3</sup> Volf and Bass, *Practicing Theology*, 255-256.

<sup>4</sup> Bass and Copeland, *Practicing Our Faith*, Kindle position 572-573.

<sup>5</sup> Wheatley, *So Far from Home*.

periods of time, send messages to the brain and the brain responds by creating physical changes that strengthen our capacities in these particular areas.”<sup>6</sup>

Butler Bass’ idea that another shift may be happening that places practices prior to beliefs appears to be supported by both science and our actual experience at Countryside Community when we look at the five major ministry initiatives taken since 2010. Countryside has always had a variety of practices that support and reflect our beliefs as a faith community. An increased interest in the specific types of practices became apparent as the community began living into their beliefs through developing new ministries that deepened their relationship with their wider community. The community also showed signs at that time of losing confidence in secular or corporate approaches to decision making in general. They no longer expect the traditional practice of allowing the pastoral leadership to choose a vision for the community and then developing a five-year strategic plan for ministry around it.

Many folks at Countryside Community have begun asking instead if their planned program ministries are what God might be calling them to do in their neighborhoods. They have also begun seeking new ways to approach how they gather information to inform their decisions for ministry, including asking questions about their ministry programs within their prayer practices. It appears that as a result of increased participation in the prayer practices of the community, there is also an increase in the community conversations and the discernment processes surrounding the decisions needing to be made.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 44.



Countryside Community currently encourages and teaches a variety of discernment practices as a way of behaving our way into our beliefs and opening ourselves to discovering what God is already doing in the world through our surrounding neighborhood. Countryside now chooses to put practices first and we hope to find ways to articulate our beliefs, not only through affirmations of faith, but also in developing ministry opportunities that encourage our community to participate with God and share in all the wonder of the energy that surrounds us. We believe this priority heightens our curiosity, awareness, generosity, and our engagement with all of creation, leading us toward an abundant community for all.

Alan Roxburgh, in his book *Joining God, Remaking Church, Changing the World: The New Shape of the Church in Our Time*, tells us that practices help us as we work together to stop focusing on simply finding solutions to perpetuating what we have always been, and instead focus on how God is already working in the neighborhoods where we are struggling to engage. He writes, “Practices allow us to craft together a common life congruent with what we desire as God’s people.”<sup>7</sup> Roxburgh believes we are a people who move in two directions simultaneously. “First, we desire to be released from ecclesiocentric defaults, from our obsession with fixing the church and making it work, from our focus on ourselves as the main actors and instead toward God as the chief actor. Second, we desire to be a people shaped by the way of Jesus who go lightly into our neighborhoods to discern and join with what God is already doing ahead of us.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Roxburgh, *Joining God, Remaking Church, Changing the World*, Kindle Location 1142.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., Kindle Location 1142-1146.

Practices are those things that set up the environment for discernment in our community. Countryside Community desires to participate with God in the world. We accomplish our discernment of the activity of God and our calling from God through our practices of being community. We have no other agenda but to listen to God's voice within our conversations and be attentive to the ministries that emerge from them.

### **Emergence Theory**

The primary source for understanding emergence theory comes from organizational behavior and management consultant, Margaret Wheatley. She describes the shift in current scientific thought from reduction science to *emergence* as a way to explain how change happens in the world. Wheatley explains that reductionists believed you could understand the whole of something by dismantling its parts and analyzing each to examine its properties. On the one hand, one conclusion of the properties could be that the whole of the thing analyzed is identical to the properties of its parts. This understanding makes it possible to change the whole of something simply by changing one of its parts. The science of quantum physics, on the other hand, now describes a world that works through the relational properties of *emergence*: "the creation of new properties that do not resemble the parts and that therefore can never be understood by dissection."<sup>9</sup>

Wheatley explains emergence, saying that to understand it we must shift our perspectives and pay attention to the whole of something rather than looking at its parts one at a time. A part is identified through its relation to the whole. She says that

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<sup>9</sup> Wheatley, *So Far from Home*, 28.

individual elements are fundamental to emergence since each part acts in isolation at the start of a process and makes decisions based on their individual needs. The emergence begins when individual elements start to connect with one another. Wheatley writes, “Individual actions that were insignificant start to have new consequences because they are interconnected. At some point a system will emerge with new and surprising properties that, from that point on, will profoundly influence the behaviors of the individual parts. What emerges is always surprising because it is so different from the parts that created it.”<sup>10</sup>

Emergence theory supports the idea that creation is happening all the time, in many and various ways. The individual parts of that creation are important on their own. When these individual parts begin to interact or relate to one another, however, something altogether new is created that cannot be undone. This new creation is then placed into relationship with everything else around it. Emergence theory is important to the areas of practices and discernment processes because it gives us an expanded perception on the relational aspect of creation and shows us how we might work together in this relational way that encourages openness and flexibility in our processes and decision making.

This emergent way of acting in the world may be a challenge for most communities, as it demands that we wait to experience what emerges to see how it relates to everything else around it before we can begin to see where it might take us. An emergence theory of change reminds us that creation is not predictable and therefore not able to be controlled, but instead needs to be discovered. We must understand the

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 30.

multiple causes and conditions that go into the unfolding nature of creation before it becomes clear how we might participate with whatever emerges. Communal practices that are developed into discernment processes provide opportunities for such a discovery, and will provide better insight for us to make decisions concerning our next best steps into creation. Wheatley writes,

Emergence is a process whereby interactions create something new and different that cannot be changed. Once something has emerged, it is here to stay. The only way to create something different is to start over, to begin again. ... Emergence demands a different relationship with life, where we're curious, open, alert. The only thing we can predict is that life will surprise us. We can't see what is coming until it arrives, and once something has emerged, we have to work with what is.<sup>11</sup>

The reality of emergence further supports the need for congregations, as self-organizing entities, to wait, watch, and be alert to the movement of God already present and happening among us. It is only in discovering what emerges from the discernment period of intentionally listening to God that a congregation is best able to discern how they might be called to participate with God through communal ministry decisions.

This idea of *emergence* is shared within many areas of applied organizational theories and disciplines. Landon Whitsitt, a Presbyterian pastor, author, and radio host, speaks to this idea of emergence within the phenomena of gathering collective wisdom from many places in the *open source* movement. The term “open source” is most commonly recognized within a discussion regarding computer software. Open source here refers to who has access to both see and edit the basic instructions of the software as well as who has the freedom to determine how the software might be used. Bruce Perens is the author of the *Open Source Definition (OSD)*, which describes ten criteria needed

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 32-33.

for any software to be considered *open source*.<sup>12</sup> The particularly emergent nature of this open source movement is in the idea that many people should have access to source code in order to share in the tasks of updating information, making corrections, expanding lists of related ideas or resources. The more people involved in the conversation, the greater information can be gathered concerning the overall knowledge of an identified topic of study. This concept is most popularly exemplified within the online encyclopedia called *Wikipedia*.<sup>13</sup>

Landon Whitsitt applies this emergent practice of open source development of information to an organizational theory for congregations. He calls his approach *Open Source Church* and defines what he means using Eric S. Raymond's models of development called "the cathedral and the bazaar" created for a conference of Linux developers in 1997:

*The cathedral:* The source code may or may not be released with the final product, but during the development process, a select few people have access to the code.

*The bazaar:* The source code is developed in full view of the entire world. Anyone who is interested can participate in the development process.<sup>14</sup>

Whitsitt says he prefers the bazaar model of development for congregations because, like *Wikipedia*, churches can benefit greatly from what might emerge when several sources come together, with a clear purpose and organizational parameters, collecting the "wisdom of the crowds," experiencing "diversity," "independence of thought,"

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<sup>12</sup> Whitsitt, *Open Source Church*, 9-29.

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.wikipedia.org> accessed March 2, 2016.

<sup>14</sup> Whitsitt, *Open Source Church*, 30.

“decentralization,” and the “aggregation of collected wisdom.”<sup>15</sup> He writes, “Being an open source church is about making sure people can do the things they need to do to make church work for them. Too often churches and their organizational structures are so firmly established that it is virtually impossible for someone to come to the church and begin contributing to its life in a meaningful way.”<sup>16</sup>

Peter Rollins is an emergent theologian who speaks to the properties and practices of *emergence* in the area of re-discovering ideas of orthodoxy and heresy within the *emerging community*. Rollins describes emerging communities as those who reject absolutism, relativism, and right belief, and instead follow a more mystical idea of “believing in the right way.” Rollins’ description allows for an expansion of the notion of orthodoxy to become a *way of being in the world* rather than being simply considered the opposite of heresy or the wrong *belief about the world*.<sup>17</sup> The emerging community for Rollins is opening a theological conversation that allows us to drop the reductionist thinking about God within the limited boundaries of reason, and allows us to look beyond either/or conversations of right or wrong doctrine. Emergence opens us instead to a way of living that embraces the experienced reality of *God with us*, rather than gathering together to talk *about* God. This emergent conversation asks us to acknowledge and articulate our experiences of God in the world and use them to help us interpret how we see God acting around us. This type of emergent conversation allows us greater freedom

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 67-72.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 3-4.

<sup>17</sup> Rollins, *How (Not) to Speak of God*, 2-4.

to discover our calling to participate in the unfolding of the life and being of God in creation.

*Appreciative Inquiry* is another good example of an emergent theory. This is a process of bringing people together in conversation to share stories of the best of the organization, and imagine what a future developed on these best stories might look like. Mark Lau Branson has done a lot of work with appreciative inquiry in congregations and defines its value this way: “Appreciative Inquiry assumes that all organizations have significant life forces, and these forces are available in stories and imaginations. ... by discovering the best and most valuable narratives and qualities of an organization, participants can construct a new way that has the most important links to the past and the most helpful images of the future.”<sup>18</sup>

The emergent process of appreciative inquiry helps congregations come together in conversation, as they imagine how this conversation may take them into a meaningful future together with their larger communities. It requires a curiosity for how things have been in the past, the resources available to them in their present, and imaginations bent toward innovative approaches in their future. What emerges from these conversations is a congregation adaptable and eager for positive change. Appreciative inquiry is used here as both a method of emergence as well as a congregational practice that encourages and provides new information for communal decisions, leading to new behaviors that build relationships in ministry.

Each of these emergence theories act both as method and practice, and help to show how individual actions connect with one another until a new system emerges,

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<sup>18</sup> Branson, *Memories, Hopes, and Conversations*, 23.

making new possibilities available where there once were none.<sup>19</sup> The importance of this theory on our practices, either as individuals or as a community, sets up the theoretical framework for the possibility of an abundant community that is led by the Spirit.

### **The Abundant Community**

Peter Block and John McKnight, in *The Abundant Community*, describe how communities become competent and self-organizing through a set of shared properties that are acted upon through communal practices, or the sharing of gifts, within the community.<sup>20</sup> They point to a community that is focused on the gifts of its members, nurtures associations or relationships among its members, and offers hospitality in the form of welcoming the stranger in their midst. A community must count on an open system of *emergence* or *self-organization*, rather than a managed system with imposed order and defined space in order to encourage the sharing of its gifts. McKnight and Block explain that congregations need to “create order without predictability,” which is where emergent design and chaos theory can help.<sup>21</sup> Emergent order does not presume that order is predictable. What it does is allow you to move forward without fear of being *wrong*, and instead places the purpose for moving on discovering what could be.

Building community within organizations happens in much the same self-organizing way. Dwight Zscheile addresses this in his discussion on *Organizing for Innovation*.<sup>22</sup> Zscheile argues that we need each other’s knowledge and perspective in

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<sup>19</sup> Whitsitt, *Open Source Church*; Branson, *Memories, Hopes, and Conversations*.

<sup>20</sup> McKnight and Block, *The Abundant Community*.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

<sup>22</sup> Zscheile, *The Agile Church*, 121-122.



order to address those situations and questions for which we have yet to find answers. We can learn from each other while we discover new ways of being in the world as we share in conversation and common inquiry.

There is no right or wrong way to gather people together to be in community. Processes that are developed to encourage conversation and discernment need to be open and flexible so that people within the community can enter the discussions at any point and move through them at their own pace. A community needs time and a safe place to be able to process assumptions from their past experiences, their expectations for present possibilities, and their hopes for living into their futures. Creating such spaces for self-organizing people to come together is vital to abundant community.

This shift toward *abundant community* comes at a time when community itself is said to be eroding.<sup>23</sup> Impersonal institutions are running the global markets, which, in turn, determine world economies and relationships between nations. This globalization benefits a few, while separating most from any participation in the decisions that determine their local situations. The community is breaking into isolated and lonely people, forced into solving their own problems, and working their own way forward into self-determined futures. Nancy Tatom Ammerman, in *Congregation and Community*, agrees that there has indeed been a shift from the communal to the individual. She says that pre-modern relationships had emotional depth that engaged people in each other's lives across much of daily living. In modern society, however, people interact on the basis of reason and individual achievement rather than community development.

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<sup>23</sup> Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2000).

Ammerman writes, “The expectation of much of this century’s social theory has assumed, then, the loss of community and the rise of atomized individuals.”<sup>24</sup>

This shift in social relationships is a major factor in the isolation, apathy, and distrust driving people out of churches and away from participation in institutionalized community of any kind, including Parent-Teacher organizations, Public Service Initiatives, and secular networks like the Rotary Club or Kiwanis. McKnight and Block say that even beyond being isolated from the institutions making all the decisions, we have also lost our extended family relationships, which makes community connections to our neighborhoods even more important. They write, “In the process of outsourcing care for the troubles of being human in a modern society, we have lost a space where we can be personal, be fallible. We no longer have a space where others have to accept us because we are family or a part of their community.”<sup>25</sup>

People in our neighborhoods are looking for new ways to be connected. They are no longer looking to those traditional systems and institutions that have always supplied those connections for them. Neighbors are finding each other on the bleachers of the local baseball fields and in community farmers markets, microbrew pubs, and children’s museums. Neighbors are engaging one another in spaces where they don’t have to meet any particular standard. They are gathering at places where time is granted for sharing stories about what is going on in their everyday lives.

The whole sense of *community* is shifting and being redefined. National identities and patriotism are still a part of who we are as people together in society, but

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<sup>24</sup> Ammerman and Farnsley, *Congregation & Community*, 349.

<sup>25</sup> McKnight and Block, *The Abundant Community*, 55.

personalized attention and participation in activities where we live are beginning to bring people together in new ways. McKnight and Block see this as a shift toward what they call an *abundant community*: “The abundant community embraces fallibility and humanness. ... [We] trust people and have faith in them—not on the basis of performance or perfection, but on the basis of their humanity and our personal relationship. Accepting people’s fallibility is a defining dimension of community.”<sup>26</sup>

Churches are called by God and sent into our neighborhoods helping people to connect to one another in meaningful ways. Ammerman points out how churches can participate with people in their neighborhoods in ways that help reshape this new way of being community. She argues that churches are places where people actually choose to spend time talking to one another about things that matter to them, and people are still choosing to incorporate faith communities into their social constructs as well as into their physical spaces. Ammerman writes, “As people construct and reconstruct urban neighborhoods, they have not neglected to build religious institutions that will sustain them. The religious associational energy we have seen expended in nine communities is a window on the continuing importance of religious gathering places in the nation’s cultural landscape.”<sup>27</sup>

People are pushing for new ways to build community through conversation about what is most personal for us even on the national and global fronts. Robert Bellah in *The Good Society* talks about the United States using Vaclav Havel’s idea of replacing the

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>27</sup> Ammerman and Farnsley, *Congregation & Community*, 370.

“politics of fear” with the “politics of trust.”<sup>28</sup> Bellah writes, “We need to talk about our problems and our future with a richer vocabulary than the indices that measure markets and defense systems alone. Words like ‘attention’ and ‘distraction,’ ‘cultivations’ and ‘exploitation’ may begin to encourage conversations in which we can define our priorities, our needs to strengthen existing institutions, and our needs to create new ones.”<sup>29</sup>

Global issues that affect us where we live are also becoming a galvanizing force for this newly defined community, which gathers together to hold governments and institutional powers accountable for community care. James Gustave Speth, founder of the Natural Resources Defense Council and former Dean of the Yale School of Forestry who currently teaches at Vermont Law School, says there are many indicators that are telling us that the old system of institutions defining our communities is dying. He points to the many examples of sustainable communities developing around support for local businesses as well as pointing to those “benefit and worker-owned businesses that prioritize community and environment over profit and growth.”<sup>30</sup>

Speth also sees the church as a necessary partner in building sustainable communities. He is quoted in a speech to local clergy saying,

I used to think the top environmental problems facing the world were global warming, environmental degradation and ecosystem collapse, and that we scientists could fix those problems with enough science. But I was wrong. The real problem is not those three items, but greed, selfishness and apathy. And for

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<sup>28</sup> Václav Havel, *Politics and Conscience*, Voices from Czechoslovakia, 2 (Stockholm: Charta 77 Foundation, 1986).

<sup>29</sup> Bellah, *The Good Society*, 272.

<sup>30</sup> James Gustave Speth in an article entitled *America the Possible: A Manifesto* from the March/April issue of *Orion* <http://www.yesmagazine.org/new-economy/america-the-possible-a-manifesto> accessed November 24, 2016. 18-23.

that we need a spiritual and cultural transformation. And we scientists don't know how to do that. We need your help.<sup>31</sup>

Churches need to be intentional in working to rebuild trust in the neighborhood and reshaping the expectations our neighbors have about church in order to be an effective partner in creating caring communities. The master narrative concerning the role of churches in the neighborhood also needs to change. This change will occur when churches stop thinking and acting as an institution and instead reach out in their neighborhoods as a community called and sent by God to be a partner in life's journey.

One way to achieve this shift of perspective and expectation is for churches to create safe places for neighbors to come together in conversation. Zscheile suggests the concept of a "holding environment" as defined by Ron Heifetz and Marty Linsky, as a way for churches to create such safe places: "This is what a holding environment provides—a container in which a community can name and wrestle together with its most challenging questions without being overwhelmed by anxiety, shutting down, or disintegrating."<sup>32</sup>

Countryside Community strives to be a neighborhood participant in developing an abundant community. Our use of practices for intentional listening, communal conversation, and discernment, allows us to engage our neighborhood in meaningful ways. We encourage open conversation simply by providing space like coffee bars and reception halls. We also develop ministries that move us outside of our walls and into our neighborhood spaces through such ministries as community gardening and social justice

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<sup>31</sup> Quoted by Rev. Kim Morrow from Interfaith Power and Light, Nebraska, at a conversation on the environmental with clergy, held at Countryside Community Church, Omaha NE, January 2015.

<sup>32</sup> Zscheile, *The Agile Church*, 96; Heifetz and Linsky, *Leadership on the Line*, 102-107.

advocacy in the local legislature or public utilities commissions. Wherever our neighbors live their lives is where we want to be as a faith community called and sent by God.

Countryside Community makes decisions concerning our participation in the life of our neighborhood through intentionally developed processes of discernment. How these processes are developed varies based on what we hope to achieve through them. The next lens discussed suggests two possible models for developing and evaluating whatever processes we might need to best discern our identity as a called and sent community.

### **Five-Phase Discernment Processes**

Shared practices within emergent environments are continually reviewed and reformed depending on their ability to foster certain capacities that make for *abundance* in a community. The importance of a process for review and reform of these practices becomes apparent as the community participates together in practices that are designed to inform and empower their decision making. The *five-phase discernment process* for making decisions offered by Craig Van Gelder in his book *The Ministry of the Missional Church: A Community led by the Spirit*, would prove useful for just such a need for ongoing review of community practices.<sup>33</sup>

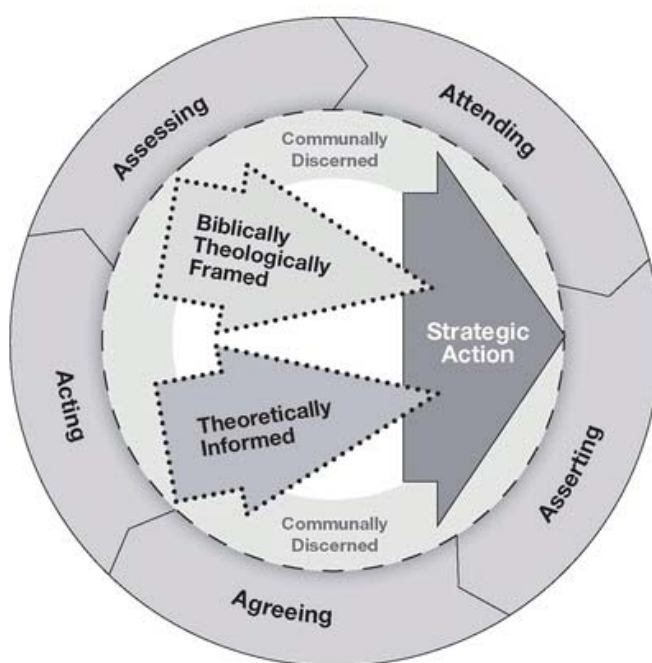
Van Gelder's process is developed with the assumption that communities are continually being challenged with issues and problems that arise from constantly changing realities. A discernment process designed to address this assumption needs to be fluid and interactive in order for persons to enter at any point in the process, engaging

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<sup>33</sup> Van Gelder, *The Ministry of the Missional Church*.

in the conversation at different speeds, with varying degrees of background information. Van Gelder developed this process for use within congregations and thus speaks to the need for framing all discernment both biblically and theologically, but he also notes this process could be used wherever a community conversation engages common values and beliefs.

The following figure from Van Gelder's description shows that this process is interactive and engages the whole community, both inside the congregation and those members of the community surrounding the congregation. It is a process within a process as it is framed by a five-fold, iterative process called *The 5A's: Attending, Asserting, Agreeing, Acting, and Assessing*.<sup>34</sup>



**Figure 3.1. Craig Van Gelder's Discernment Process**

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 116-119.

The purpose of this discernment process is to help congregations who hope to discover their calling through an engagement with scripture, an engagement with their cultural context, and through a self-understanding of what it means to be a community created by the Spirit in order to take action in the world. Van Gelder writes, “Decisions that lead to choices means that the community of faith will engage in strategic action that is communally discerned, biblically and theologically framed, and theoretically informed.”<sup>35</sup>

Van Gelder’s suggested discernment process is helpful as an ongoing assessment for reviewing the elements of Countryside Community’s discernment processes to determine whether our practices together engage all the aspects that provide for an informed communal decision. This process would allow us to enter discussions from any point within the 5A’s cycle and can be utilized by any one of our small groups, boards, or committees to evaluate their specific ministry opportunities, as well as being useful when discerning within a full congregational process.

A second model for discernment comes from Peter Senge’s approach to organizational insight and review of systems. Senge’s approach is another example of an emergent process that could be used to assess the practices at Countryside Community. In his book, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of a Learning Organization*, Senge describes five tools that help organizations learn about who they are and how they interact with one another and in their larger communities.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 105.

<sup>36</sup> Senge, *The Fifth Discipline*, 7-12.



**Table 3.1. Peter Senge's Discernment Process**

Personal Mastery	The discipline of continually clarifying and deepening our personal vision, of focusing our energies, of developing patience, and of seeing reality objectively.
Mental Models	Deeply ingrained assumptions, generalizations, or even pictures of images that influence how we understand the world and how we take action.
Shared Vision	Involves the skills of unearthing shared “pictures of the future” that foster genuine commitment and enrollment rather than compliance.
Team Learning	Starts with “dialogue,” the capacity of members of a team to suspend assumptions and enter into a genuine, “thinking together.”
Systems Thinking	The fifth discipline. It is the discipline that integrates the disciplines, fusing them into a coherent body of theory and practice.... By enhancing each of the other disciplines, it continually reminds us that the whole can exceed the sum of its parts.

Senge suggests we need to go to a deeper level of learning for new realities to emerge and change how we participate with them. This depth of understanding includes exploring how our story is connected to the larger story of creation and how we might be called into action within our current context. He writes, “The key to the deeper levels of learning is that the larger living wholes of which we are an active part are not inherently static. Like all living systems, they both conserve features essential to their existence and

seek to evolve. When we become more aware of the dynamic whole, we also become more aware of what is emerging.”<sup>37</sup>

Senge’s approach to developing a discernment process is helpful to Countryside Community as it encourages us to identify who we think God is calling us to be and giving us permission to identify and let go of any assumptions or expectations that no longer support that emerging identity. We would then be free to imagine our possible futures and be in conversation with one another to evaluate whether or not this imagined future fulfills our hopes for partnering with our neighbors in meaningful ways. The last step for us in this process would be to use the information gathered to inform any decisions made and to develop action steps that bring our imagined futures into a lived reality.

Other discernment processes are available for helping both individuals and groups stay attentive to the life and being of God in the world and how we are called to participate in what is already happening all around us. These types of discernment processes include ancient practices from St. Ignatius of Loyola, the Rule of Benedict, or working through the practice of Mindfulness.<sup>38</sup> These processes were developed in a variety of cultures and are helpful in discerning our future participation with God, but the

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<sup>37</sup> Peter M. Senge and Society for Organizational Learning, *Presence: Exploring Profound Change in People, Organizations, and Society*, Kindle edition (New York, NY: Doubleday, 2005), Kindle Locations 200-204, 214-216.

<sup>38</sup> Ignatius, *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius Loyola: A New Translation by Elisabeth Meier Tellow*, Resources in Religion 3 (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1987); Benedict, *The Rule of St. Benedict*, Dover ed. (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2007). Mindfulness as defined by Wikipedia: “The practice of *mindfulness* involves being aware moment-to-moment, of one’s subjective conscious experience from a first-person perspective. When practicing mindfulness, one becomes aware of one’s “stream of consciousness.” The skill of mindfulness can be gradually developed using meditational practices that are described in detail in the Buddhist tradition.” For more on the practice of mindfulness, see Wikipedia <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mindfulness>, accessed March 11, 2016.

processes suggested by Van Gelder and Senge help us take a step beyond discernment into an evaluation of those practices we encourage within our congregation for the purpose of communal decision making.

### Summary

It is important in this research to understand the impact *practices* have on building a communal environment for interpreting the world around us, and what our role might be, both as an individual and as part of a faith community. We learn from our practices to pay attention to the present and future possibilities emerging for us in our ministry with our surrounding communities. These possibilities help to shape and reform our conversations with one another as we work toward building an abundant community. Countryside must continually review and reform our processes as we continue to live into this abundance, while developing new approaches to listening and practicing together. A key step in this process is the letting go of those practices that stand in the way of our seeking that which helps us most fully participate in the life and being of God in creation.

These lenses inform this research by directing our attention to the relationship between the practices we share and the decisions we make as a community. Countryside Community can therefore utilize these lenses to develop deeper, more effective, discernment processes that lead us to deeper relationships with one another, our neighbors, and with God. Countryside Community is literally practicing our way into believing and then acting on those beliefs through the decisions we discern together. Margaret Wheatley tells us that the way nature organizes itself supports this relationship between practices and decision making:

A deterministic universe is nowhere to be found. We have the power to determine our futures. What we do matters. Whether we take care of ourselves, our physical

and mental selves, matters. What we engage in, what we think about, matters. Life is right here, willing to create the capacities we need to support us. But we must be the ones to consciously choose these capacities.<sup>39</sup>

## CHAPTER 4

### BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL LENSES

There are several biblical stories that speak to the role of *practicing our way into believing*. Prophets and disciples have opened themselves to listening for God's voice within their meditation and prayers throughout the biblical narrative, and have been led to places where God's presence is inescapable. This chapter reviews I Kings 19:9-13, Exodus 13:21-22, and Acts 15:4-29, as three stories in our scripture which exemplify the people of God seeking out God's presence in their everyday decisions and direction. It also explores the theological concepts of *perichoresis*, *spiritual practices*, and *discernment* that have been further developed in recent years by several theologians. These theologians take seriously what it means to intentionally seek out the activity of God, who is already engaging creation toward its promised future. I use these three theological concepts as lenses through which to explore ways communities can actively pursue where God is moving and how our communities might be called to participate best with God in the world.

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<sup>39</sup> Wheatley, *So Far from Home*, 46.

### Biblical Lenses

Three particular biblical stories come to mind when I look to scripture for insight regarding spiritual practices and how they lead God's people into a lived experience of God's activity in the world: I Kings 19:9-13 shows us how intentional listening keeps us seeking until we are confident that the voice we are hearing is God's voice; Exodus 13:21-22 speaks to the trust developed in our relationship with God as we follow God's lead toward our promised futures; and Acts 15:4-29 provides examples of communities which, through intentionally listening and trusting in God's activity, are led by the Spirit. These biblical narratives reveal to us a God who is steadfast and chooses to be present with us as we live into the fullest expression of who we are created to be. They also reveal a people who constantly seek an awareness of God's presence, who trust that God is directing their paths toward meaning and purpose, and who act in response to God's calling for them in the world.

#### Intentional Listening: I Kings 19:9-13

*Intentional listening* is portrayed biblically through the story of Elijah in I Kings 19. Elijah runs from his calling as a prophet, fearing for his life, and is met by an angel who directs him to Mt. Horeb to wait for God. Elijah listens intently for God's appearance in this space, but is met first by a mountain-splitting wind, followed by an earthquake, and then a firestorm. God's presence is not felt in any of these events, as Elijah's fear and uncertainty persists. It wasn't until all of these events had come to pass that Elijah, listening even more intently, is able to discern God's presence within the *sheer silence*, and is led to the mouth of the cave to listen for God's voice.

Dan Simundson's commentary on I Kings 19 says, "When we need an appearance or a word from God, God will provide it, but we may not recognize it because it comes in ways we had not expected. ... If we are not attentive, we may miss it and not know that God has actually been there."<sup>1</sup> Elijah is able to wait on God through a persistent expectation that he would indeed hear God's voice, even though the terrifying effects of mighty winds shattering the shelters which protect him, the earth shifting the very ground on which he stands, and a huge fire which blocks his only escape route. The cave in which Elijah waits is a safe space amidst the chaos of the world, a space where Elijah can listen for God without fear, and be certain that he follows God's voice, rather than just reacting through fearful responses to the destruction in the world around him.

The role of the church in our current time is to create such safe places that grant our communities time and space to wait on God. Ron Heifetz and Marty Linsky describe these kinds of spaces as "holding environments," places where the work of adaptive change (changes that require people in the community to change their values, their behavior, or their attitudes) can take place.<sup>2</sup>

Churches are called to be those places where people are given time, space, and resources that allow them to consider how God might be speaking to their situation and calling them to action within it. Elijah's story exemplifies the need for spaces that allow us to drop our defenses and our fears long enough to seek God's voice when making decisions regarding our calling and the direction of our ministries. Churches can be this

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel J. Simundson, "Comfort and Challenge: Prophetic Preaching in Pentecost," *Word & World* 16, no. 3 (1996): 371-372.

<sup>2</sup> Heifetz and Linsky, *Leadership on the Line*, 102-107.

type of space when they allow people the opportunity to shift their way of thinking from just one *right way* of responding, to considering several different methods and interpretations of the situations to which God is calling them.

#### Trusting in God's Leading: Exodus 13:21-22

Countryside Community's first step in discernment is waiting and listening for God's voice and call to action. We need to trust that our next steps into participation with God in the world are steps that follow where God is leading us. The story of God guiding the Israelites through the desert from Exodus 13 gives us an example of how God leads and how God's people recognized the direction in which God was moving them.

The Lord went in front of them in a pillar of cloud by day, to lead them along the way, and in a pillar of fire by night, to give them light, so that they might travel by day and by night. Neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night left its place in front of the people. (Ex 13:21-22)

The biblical story of the people of Israel exiled in Egypt serves us well as a metaphor for examining who we are as church and for listening more closely to what God is calling us to be about as we participate with what God is already doing in the world. The people of Israel had forgotten their distinct identity as the people of God and about God's covenant to be with them as they traveled out from their exile in Egypt. They wandered in the wilderness for forty years, and in their wandering, remembered who they were as they experienced many ups and downs in their relationship with God, themselves, and with each other. The Israelites followed the pillars of cloud by day and the pillars of fire by night, listening, questioning, testing, and learning to trust that God was indeed present with them throughout their journey and that they were indeed God's beloved people.

Countryside Community can look to this metaphor for direction in traversing our own wilderness wanderings and learn to recognize the voice of God in defining and directing us as we live into the discovery that we too are God's beloved people in the world. David Whyte, a poet living in the Pacific Northwest, reminds us of the benefits of exile in remembering who we are: "Remembering what we have forgotten is the first practical step home; the opening of a tidal gate that brings us into contact with the larger, stronger currents of existence. Exile and forgetting are natural states for most human beings, but so are remembering and recalling."<sup>3</sup>

The people of Israel endured much suffering and pain as slaves in Egypt, causing them to question if the God of their ancestors truly was the one true God who loved them and promised to include them in bringing creation to its fullest expression. Israel needed assurance, even after their liberation, that God was present with them, guiding them to a new life. The pillars of cloud and fire were the assurance they needed. Terence Fretheim tells us, "The wilderness setting and the people's situation were such that *a tangible assurance* of the divine presence was believed necessary. Such phenomena impress the fact of God's presence upon on all the people's senses, not just their minds or spirits. The whole person experiences the presence of God."<sup>4</sup>

Countryside Community, too, endures suffering and conflict as we consult with one another and our neighbors to make decisions about our ministry presence in the world. These conversations are not always friendly or polite, and can often leave many

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<sup>3</sup> David Whyte, *The Three Marriages: Reimagining Work, Self and Relationship* (New York, NY: Riverhead Books, 2009), 150.

<sup>4</sup> Terence E. Fretheim, *Exodus*, Interpretation, a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1991), 151.



disenchanted with the church as well as questioning their relationship with God. We have the opportunity to deepen our relationships with one another and with God instead of alienating ourselves, and others, from God's promised future for us. We can do this by simply inviting God into our conversations, listening for God's voice, and learning to recognize how God is leading us into the world.

God led the way for the Israelites through the wilderness with signs that were recognized and trusted. Countryside Community has had over seven years' experience of intentional discerning a new way of being church. The pillars of cloud and fire we follow in our practices are leading us through our own *wilderness* as we are remembering that God exists, God cares about us, and God yearns to relate to us here and now. Countryside believes we deepen our relationship with God, others, and ourselves, through listening to God's voice, paying attention to God's activity in our present, and living into the discovery that we are God's beloved people.

#### Spirit-led Church: Acts 15:4-29

Countryside Community must continually listen for God and trust God's direction as we step into our neighborhood to participate in the life and being of God that already dwells there. Each step taken expands our possibilities as a *Spirit-led church*, making decisions for ministry centered on discernment in the Spirit, much like the early communities depicted by Luke in the book of Acts.

The Holy Spirit (the Advocate) carries the life and being of the Triune God within and among the first century communities throughout the book of Acts. This same Spirit carries the life and being of the Triune God into our communities as well. In the first chapter of Acts Jesus gives the Holy Spirit instructions to take to his chosen disciples

first, but soon after, all the disciples are instructed to go to Galilee and wait there for the Holy Spirit to come to them. All Jesus' disciples are called to be witnesses to this Spirit in the world. The Holy Spirit shows up again in chapter two of Acts and sets the disciples on fire, empowering them to share the story of Jesus that is heard by all in their own language. The Spirit continually works through the disciples and other believers throughout Acts. God's love draws the circle of acceptance wider and wider from its center in Jerusalem, spreading far enough to reach even the soul of Saul, who in chapter nine, threatens to murder of the disciples. Peter, embodying the impartial love of God for all people, is sent dreams and carried by the Spirit to the Gentiles. Barnabas and Saul (now Paul) were carried by the Spirit to Antioch where they were to begin a new community. New *Christian* believers are then sent out to preach, creating communities of believers among the Gentiles throughout the region.

The ever-widening circle of uncircumcised believers causes some among them to raise concern. Paul and Barnabas are sent to Jerusalem to meet with the apostles and the elders to discuss this community-challenging question of circumcision as a required practice among believers. A self-organizing process of discernment begins emerging among the first century Christian community most clearly within this community conversation in Jerusalem. Peter begins the discussion by claiming his call from the Spirit to ministry with the Gentiles. This call includes proclaiming the saving grace of God for Jews and Gentiles alike. Paul and Barnabas share stories of the Spirit within their ministry among the Gentiles, and then James speaks up to share how faith among the Gentiles fulfills the words of the prophets and upholds the tradition of their covenantal faith in the liberating God of their ancestors.

This new community of believers could have been swallowed up in this controversy in Jerusalem concerning the practices of the church, but open conversation and discernment among all involved, allowed for the Spirit to move among them, leading them toward what God was already creating among them. William Willimon writes,

The young church which has had to prevail against external adversaries, both Jew and gentile, as well as internal infidelity has demonstrated that it can prevail against perhaps the toughest foe of all—disagreements with fellow Christians about church policy. Rather than do what churches often do on such occasions—flee from the fight, submerge our differences, or else storm off in a huff—the apostles demonstrate that the gospel has given them the resources to confront controversy without being destroyed by it.<sup>5</sup>

This conversation in Jerusalem opens the discussion to everyone who wishes to participate, is biblically and theologically framed, and invites God the Spirit into the discerning process. In response to this discernment, an action plan is determined by the apostles and the elders to send Barsabbas and Silas to Antioch with Barnabas and Paul, carrying a letter summarizing their decision made through community discernment. *For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to impose on you no further burden than these essentials* (Acts 15:28).

Our current day congregations can recognize how the people of God in each of these biblical lenses: *intentionally listen* for God's voice within their conversations, empowering them to *trust in the signs and callings of God* to move out into the wilderness of the neighborhoods in the world, following the *Spirit-led* pathway into the ever-widening circle of God's love dwelling among us. These elements of *listening*, *trusting*, and being *Spirit-led* form the foundation against which all community practices and processes of discernment are evaluated in this study. Countryside Community

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<sup>5</sup> William H. Willimon, *Acts* ibid. (Atlanta 1988), 131-132.

continues our own discernment of where God might be calling us to move into the future and make decisions concerning which ministries we might embrace in order to live into our discoveries.

### **Theological Lenses**

#### **Perichoresis**

Michael Lawler explains that the term *perichoresis* was first introduced by Gregory of Nazianzen (d.ca.389) as the verb *perichorein*, coming from *chorein*, which means to make room for another, and *peri*, which means round about. The noun *perichoresis*, was introduced by Maximus the Confessor (d.ca.662), and describes the dynamic process of making room for another around oneself.<sup>6</sup> An unknown author named “Pseudo-Cyril” (ca.650) and John of Damascus (d.ca.749) expanded the use of these terms within their discussions concerning the Trinitarian nature of God. Pseudo-Cyril was the first to use the language in relation to the being of God, speaking of three persons in one God, who dwell together by each making room for the other, by “coinhering equally one with the other without any confusion.”<sup>7</sup> John of Damascus furthered the conversation of the three persons in his time, “Three persons are united in a Holy Trinity undividedly and without confusion. They are undivided because of their unity of nature and they mutually make room for one another without confusion.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Lawler, “Perichoresis,” 49-50.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 52.

The Council of Florence in 1442 concurred that these three persons are indeed one God who have no conflicting relationships with one another, but rather share in the same substance and essence. They state, “Because of this unity, the Father is entirely in the Son, entirely in the Holy Spirit, the Son is entirely in God, entirely in the Holy Spirit, The Holy Spirit is entirely in the Son.”<sup>9</sup>

Lawler defines and explains this concept of *perichoresis* precisely because he believes it explains how God is related to the church as well as to all of creation. He says that because God “*is* relatedness and communion in Godself, that God is also relatedness and communion in creation, salvation and grace.”<sup>10</sup>

Many theologians speak to the importance of this perichoretic nature of God and what it means to the life of the church. Jürgen Moltmann describes *perichoresis* this way: “The very special suggestion of *perichoresis* is that the divine persons are ‘habitable’ for one another, giving one another open life-space for their mutual indwelling. Each person is indwelling and room-giving at the same time.”<sup>11</sup> Moltmann, too, speaks to the relatedness of the three persons of the Triune God. God is communal and relational in essence, and thus, all of creation can find room within this essence of God, fully participating in the life and being of God by virtue of God’s unyielding love for all of creation. All of creation can find a resting place in God because God loves all of creation.

Moltmann goes on to explain that the “mystical dimension of the church” flows from this open and inviting community of the triune God where the persons of the

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 53.

<sup>11</sup> Moltmann, “Perichoresis,” 114.

Trinitarian community make room for one another.<sup>12</sup> The human community mirrors this indwelling with the divine, both dwelling together in the love that allows for each to open space for the other to live within them. In this understanding of the relationship of God to creation, the Holy Spirit is the experienced God that dwells among us and breaks down all things that come between human persons which otherwise would leave humanity isolated and alone. The church then becomes that place that mirrors the essence of the Triune God. It becomes a community that lives into its fullest expression when it makes room for the other and for the creation that has already made room for all of humanity.

David Tracy, an American Roman Catholic theologian, also speaks of the Triune God and making room for the other, as we identify who we are within our relationships. When we identify God through a Triune community we are making the claim that *being* in relationship defines our decisions much more than just stating that we are somehow related to one another. Participating in life through relationships, just as the Triune God acts within a communal relationship, means that the relationships of the stranger are as important and meaningful as our own relationships, connecting us to the stranger, even if we have yet to meet.<sup>13</sup> Our relatedness is what identifies and defines us as creations of God, and we are inextricably connected to the other through our relatedness to the Triune God.

Craig Van Gelder and Dwight Zscheile support Tracy's view saying that the church is not primarily a group of people wanting to do some good in the world, but rather is a "community of mutual participation in God's own life and the life of the

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 121-122.

<sup>13</sup> Tracy, "On Naming the Present."

world—a participation characterized by openness to others.”<sup>14</sup> The role of the church is to continually participate in the creating of new possibilities with God by reaching out to the other and to the world in ways that show trust, collaboration, and gratitude, as it follows the Spirit into the world, extending the Triune community. This posture of openness and expansion sets the direction of conversation toward a positive and imaginative process that invites all people to the table of conversation and engagement and prepares an environment that gives each the space they need to interpret for themselves how the community might best follow God’s call into abundant life.

Scott Frederickson says the sharing in and the working out of God’s love is done precisely through mutual participation and collaborative interpretation of where the Spirit might be calling our current congregations. Frederickson describes the perichoretic nature of God and its effect on the church saying, “Since all this activity proceeds from God’s being, this incorporation also stems from the being and activity of God. . . . What happens is that when God shares divinity with humanity, so now in the Spirit we share with each other. What we share is the love God shared.”<sup>15</sup> To be a missional church we must rest in the steadfast embrace of God’s love. We are to be intentional about seeking out that activity of God that beckons to us to speak up and act out in ways that honors the other, and pushes toward a sharing and belonging that deepens our relationships. The church is called to build up the realm of God in our current neighborhoods so that we

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<sup>14</sup> Van Gelder and Zscheile, *The Missional Church in Perspective*, 107.

<sup>15</sup> Scott Frederickson, “The Ecclesiology of God: The Role of the Divine Congregation on the Human Congregation” (2001), 141.

might break through the vicious cycles of fear, violence, and abuse that threaten our very future.

Michael Welker is another theologian who speaks to the power present in God's love as it acts through the Spirit, expanding the lived experience of creation within it so as to continually create new possibilities for life. All creation experiences a strengthening as humanity participates within the love of God through both receiving this love and giving it away. The walls we build that separate us from God and the rest of creation are broken down in this participation, and reconciliation is possible yet again. This understanding of our mutual participation in God's love allows each of us to be both the recipients and the bearers of God's revelation to one another.<sup>16</sup>

The implication for the church as being both the recipient and the bearer of the revelation of God, through the Spirit, means that it must be a community where a diversity of interpretations and vision are constantly coming together, constantly re-interpreting what we think we know, and continually reshaping our activity in the world based on these new discoveries. There is no one right vision or expression of God's love in this revelation, so the more expansive the conversation, the more we are brought together through our very diversity. The communal nature of Godself gives us patterns for behaving within our diversity that help us engage each other in genuine interest and curiosity, secure in the knowledge that the pluralism created is one that unites us all in our inclusion and collaborative creativity, rather than one that separates us in our differences.

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<sup>16</sup> Welker, *God the Spirit*, 21, 226.



Dwight Zscheile describes *perichoresis* as a relationship of shared participation between the persons of God and claims that the strength of the relationship is the distinctiveness of each person that sets them in relatedness to each other. Zscheile writes, “The triune community is composed of distinct persons united in a life of loving communion (*koinnonia*, fellowship, sharing, belonging, or participation) precisely because of their otherness and difference. Difference makes communion possible.”<sup>17</sup> The intrinsic power of unity within diversity is defined within the perichoretic nature of God, and it is this essential nature of God that the church is called to follow into the world.

Congregations are called to live into the life and being of God and the life of the world through understanding this *perichoresis* of the Triune God, and in so doing must discern where God is already moving in the world and how each congregation is distinctively called to participate. The practices that make up a process for this communal discernment then need to be of the same character as the relational nature of God. Namely, *spiritual practices* ought to be open to all and constantly seeking the love God shares in Godself and in the world.

### Spiritual Practices

Annie Dillard sat beneath a tree beside Pilgrim Creek near Puget Sound as the world stepped into the decade of 1970. Here in this place she watched as the world in its incredible intricacy went about the business of living into itself. Her personal world had recently been rocked by divorce, and chaos seemed to rule the rest of the world as well.

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<sup>17</sup> Zscheile, *Cultivating Sent Communities: Missional Spiritual Formation*, "Chapter 1: A Missional Theology of Spiritual Foundation," 14.

She came to Tinker Creek to gain some perspective.<sup>18</sup> Here she witnessed both the beauty and the horror of life that led her to an understanding that creation is an unfathomable set of systems and seemingly random acts of both wonder and violence. This creation is one that cannot be easily seen or understood in its entirety, but one that is compelling in its mystery, calling each of us to step into the midst of the unknowable in order to participate in any level possible. The pathway of discovery for Dillard begins by sitting at the edge of existence, observing its fringe, knowing that the fringe is merely an introduction to all that is. She writes, “The first question—the one crucial one—of the creation of the universe and the existence of something as a sign and an affront to nothing, is a blank one. I can’t think about it. So it is to the fringe of that question that I affix my attention, the fringe of the fish’s fin, the intricacy of the world’s spotted and speckled detail.”<sup>19</sup>

Dillard gives us a frame of sorts, or perhaps a context, in which to interpret the purpose and goal of spiritual practices. The point is to engage with creation and the Creator to the furthest point possible in order to be a part of all that is already happening around us, all the time, anyway. We are all aware that things happen all around us all the time, but we are never sure of what role we play in that activity, or how we might participate in such a way as to let it include us. Spiritual practices then are those intentional rituals aimed at opening us up to participate in the creative activity of God that calls to us through creation.

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<sup>18</sup> Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, 1st U.S. ed. (New York, NY: Harper's Magazine Press, 1974; repr., 1990 Book of the Month Club, Harper and Row).

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.

Miroslav Volf and Dorothy Bass define practices within the Christian tradition as “patterns of cooperative human activity in and through which life together takes shape over time in response to and in the light of God as known in Jesus Christ.”<sup>20</sup> Their definition includes *four key components of practices*: (1) practices resist the separation of thinking from acting; (2) practices are social, belonging to groups of people across generations; (3) practices are rooted in the past but are also constantly adapting to changing circumstances; and (4) practices articulate wisdom that is in the keeping of practitioners who do not think of themselves as theologians.<sup>21</sup>

A discipline that exemplifies these four components of spiritual practice can be found in the *Rule* of Benedict.<sup>22</sup> Benedict lived in the fifth century when monasticism was a popular alternative lifestyle in response to the decline of Rome and the ensuing chaos caused by a world in the midst of political transition. Benedict chose the ordered and disciplined life of being in community and developed the *Rule* as a guide for living the way of Jesus as described in the gospels. The suggested practice of this *Rule* for modern day Christians involves the following:

1. Pray at least two Offices daily.
2. Read and meditate on sacred scripture at least once a day.
3. Practice times of silence.
4. Practice a contemplative type of prayer daily.
5. Remember that every moment of our lives is lived in the Divine Presence.
6. Do a partial or full fast (or abstain from meat) at least once a week.
7. Attend church services and/ or receive the Holy Eucharist at least once weekly.
8. Care for those you live with, work with, and worship with.

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<sup>20</sup> Volf and Bass, *Practicing Theology*, 3.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>22</sup> Benedict, *The Rule of St. Benedict*.

9. Treat your family and your daily work/ profession as your main Christian ministry.
10. Refrain from judging others and pray for them instead.
11. Be consistently involved in at least one ministry/ program of your parish.
12. Treat all physical objects in your environment with care and reverence.
13. Remember RB 4: “The love of Christ must come before all else.”
14. Be faithful (stable) in your family, employment, parish responsibilities.
15. Serve others with consistent patience and care.<sup>23</sup>

Dennis Okholm suggests that the intention of Benedict was to offer more of a process that might be used to translate the gospels into a way of communal living. He writes, “It commanded such esteem because it was traditional—a masterful summary or synthesis of the whole preceding monastic experience. It didn’t hurt that it was also brief, human, thorough, and adaptable.”<sup>24</sup>

Spiritual practices are seen not as something distinct from the beliefs that one holds, but rather as integral to them. Intentional diligence in practices opens us up to recognizing God’s presence with us, so both our actions and our beliefs are influenced by our discoveries. Miroslav Volf suggests that “The whole Christian way of life, with all its practices, is supported and shaped by something outside of that way of life—by what God has done, is doing, and will do.”<sup>25</sup>

American sociologist Robert Wuthnow suggests that an additional aspect of spiritual practices is to encourage people to be intentional about, and take responsibility for their relationship to God by deepening their own spiritual development.<sup>26</sup> It is

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<sup>23</sup> Dennis L. Okholm, *Monk Habits for Everyday People: Benedictine Spirituality for Protestants*, Kindle edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2007), 134-135.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 27-28.

<sup>25</sup> Volf and Bass, *Practicing Theology*, 254.

<sup>26</sup> Robert Wuthnow, “Spiritual Practice,” *Christian Century* 115, no. 25 (1998): 854.

important then to explore the meaning of our sacred relationship and how to engage with it by reading and being in conversation with your community. In this exploration, we are better able to understand our relationship with God and one another, and can be constantly discovering new ways of seeking a personal conversation with God through prayer and reflection.

To practice being open to the revelation of the life and being of God in the world is not to rely on our rituals to make us worthy of God's attention, but rather to set us within a posture of perpetually seeking to participate with what God is already doing in the world. We strengthen our openness to hearing God's voice within the decisions we make from day-to-day as we come together seeking God's guidance. Countryside Community is committed to developing discernment processes through practices that best help us to hear God's voice among us. Our aim is not to make sure we *do the right thing*, but rather, to open ourselves up to admitting we could be wrong. We are, therefore, freed to move toward an outcome that is wildly open to God's will, not our own. It is not the perfect outcome that we seek, but discovering a process of opening ourselves to the revelation of God in our lives.

Explorations with practices from our own Christian tradition, such as Celtic spirituality, the ancient Catholic exercises from Ignatius, and drawing from the wisdom of the Desert Mothers, might help us in expanding our experiences. We might also explore practices from other faith traditions such as those found among the Muslim and Jewish communities.<sup>27</sup> We can become far more diverse and far better informed of

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<sup>27</sup> Jane E. Vennard, *Fully Awake and Truly Alive: Spiritual Practices to Nurture Your Soul*, Kindle Edition ed. (Woodstock, VT: SkyLight Paths, 2013); Jamal Rahman, *Spiritual Gems of Islam: Insights & Practices from the Qur'an, Hadith, Rumi & Muslim Teaching Stories to Enlighten the Heart & Mind*, Kindle edition (Woodstock, VT: SkyLight Paths Pub., 2013); Ignatius, *The Spiritual Exercises of St.*

additional revelations of the God all around us if we take into our experience those spiritual practices from cultures that discover God through a variety of rituals.

Countryside Community studies the practices within the Christian tradition to help us better understand their purposes and their usage within various types of processes for discernment. We are better able to imagine a broader use of practices that are specifically designed to open conversation among our neighbors and God if we take time to intentionally evaluate the practices within our community. We also deepen our own engagement to the world through the continual improvement of these communal practices as they direct us deeper into the perichoretic life and being of God.

#### Processes of Discernment

Countryside Community Church asks the question “Who is God, and who is this church in relation to God?” in every committee and council meeting, every small group discussion or large group event, in every Sunday school class, and in every Sunday morning worship service. This pervasive questioning positions us to enter a process of discernment that allows for God’s voice and presence to be included in all our community conversations. The steps we take together in discovering alternative responses to this question move us toward being a community that takes seriously Patrick Keifert’s challenge to all missional congregations and their leaders:

Of course, part of leadership requires responding to immediate challenges and managing them, but true leadership depends on having the time and the ability to define the challenge (rather than simply respond to it) within the vision and plan of action based on God’s preferred and promised future. This requires growing

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*Ignatius Loyola: A New Translation* by Elisabeth Meier Tetlow; Mary C. Earle, Sylvia Maddox, and Mary C. Earle, *Holy Companions: Spiritual Practices from the Celtic Saints*, Kindle edition (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Pub., 2004); Mary C. Earle, *The Desert Mothers: Spiritual Practices from the Women of the Wilderness*, Kindle edition (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Pub., 2007).

leaders out of a process of spiritual discernment about the local church's missional vocation.<sup>28</sup>

We need to ask ourselves where God is already moving creation and how we might take part in that activity as we define the challenges facing our congregations within God's calling for our communities. This is especially true when entering conversations on social justice, inclusion, and other controversial subjects. Martin Copenhaver, a minister within the United Church of Christ (UCC), and now President of Andover-Newton Seminary, relates a story about how his congregation considered the subject of becoming an *Open and Affirming* congregation of the UCC (a congregational designation of welcoming all to participate, regardless of sexual orientation).<sup>29</sup> He explains that their usual process of *Roberts Rules of Order* would not work in this discussion since it gave them no framework for biblically and theologically understanding such a controversial issue.<sup>30</sup> God would be missing from the conversation. Copenhaver was looking for a process that would point his congregation to their beliefs and practices of discernment. He needed a process centered on the assumption that God is present and active in the world and desires to be in participation with God's people for the unfolding of God's promised future. Copenhaver states that God's calling for a congregation is often unclear, but can be discovered within *discernment* in the Holy Spirit.

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<sup>28</sup> Patrick R. Keifert, *We Are Here Now: A New Missional Era, a Missional Journey of Spiritual Discovery* (Eagle, ID: Allelon Publishing, 2006), 71.

<sup>29</sup> Copenhaver, "Decide or Discern," 29.

<sup>30</sup> Henry M. Robert, *Robert's Rules of Order* (Chicago, IL: S C Griggs, 1879).

The Congregationalist tradition of the United Church of Christ has a particularly strong heritage of discerning congregations. Copenhaver explains that being congregational means a local congregation uses scripture and prayer to inform their communal ministry decisions. The UCC believes no other ecclesial body is better able to discern how their community is being called to participate in the life and being of God than the local congregation. Copenhaver writes, “The early Congregationalists met often and their meetings were seen as opportunities to encounter God in their midst. They were more like worship than legislative sessions. The community did not gather for decision making as much as for discernment.”<sup>31</sup>

Countryside Community Church is from this Congregationalist tradition, and as such, shares this understanding and practice of discernment. Our ministry includes many opportunities for shared spiritual practices, communal conversations, and neighborhood engagement. We have developed a number of discernment processes for organizing and governing our community through the use of these practices. These discernment processes are used for considering controversial issues that require a community-wide decision. Each decision made carries implications for defining and developing our identity, policies, and ministries. We must be prepared to continually evaluate and reform these processes as our congregation continues to grow, expand, and adapt to the changes going on in the neighborhoods that surround us. Discernment, then, is an ongoing spiritual practice in itself, which allows us to be intentional in cultivating an abundant community.

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<sup>31</sup> Copenhaver, “Decide or Discern,” 31.



Dwight Zscheile, in *The Agile Church*, talks about the shift in our society that forces Christian congregations to be more intentional about cultivating communities and explains that a five-year strategic plan is not an adequate response. He writes, “It calls for a much deeper theological and spiritual rediscovery that recognizes God’s presence, movement and calling as primary to its identity. It invites the church into a different posture—a posture of learning, vulnerability and creativity.”<sup>32</sup>

Countryside Community seeks to discover the biblical and theological framework of discernment that gathers the community in conversation through spiritual practices, leading them to discover their identity within the life and being of God in the world. Cultivating helpful processes of discernment will in turn help us to make better-informed decisions for participating with God in the world. Nancy Bieber suggests,

The foundation of spiritual decision making and spiritual discernment is opening to God. We acknowledge gladly that we are not depending entirely on our own abilities to think and compare, to feel and envision. We want the light and wisdom of God to shine out and influence our thought process and analytical reasoning, our feelings and hopes. We recognize that this is the way to good decisions.”<sup>33</sup>

### **Summary**

Elijah, the people of Israel, and the early Christian communities help our current communities learn to take the time to intentionally listen for, trust in, and be guided by God’s voice, as experienced through the Spirit. Countryside Community Church is a faith community called to pay attention to the world around it, seeking signs of God’s activity and discerning ways in which we might actively engage with God. We need also to

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<sup>32</sup> Zscheile, *The Agile Church*.

<sup>33</sup> Nancy Bieber, *Decision-Making & Spiritual Discernment*, Kindle edition, The Art of Spiritual Living (Woodstock, VT: SkyLight Paths Pub., 2010), 5-6.

understand and interpret the many ways in which God is speaking to us in the activity around us.

The perichoretic nature of God created in us calls us to live in the communal nature that defines who we are in creation. We are created to recognize the other as related to all that is, as the other is also then called to engage with us in the same manner. We live into our fullest natures in relatedness to one another, to God, and to all of creation, when we intentionally listen to one another and trust one another's relatedness to all that is. We expand our experiences and our engagement with the world when we seek guidance and revelation from one another when making decisions and taking action within our communities. Spiritual practices and discerning hearts open us to be seekers with one another and with God, acknowledging that our diversity is exactly that which allows for our fullest community within the life and being of God.

Countryside Community Church is seeking its fullest communal nature. We are expanding our spiritual practices and broadening our discernment processes to include as many variations of opening ourselves to revelation in our world as possible. Each step we take allows a deeper understanding of ourselves and of how we are related to our neighbors and to the earth that embraces us. We seek to explore which practices help us to take those next best steps and enter those places where mutual conversation and collaboration help us to follow the unique path that God has placed before us. This research opens such conversation within our community by exploring the nature of our practices together and how we might better discern God's calling for us.

## CHAPTER 5

### METHODOLOGY

Countryside Community Church has a strong history of moving toward a missional posture. Our ministry strives to follow the calling of God for our community into the world where God is already active in continuously creating all things new. Lesslie Newbigin describes this missional posture saying, “Mission is not essentially an action by which the church puts forth its own power and wisdom to conquer the world around it; it is, rather, an action of God, putting forth the power of his Spirit to bring the universal work of Christ for the salvation of the world nearer to its completion.”<sup>1</sup> The purpose of the research in this congregation is not to move our ministry through a participatory action research aimed at adaptive change for our people. Our purpose is to do research aimed toward discovering how we might better resource our people with ministry tools to keep us looking toward what God is calling us to be about in our neighborhoods and communities.

Countryside Community introduces many new worship and discernment practices for our community to experiment with in our ongoing conversation with God. All practices are helpful in intentionally listening for God, but many practices are better suited for individual devotions rather than public dialogue. Other practices better lend

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<sup>1</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission*, Rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1995), 59-60.

themselves to use with smaller groups of people than within large roomfuls of people. We experiment with all kinds of practices at Countryside Community and are at the point in our developing discernment where we need to evaluate which practices work better than others for individuals, small groups, and larger community and neighborhood groups. Another value tested in these practices was whether they are useful and helpful in discerning our communal decisions as a congregation in conversation with God.

The purpose of this research is to determine the answer to the question:

*What practices currently encouraged in the discernment processes of Countryside Community Church are actually being utilized; which practices are most helpful in informing our communal decisions; and how might we improve our discernment processes by further developing those practices?*

### **Research Methodology**

I chose a sequential explanatory mixed methods research design to help Countryside discover new perspectives that inform our ongoing development of discernment processes in our community. The first stage of the research was to offer a census survey to all adult members of the congregation. The questionnaire contained an invitation for volunteers to further participate within a one-on-one interview to discuss their uses of discernment practices in more detail, and if the practices they used in their discernment were helpful to them when voting on congregational ministries. Six survey participants were chosen from a group of fifteen who volunteered for a follow-up interview. I chose these six participants because they were a cross-section of men and women, and they participated in most of the five major ministry decisions of the church since 2010. One of the six chosen for an interview was later dropped from this research due to the irrelevant data obtained in the interview.

The intention of this method was to gather data on Countryside Community's use of the discernment practices currently offered, as well as which of these practices are most helpful to our members in their discernment within community decision making. We wanted to discover which types of practices our community actually uses, or if they used any at all, and which practices, when utilized, were most helpful in decisions made for cultivating new ministries within our community. This method helped to better inform and improve our overall discernment processes by expanding our best practices.

John Creswell and Vicky Plano Clark in *Mixed Methods Research* speak to the value of mixing quantitative and qualitative data in research: "The explanatory design is a mixed methods design in which the researcher begins by conducting a quantitative phase and follows up on specific results with a second phase. A second, qualitative phase is implemented for the purposes of explaining the initial results in more depth."<sup>2</sup> I argue that by using this explanatory research design Countryside was first able to gather specific information on our currently utilized practices from a broad range of our community through a questionnaire. The next step was to go deeper by utilizing interviews to explore what it is about the most often used practices that make them helpful (or not) for our people in discerning community decisions.

### **Variables**

The independent variables of this research included those practices we have encouraged as discernment processes at Countryside. We have experimented with many types of practices. Some of these practices are best used individually, while others are

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<sup>2</sup> John W. Creswell and Vicki L. Plano Clark, *Designing and Conducting Mixed Methods Research*, 2nd ed. (Los Angeles, CA: SAGE Publications, 2011), 82.

implemented in our worship and small group devotion time. Our aim as a community is to encourage each other to seek God's presence among us. How that seeking takes place varies greatly depending on the person or group that is doing the seeking. This research was designed to discover which of the practices developed and encouraged are actually utilized by the various members of our community.

The processes of discernment actually utilized at Countryside Community Church were the dependent variable in this research. We wanted to discover what processes were actually used by our people, and how we might continue to improve these processes in ways that enhance our seeking for God's activity around us and how to participate in it. We developed these processes by examining our practices and encouraging those that best connect us with one another and with God. We must trust one another to be truthful about our experiences together in order to successfully examine our practices. A practice that is meaningful for one person may have no effect on another. We must encourage yet another practice, of open and safe conversation among us, to begin our analysis.

Variables such as age, education, race, levels of church experience and participation, all have an influence on the conversation we have together. Countryside Community is made up of people from a variety of church backgrounds, but the majority of the population would be categorized as white, wealthy, and well educated. These demographics are changing all the time, as we intentionally seek to diversify our community. The changes, however, are not happening fast enough to have much effect on this research. The intervening variables that most affected this research included financial stewardship and comfort with experiencing debt. Location and ease of access to the ministries developed were other factors tested in this research.

### **Biblical and Theological Rationale**

Countryside Community Church closes its worship each week with the following blessing:

May the Spirit of the living God, made known to us most fully in Jesus Christ our Lord, go before you to show you the way, go above you to watch over you, go beneath you to uphold and uplift you, go behind you to push you into places you would not necessarily go on your own, go beside you to be your constant and strong companion, and dwell inside you to remind you that you are not alone, but you are loved—loved beyond your wildest imagination. May the fire of God's blessing burn brightly upon you, and within you, now and always. Amen.

This blessing stands as the culmination of our theological understanding at Countryside as it describes our relationship to a God who is always surrounding us and guiding us toward action in the world. When the people of Countryside intentionally listen for God's calling, each person may look in a different direction, using a completely different method from any other, yet they each expect to connect with what God is already doing all around us. We do not know what we will need to participate with God so we practice many methods of intentional listening and discerning. The practice that works for one member will not necessarily be an effective practice for another, so we experiment with many different practices to open ourselves most fully to our own unique conversations with God.

Sequential explanatory mixed methods research suits our need for experimental practices because it is the broadest spectrum of research available for helping us to track which practices seem most helpful, to which groups of people, and how they use these practices within their overall discerning processes for making decisions. We are able to gather as much information as possible from a large population of our community through the use of questionnaires. We can then test responses in a number of different ways revealing patterns between people and practices, helping us to discern which

practices are helpful to which groups of people. Mixed methods research also allows us to follow the relationships between our practices and actions by using a qualitative instrument to follow up with smaller and more specific samples of our population. Instruments such as one-on-one interviews allow us to explore more deeply the patterns suggested in the quantitative method, giving us a fuller explanation as to why the patterns are forming.

Countryside works to limit our preconceptions of how God works in the world so as not to mistake God's activity with our own priorities and expectations. We strive instead to practice living within the ambiguity that often accompanies discerning God's call for our community. Mixed method research gives us the space to live in this ambiguity while actively seeking patterns and relational evidence of where God might be moving around us. Our Countryside Community is made up of over forty-one denominations and church backgrounds including Agnostics, Atheists, Unitarians, Trinitarians, Jews, and Evangelicals. We use our experimental practices and our mixed methods research to develop and refine discernment processes that are broad enough to be as helpful and supportive as possible to as many people as possible. Our goal is to provide a fertile environment for listening for God's call among us, even if it is pushing us into places we wouldn't necessarily go on our own.

One of the biblical metaphors I have chosen for this study includes the story of the Israelites wandering in the wilderness for forty years, *remembering* that they are chosen by God to be a light to the nations. The Israelites followed the pillars of cloud by day and the pillars of fire by night listening, questioning, testing, and eventually, learning again to trust that God was indeed present with them, leading them into their future.



Studying the practices of our congregation through this same listening, questioning, and testing in mixed methods research opened us to better recognize the presence of God among us, leading us into our future.

Mixed methods research encourages opportunities for discovery through conversation with one another. It is the perichorectic nature of God in community that serves as the model for our conversational discernment and decision making. The blessing we use at Countryside speaks of a God who is actively present all around us, guiding us and leading us into new life. Whether God is moving in front of us, above us, behind us, beneath us, beside us, or within us, God is always seeking to be in relationship with us. We are called to respond in ways that build mutual relationships that are then lived out in the world. We seek God in the forms the Spirit manifests for our discernment just as the Israelites followed the Spirit's form of the pillars of clouds and fire to their promised future.

Scott Frederickson speaks to the perichorectic nature of the Triune God that seeks form in many different ways. He writes, "... the Creator Father, the Son, and the Spirit also have an 'ek-static' (Zuzioulas) movement to their life and being. The Spirit seems to constantly go out of its life and being into form; the Son is history; and the Father Creator speaks. These movements seem to suggest God reaches out, calls out, lives out the very life and being of God."<sup>3</sup> The Spirit of God is moving in many ways all the time. Thus, Countryside Community seeks to expand the breadth of its listening for God's Spirit in as many directions as possible, using the broadest research possible to evaluate our practices for listening and discerning.

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<sup>3</sup> Frederickson, "The Ecclesiology of God," 129.

Churches are called to be community partners as well as provide spaces for discovery and learning that lead community conversation through discerning God's voice in our midst. Alan Roxburgh talks about this aspect of church as being God's people in the world,

When we are truly seeking to know what it means to be God's people, we will want to know what God is up to in our neighborhoods and communities and what it means for the gospel to be lived out in this time and place. The matter of getting someone to church is utterly secondary to these insights. Now we are in a place where ecclesiology isn't the issue. Missiology is.<sup>4</sup>

Countryside Community seeks to be a missional congregation in this way of providing space and opportunity for these communal conversations of discernment. Mixed methods research allows us to experiment with a variety of practices and then study our patterns within this use in order to build discernment processes that help us explore most fully the presence of God among us.

### **Journey Partner Team**

My journey partner team helped to develop the scope and focus of this study and to construct the instruments used in this research. They were also used in designing the recruiting materials for community participation throughout this study. This journey partner team is made up of two men and three women who represent staff, older and newer members, as well as a mixed representation of denominational church backgrounds. I chose these folks as my journey partners because they are a good representative group of the congregation as a whole.

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<sup>4</sup> Alan J. Roxburgh, *Missional: Joining God in the Neighborhood*, Allelon Missional Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011), 26-27.

### **Research Design**

I utilized a sequential explanatory mixed methods research design with the direction of influence flowing from the specific practices being utilized toward the use of those practices for informing the decisions members made concerning community ministries at Countryside since 2010. The underlying hypothesis of the study was revealed in question twenty-five of the questionnaire when participants were asked to what extent they either agreed or disagreed with the statement “The discernment practices we utilize at Countryside Community greatly inform the decisions we make as a congregation regarding our ministries in our community.” My observations as the Associate Pastor of Countryside Community since 2010 lead me to believe that as Countryside continues to utilize spiritual and discerning practices with one another, they are making use of those practices to intentionally listen for God’s voice to inform their decisions concerning ministry for the whole community. This research was designed to test this possible relationship between the two concepts so that we might design better processes of discernment for the overall community based on the actual behaviors of the members.

The use of sequential explanatory mixed methods research was helpful in this project because it allowed for a high degree of input from a broad spectrum of the participants of the ministries, as well as providing the opportunity for a deeper exploration of the relationships between the concepts being studied. Peter Nardi explains the value of such research saying,

We do this kind of research in order to explain relationships, to uncover the reasons “why” or “how” some social phenomena occur among respondents. ... With information collected systematically, those responsible for a program or

policy can make informed decisions about what dimensions need to be changed, enhanced, or removed.<sup>5</sup>

The first step of the research design included conducting an initial census survey with a questionnaire made available to adult members of the congregation. The implementation of this initial step in the design began on November 29, 2015 with the opening of a survey designed to gather data regarding: (1) which practices encouraged at Countryside Community, if any, were actually being utilized by the membership; (2) which practices, if any, were utilized for each of the five major communal ministry decisions since 2010; and (3) the perceived value of each of these practices with regard to making communal ministry decisions (appendix A).

The introductory page stated the purpose of the survey, its timeframe, and a thank you for participating. An explanation was also given stating that the return of the questionnaire was considered implied consent to participate in the survey. We also designed a page of background information describing each of the five major ministry decisions made by Countryside Community since 2010 that are the focus decisions used in the questionnaire (appendix A). My journey partner team argued that the addition of this information within the questionnaire would help the participants better understand the specific context of each decision and thus be better able to answer questions regarding the utilization of practices within each of the decisions made.

The questionnaire consisted of twenty-seven questions within eight categories and was designed for the participant to complete within fifteen minutes. Each question included a *comments* text box for gathering any questions, clarification, or comments

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<sup>5</sup> Peter M. Nardi, *Doing Survey Research: A Guide to Quantitative Methods*, Third Edition. ed. (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2014), 11-12.

directly corresponding to the question asked. Question number six on gender identification and question eight on level of education achieved were an exception, as they did not need an additional box for comments. The eight categories within the questionnaire included:

- (1) Relationship to, and participation with, Countryside (Questions 1-5)
- (2) Demographic information such as age, gender, and education (Questions 6-8)
- (3) Discernment Practices (Questions 9-12)
- (4) Practices used in decision making in general at Countryside, as well as which practices were utilized in the process of discerning the five major ministry decisions made since 2010 (Questions 13-18)
- (5) Identifying any additional factors in the decisions made (Questions 19-23)
- (6) Attendance at meetings where decisions were made (Questions 24)
- (7) Testing the hypothesis (Question 25)
- (8) Additional Comments (Questions 26-27)

The questionnaire and the interview protocol were both field-tested by selected members of our community. The choice was to include one staff person, one male and one female from my journey partner team, and one male and one female at large from the congregation. I also asked a congregational member who is employed as a sociological researcher to field-test both the questionnaire and the interview protocol. Ideas and corrections suggested in the field tests were made to the instruments and revised versions were presented to the research populations. The persons chosen to field-test these instruments were not eligible to participate in the larger study.

It was the recommendation of this field-testing group that some of the questions would benefit from having a reference point concerning the communal decision to which they were related. My journey partner team and I developed the information sheet on the

five relevant decisions, as well as a listing of the discernment practices currently encouraged and utilized at Countryside Community, in response to this recommendation (appendices E and F).

The survey remained open from November 29, 2015 through December 31, 2015. The invitation to participate was made in three forms: (1) as an electronic hyperlink listed on our Countryside Community website, (2) as an electronic hyperlink within an email invitation and sent to 954 email addresses collected from our church roster database, uploaded to SurveyMonkey, and distributed through their online survey software application, and (3) as printed copies of the survey available through our congregational church office.

Fifty responses were made via the hyperlink made available through our church website. Of the 954 people invited through an email invitation, seventy invitations were returned as undeliverable, and twenty-five of the persons receiving the invitation opted out of participating. A total of 222 of the questionnaires were completed, and another fifty-four were partially completed, for a total response of 276 out of the 954 invitations initially sent, or a 28.93% response rate within this category. A total of thirty-one questionnaires were returned in printed form. I manually entered these responses into the SurveyMonkey software application from January 2-18, 2016. The grand total of survey responses through these three forms of invitations to participate was 307 of the possible 954 adult members of our congregation, for a grand total response rate of 32.18%.

Announcements introducing the survey and its purpose were made through a variety of communication mediums: our weekly Sunday worship bulletins, our December congregational newsletter, our weekly electronic calendar email distribution called “C-

10,” weekly invitations on our congregation’s Facebook social media page, and through verbal invitations from the chancel during Sunday morning worship services. These announcements invited all members over the age of eighteen to participate. A reminder was sent on December 26, 2015 to 702 email addresses that had yet to respond to the initial email invitation, asking them to respond before the close of the survey on December 31 at 12:00 pm.

The second stage of this research design was a set of six interviews crafted to explore more closely what practices these respondents have used for discernment and why these practices were, or were not, helpful in informing their decision making as they participated in the community-wide discernment of ministry at Countryside. Other questions in this protocol dealt directly with the influence of the clergy and the church leadership to choices made within the discernment processes of the ministry decisions we are exploring (appendix B).

I chose a purposive sample from those responding to the survey to participate in interviews designed to solicit responses to our qualitative protocol. Six people were chosen though one of them was later dropped because the data collected at the interview was irrelevant to the research conversation. The primary criterion for selecting persons within this nonprobability quota sample was based on securing gender equality within the interview process. A secondary criterion for selection included those persons who had been participants in the discernment processes of as many of the five major ministry decisions made since 2010 as possible (appendix E).

My journey partner team and I followed the advice of Herbert and Irene Rubin for setting up the design of the interview protocol,

You begin by introducing yourself and the topic, then ask some relatively easy questions, and only then move to the heart of the matter by asking your core questions, which may be sensitive or difficult to answer. As interviews wind down, you try to lower the emotional intensity, discuss less provocative topics, and close in ways that allow for later contact.<sup>6</sup>

Our interview protocol was designed to slowly walk the participant through their participation in ministry and discernment practices at Countryside Community Church and then ask them if these utilized practices were helpful to them when making decisions concerning community ministries. The middle section asked the participant about additional factors that might have influenced their decision making and if their decisions would have been different if they had not participated in any of the discernment practices. The last set of questions asked specifically about the concept of *discernment* and how they would define it and how they use it. The very last question was designed to give participants the opportunity to share with the researcher anything further concerning the ongoing development of discernment processes at Countryside Community.

The flow of the conversation followed this design pattern well when I began these interviews, but at the end of the interview, the conversation seemed to be missing questions concerning the role of God (the primary participant) in what was being defined as discernment. I then asked two more questions regarding the perceived role of God in our decision making and where the participants sense the presence of God among the ministries at Countryside. I consulted my journey partner team and together we agreed to officially include these additional questions in the protocol.

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<sup>6</sup> Herbert J. Rubin and Irene Rubin, *Qualitative Interviewing: The Art of Hearing Data*, 3rd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2012), 107.



These interviews each ran for an hour and were conducted by me in my church office at Countryside Community between January 19 and June 30 of 2016. The purpose of the interview was explained to each of the participants at the outset of the interview, as well as being informed of the process, the risks, and the terms of confidentiality of reporting the data retrieved from the interviews. Each participant was asked to sign an informed consent form, which is kept on file with the transcript of each interview. Both the implied consent used in the questionnaire and the informed consent form used in the interviews can be found in the appendices of this study (appendices C and D).

These interviews were recorded with a digital audio recorder and transcribed by myself using an online software application called *Transcribe*. All recordings were saved as MP3 files, and each transcription was saved as a digital text file using Microsoft Word. All recordings, transcriptions, and coded notes are archived in my personal computer and on a backup file secured in an external hard drive, and kept in a locked file cabinet in my church office. All archived materials regarding these research instruments will be disposed of after May 31, 2020.

A third stage in the research includes all the memo writing that occurred throughout the process of developing the research design, evaluating and field testing the instruments, and during the first stages of gathering data from the instruments. These memos were gathered using voice memo software installed in my cellphone and through written notes taken at journey partner meetings. Written notes were also taken concerning structure and explanation of intent during the initial personal interviews.

## **Analysis**

The results of this research project were evaluated to ascertain which of the current discernment practices at Countryside Community Church are being utilized, if any, and then to determine which of these practices are most helpful in discernment and decision making within our community. Descriptive statistics for data gathered through our quantitative instrument are reported in chapter six of this study. The report includes the total number of the sample (N), frequency, percentage, and mean where appropriate. The first step in analysis was to validate all the imported data from SurveyMonkey. All data were imported into SPSS software applications as tools for analyzing my data. Next, I conducted inferential statistical tests, specifically independent t-tests for comparing means between groups. Comparative data are reported in a series of cross-tabulation tables and diagrams that depict all relationships between the data.

Categories of comparing means included age, gender, education, worship service preference, participation in ministry decisions, practices used individually, practices used within community, and practices used to discern specific communal ministry decisions. The Lickert scale responses for question number twenty-five of the questionnaire were operationalized and reported to show support for or against the hypothesis of this research project.

Quantitative data allowed us to gather information concerning the practices we are currently utilizing at Countryside as well as to tell us something about the people who are using them. This data allows us then to take a step further into exploring these practices by asking a smaller sample of people which practices they find most helpful for informing the decisions they make concerning the ministries at Countryside. Qualitative

data helps us get to the “why” of our practices, and thus the best way to use them within the processes we build for discernment throughout the community.

All data gathered through qualitative interviews were coded by me according to guidelines suggested by Kathy Charmaz in her book *Constructing Grounded Theory*.<sup>7</sup> My initial *in vivo* coding was developed through word-by-word, line-by-line, and incident-by-incident coding. My next step was to create focused codes that clustered the *in vivo* codes. I followed this engagement with the data by clustering the focused codes into more summary axial codes. My final level of coding was identifying theoretical relationships among the axial codes. This same sequence of coding was also applied to all open-ended questions from the questionnaire, as well as my personal memo writing transcriptions. These variables were then placed in a diagram to show the relationships between the theoretical codes.

### Summary

Van Gelder tells us that congregations must look to many methods of both listening and discerning in order to inform any decisions made regarding their ministry, as they are discerning both what God is doing in the world and how our congregations might be called to follow.<sup>8</sup> Countryside Community is continually creating processes for intentionally listening for God’s voice within our conversations. We are designing new and participatory ways to be attentive to God’s activity in the world, so that we might discern how our community might best participate with God. The methodology of

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<sup>7</sup> Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*, 42-62.

<sup>8</sup> Van Gelder, *The Ministry of the Missional Church*, 119-120.

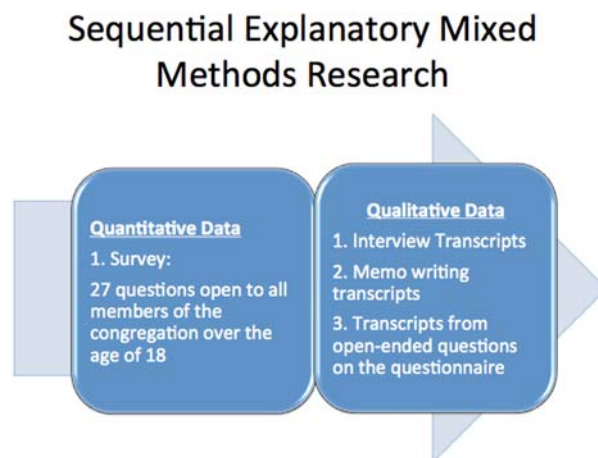
research chosen for this study was based on this desire to discern God's presence among us, and our desire to build strong ministries for our community to participate in what God is calling us to be in the world. The next chapter helps us gain more clarity toward this calling as we discuss the results of the study.

## CHAPTER 6

### RESULTS

This chapter describes the results of the research done to learn what practices the people of Countryside Community Church are actually utilizing, either personally or in community. A second area of research this project includes assesses which of the utilized practices are most helpful for informing our decision making as a community of faith. Countryside Community is attempting to participate with what God is already doing in the world around us through intentionally practicing ways of discernment that open us most fully to God's revelation in our lived experiences. This research was designed to answer the question that was proposed at the start of this thesis,

*What practices currently encouraged in the discernment processes of Countryside Community Church are actually being utilized; which practices are most helpful in informing our communal decisions; and how might we improve our discernment processes by further developing those practices?*



**Figure 6.2. Research Method Design**

The method for research was a sequential explanatory mixed-method, with the first stage being a survey of congregational members over the age of 18. We asked members to identify which practices they were using, if any, and which practices identified were most helpful in making the five major decisions of the congregation since 2010. The survey was conducted between November 29, 2015 and December 31, 2015. Participants were given the choice to take the survey online through SurveyMonkey or from a printed version available from the church office. A total of 276 people chose to respond online while thirty-one chose to respond in printed form for a total of 307 responding. An electronic link was emailed to 954 members with an invitation to participate, as well as providing an electronic link to the online survey through our congregational website. The rate of response accumulated from both the electronic and printed surveys was 32%.

The practices introduced and encouraged for use by Countryside Community Church were separated into four categories within the questionnaire: prayer practices, conversation practices, media practices, and community practices. Each respondent was asked if they participated in the practice, and if they found it helpful in each of the five identified communal decisions. Each respondent was also asked about their perception of influence the practice may have had on the decisions in which they participated.

The second stage of this research included identifying six persons who identified themselves on the survey as being interested in participating in a follow up interview with me to further explore the use of practices in their personal lives as well as in their life within the church community. Each of the six interviews was transcribed by myself and then coded for the creation of *in vivo*, focused, axial, and theoretical codes for analysis

using the Charmaz method of coding: word by word, line by line, incident by incident.<sup>1</sup>

After conducting, transcribing, and coding the interviews, it was my opinion that one of the interviews was not helpful to the conversation as the participant had been an active participant in only one of the communal decisions and did not seem to understand the questions I was asking. The decision was made not to include these data within the results of the research.

The tables presented in the qualitative research results below represent the focus and axial codes that were derived from the initial *in vivo* codes from three sources of qualitative data streams: the five interview transcripts, the comments section for question number twenty-seven of the questionnaire, and notes from my own memo-writing during the research process.

### **The Survey: Quantitative Research**

The questionnaire included questions concerning the four categories of practices mentioned above, as well as demographic information on gender, age, and educational level. Each of the respondents was also asked questions concerning their participation in church, both past and present. This information was then further analyzed to gather information on any possible impact these variables may have had on either the use of practices or within the person's participation in communal decisions. The final section of the questionnaire asked respondents to locate themselves on a scale of agreement with the statement "The discernment practices we utilize at Countryside Community Church greatly inform the decisions we make as a congregation regarding our ministries in our

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<sup>1</sup> Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*, 42-62.

community.” A five-point Likert scale was used, ranging from “strongly disagreeing” to “strongly agreeing” with the statement.

### Demographics

The total number of people responding to the survey equaled 307. Not every person responded to every question in the survey. Some people reported trouble maintaining their internet access during their participation and were dropped from the survey before they were able to finish and others reported that they did not answer those questions concerning the decisions in which they did not participate. The following tables show the results regarding gender, age, level of education, and their participation with a church community, both past and present.

**Table 6.2. Participation by Gender**

<b>Gender</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Male	105	35.0
Female	195	65.0
<b>Totals</b>	300	100.0

Of the 300 people who responded to the question of gender, 105 identified as male (35.0%) and 195 identified as female (65.0%) as seen in table 6.2 above. The largest age group represented for the 294 respondents (see table 6.3 below) was between the ages of sixty and sixty-nine, carrying a valid percentage of 24.5%, though all of the age groups between twenty-four and seventy-nine were well represented. The smallest age group represented was those over the age of eighty with a valid percentage of only 8.2%.



**Table 6.3. Participation by Age Groups**

<b>Age Groups</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
24-39	37	12.6
40-49	54	18.4
50-59	54	18.4
60-69	72	24.5
70-79	53	17.3
80+	24	8.2
<b>Totals</b>	294	100.0

The highest percentage reported regarding the respondent's level of education was a graduate degree. The percentage of graduate degrees of the 300 who responded was 51%. Another 33.3% of those 300 respondents reported having a Bachelor's Degree, while only 15.6% reported having a high school diploma or two years or less of college after high school, as represented in table 6.4 below.

**Table 6.4. Participation by Levels of Education**

<b>Level of Education</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
High School / Some College / Associate's Degree	47	15.6
Bachelor's Degree	100	33.3
Graduate Degree	153	51.0
<b>Totals</b>	300	100.0

Only 5% of the 301 people responding have been actively participating at Countryside Community for less than a year. The highest group of these respondents has been active at Countryside for more than ten years (45.8%). The largest groups of people of the 300 respondents attend worship weekly or several times a month (70.7% overall). These results are presented in Tables 6.5 and 6.6 below.

**Table 6.5. Participation by Length of Active Participation at Countryside Community Church**

<b>Length of Active Participation at Countryside Community Church</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
1-11 Months	15	5.0
1-3 Years	52	17.3
4-6 Years	51	16.9
7-10 Years	45	15.0
More than 10 Years	138	45.8
<b>Totals</b>	301	100.0

**Table 6.6. Participation by Frequency of Worship**

<b>Frequency of Worship</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Usually Every Week	126	42.0
Several Times a Month	86	28.7
About Once a Month	33	11.0
Several Times Per Year	32	10.7
About Once a Year	8	2.7
I Do Not Attend Worship	15	5.0
<b>Totals</b>	300	100.0

The average weekly attendance at Countryside Community as reported for 2015 is 333 people, and 212 people responded to the survey that they attend weekly or several times a month, which could mean a number of things: we have over 120 visitors weekly; we have several weekly attenders who did not participate in the survey (including all those under the age of eighteen); we do not have the same 333 people there each week; people responding to the survey are over-projecting their actual attendance; our ushers

are miscounting each week; or a combination of all the above.<sup>2</sup> Future research of interest for me would include testing for this breakdown of population to discover more fully if there is a correlation between regular participation and engagement with practices and discernment processes.

The last category for a description of those who participated in the survey concerns any past church experience of the respondents. The results of this category are presented in Table 6.6 below. Of the 298 respondents to this question, 73 people (24.5%) have either solely attended Countryside Community Church or another congregation of the United Church of Christ denomination. Those who identified as Christians previously attending a congregation other than one of the United Church of Christ is 217 (72.8%), while only 8 people (2.7%) of the total respondents reported either no church background or having experience in a community other than one identified as Christian.

**Table 6.7. Participation by Previous Church Background**

<b>Previous Church Background</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Countryside Community Only or Other UCC congregation	73	24.5
Christian	217	72.8
Non-Christian or No Church Background	8	2.7
<b>Totals</b>	298	100.0

The average respondent to the demographic section of the questionnaire is a female who has been active at Countryside Community for more than ten years, attends

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<sup>2</sup> 2015 Annual Report of the Congregation, Countryside Community Church, Omaha NE.

worship weekly, and has previous church experience in some type of Christian community. This person is most likely between the ages of sixty and sixty-nine, and possesses a graduate degree. Later in these results I compare these demographic results to both the practices being utilized and the participation within the communal decisions to see if there is any statistically significant relationship.

#### Practices: Prayer, Conversational, Community, and Media

Each of the respondents was asked in this section of the questionnaire if they currently utilize any of the listed practices. The first category was prayer practices, including personal meditation, examen, private devotions and scripture reading, group prayer devotions, centering prayer, guided meditation, prayer retreats, prayer walking, prayer journals, open chapel prayer, “pneuma divina,” and “Dwelling in the Word.” The number of responses to each of the practices listed ran between 282 and 285 of the total 307 participants in the survey. The (N) was determined by those who answered either “yes” or “no” to that particular practice. The order of the most utilized practices was determined by the number of people who responded “yes” to the practice (n).

**Table 6.8. Currently Utilized Prayer Practices**

<b>Currently Utilized Prayer Practices</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>n – “Yes”</b>	<b>Percentage</b>	<b>Rank</b>
Personal Meditation	285	187	65.6	1
Examen	285	181	63.5	2
Private Scripture	284	107	37.7	3
Group Prayer	283	93	32.9	4
Centering Prayer	284	62	21.8	5
Guided Meditation	284	38	13.4	6
Prayer Retreats	284	36	12.7	7
Prayer Walking	283	27	9.5	8
Prayer Journals	284	26	9.2	9
Open Chapel Prayer	282	24	8.5	10

Pnuema Divina	284	14	4.9	11
Dwelling in the Word	283	13	4.6	12

The top utilized practices of those responding were personal meditation and the examen, each receiving a percentage of over 63%. Countryside Community as a whole has been practicing the examen in each of our worship services on Sunday morning since 2013, so I am happy to see that the respondents recognize the practice by name and are aware of participating in it. Private devotions and scripture reading, group prayer devotions and centering prayer were the second highest of the practices being utilized by the respondents with valid percentages of 21.8% to 37.7%. The rest of the prayer practices listed were utilized by less than 14% of the respondents.

The practices encouraged and utilized at Countryside Community have been intentionally diverse, hoping that individuals within the community might find one or two practices among many that suit them well enough that they would continue to practice it on their own or within their boards, committees, or small groups. The practices we share corporately in worship are expected to be reported in such a survey of the population, but I am also happy that there are a number of practices that, though they rank in a smaller percentage of the total respondents, are still being practiced by some.

The second category was conversation practices. These practices included public lectures, small group discussions, community dinners, large group or panel discussions, and classes designed to inform people about the topics being discerned. The mean of respondents ranged from 285 to 287 (N), and the number of people who responded “yes” to the practice (n) determined the order of the most utilized practices. The results of this category are shown in Table 6.9 below.

**Table 6.9. Currently Utilized Conversation Practices**

<b>Currently Utilized Conversation Practices</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>n – “Yes”</b>	<b>Percentage</b>	<b>Rank</b>
Public Lectures	286	212	74.1	1
Small Group Discussions	287	198	69.0	2
Wednesday Night Community Dinners	287	132	46.0	3
Large Group or Panel Discussions	285	126	44.2	4
Classes on Discernment Topic	287	67	23.3	5

The most utilized practice of conversation was public lectures (74.1%), with small group discussions coming in as the second most utilized practice (69.0%). Countryside Community Church has a long history of providing a community lecture series on a wide range of topics through our Center for Faith Studies. This lecture series draws a large number of participants from the community at large as well as from our own faith community. These lectures are then supported by continued discussion through our small group and advocacy ministries. This result is not as surprising as it is validation of the direction our ministries have been moving all along. Both community dinners and large group or panel discussions had more than 44% of reported use, and classes on discernment topics were utilized by less than 24% of respondents. These conversation practices were all intentionally utilized for four out of the five communal decisions made by Countryside Community since 2010. The purpose of these practices was to open

conversation within our community in order to better inform people of the issues surrounding our decisions and the people who would be most affected by them.

The third category was community practices, which included those events and ministries planned specifically for the purpose of connecting our faith community together with the larger Omaha community conversation and, sometimes (through the reach of technology), even a global conversation. The specific list of events presented to the respondents is included in Table 6.10 below.

**Table 6.10. Currently Utilized Community Practices**

<b>Currently Utilized Community Practices</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>n – “Yes”</b>	<b>Percentage</b>	<b>Rank</b>
Information Meetings Prior to Congregational Meeting on Tri-Faith Relocation	285	215	75.4	1
Darkwood Brew Services	283	170	60.1	2
Tri-Faith Visioning Process with Architects	283	164	58.0	3
Tri-Faith Picnic	285	123	43.2	4
Community Cupboard Saturday Distributions	282	114	40.4	5
Darkwood Brew Tri-Faith Episodes	279	79	28.3	6
Interfaith Thanksgiving Service	282	62	22.0	7
Tri-Faith Neighbor to Neighbor Dinners	285	45	15.8	8
Pridefest	285	37	13.0	9
Seder Meal at Temple	284	29	10.2	10
LGBTQ 101	283	16	5.7	11
Heartland Clergy for Inclusion Press Conference	283	14	4.9	12

Eid Celebrations at AMI	284	8	2.8	13
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The most utilized community practice was the information meetings (75.4%). These meetings were developed to broaden the conversation surrounding our discernment about relocating our congregation to the campus of the Tri-Faith Initiative in order to participate as the Christian partner of the initiative. We intentionally set meeting dates throughout the discernment period, scheduled speakers from the Jewish and Muslim partner communities, as well as developed questions to prompt conversations in smaller groups following the meeting times. This practice was well received and well attended. Much conversation happened within those meetings and relationships were developed with people we might not have met otherwise. These new connections helped our people envision the possibilities, as well as the realities, of what it meant to become a partner of the Tri-Faith Initiative. In some instances people were challenged with new information they had not considered prior to the meeting and we were all given the opportunity to consider more fully of what God might be calling Countryside Community to participate in by moving to a new neighborhood.

The last category of practices was media. This group of practices was designed to utilize the social media and website vehicles for distributing information and starting conversations online. We wanted a *home base* to store all of the video presentations we were developing on the discernment events as well as providing a space for frequently asked questions and updates regarding logistics and resources for the relocation. The media we utilized were our own congregational website as well as linking our members to outside websites where they could find many more resources and information on the topic being discerned. These types of websites included those from the Tri-Faith partners



and the Tri-Faith Initiative, the Website for Countryside Community Cupboard, Center for Faith Studies, Heartland Clergy for Inclusion, PFLAG, and Darkwood Brew. Other listed media practices were the use of our own Facebook page as well as those pages from the Tri-Faith partners, local community presentations regarding interfaith dialog (“Ravel/Unravel” from Project Interfaith), and movies that were specific to the discernment topic (“Of Many” and “Facing Fear”). The results in this category of media practices are represented in table 6.11 below.

**Table 6.11. Currently Utilized Media Practices**

<b>Currently Utilized Media Practices</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>n – “Yes”</b>	<b>Percentage</b>	<b>Rank</b>
Websites specific to discernment topics	277	163	58.8	1
Facebook specific to discernment topics	281	133	47.3	2
“Ravel/Unravel” by Project Interfaith	280	25	8.9	3
Movies specific to discernment topics	281	23	8.2	4

The most utilized media practice was the use of websites (58.8%). We make use of both our own congregational website as well as others pertinent to our discussions. We made use of this media for distributing a broader range of information that could be accessed at any time, in order to reach a larger community of people. This media allowed us to share our recorded events with those people who were unable to attend. People who took advantage of this practice could then feel they were an active part of the conversation even if they were physically unable to be in the room at the time of the original event. Countryside Community broadcasts our worship services and stores the video of them on our website, connecting people to them with direct links for easy

access. We used this same technology for each of our discernment events so we could share the discussion with as many people as possible. Websites give us the perfect platform for this practice and allows us to share these events easily with our larger Omaha community via direct links.

Facebook as a media practice ranked second (47.3%). Many people within our community already use Facebook in their everyday lives, which makes it a perfect extension for communicating with one another through closed groups and shared pages. Many conversations continued long after the events were over via the media of Facebook.

A few people took advantage of media through movies and documentary presentations that were specific to the topics for discernment. Less than 9.0% of respondents reported using the local community presentations or the international film presentations that were provided. The actual numbers of people were twenty-five for the “Ravel/Unravel” presentation and twenty-three for the movies that were suggested during the process. Some of these movies were actually shown at the church while others were suggested viewing listed on websites, Facebook, and bulletin announcements. I think it is important here to reiterate that the overall discernment processes developed by Countryside Community to get people talking to one another and utilizing these practices for discernment were designed to be diverse in nature so that each person could participate in whatever way they felt comfortable. Even though the percentages for these two practices were lower than the other practices, *some people were utilizing them*. It is my personal belief that the whole community is better informed than it was before the use of the practice of discernment even if only a handful of people participate in that practice.

### Are These Practices *Helpful* for Informing Our Decisions?

All of the questions so far in this section on practices were designed to identify which practices are actually utilized by the community at Countryside Community Church. The next section of the questionnaire was designed to analyze how *helpful* these identified practices are for informing the decisions we make as a faith community. The first question in this section summarizes the practices and asked “How helpful are the following discernment practices in informing the decisions you contribute to regarding the overall ministry at Countryside?” The results for this question are represented in table 6.12 below.

**Table 6.12. Helpfulness of Practices for Informing Decisions of Overall Ministry**

<b>Helpfulness Of Practices for Informing Decisions of Overall Ministry</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>n – “Somewhat or Incredibly helpful”</b>	<b>Percentage</b>	<b>Rank</b>
Worship	245	228	94.2	1
Prayer	231	210	90.0	2
Small Group Community Conversation	200	180	90.0	2
Public Lecture	198	174	87.9	3
Community Events with Groups directly affected by our decision	179	155	86.5	4
Large Group Community Conversation	203	174	85.7	5
Classes Specific to Discernment topic	164	135	82.3	6
Scripture Reading	222	167	75.2	7
Website	199	148	74.4	8
Social Media	176	101	57.4	9
Movies	131	62	47.4	10

This question was designed within a Likert scale including a range of “Not helpful at all,” “Of very little help,” “Somewhat helpful,” and “Incredibly helpful.” We also included a selection for “I don’t know.” Each of the practice categories listed received a different number of respondents (N). It was noted in the comments to this question that some of the respondents had not used all the practices listed and were therefore unwilling to answer concerning their *helpfulness*, even though an “I don’t know” option was provided. The table above represents the number of respondents who answered “Somewhat helpful” or “Incredibly helpful” for each of the listed practices. They were then ranked according to the percentages answering the question.

Worship was reported as the most helpful of those practices listed (94.2%). Prayer and Small Group Discussion both came in second for most helpful (90%). Public Lectures (87.9%), Community Events (86.5%), and Large Group Community Conversations (85.7%) were the next group of most helpful practices. The last five practices listed had very strong percentages of their own as well, showing that all of the listed practices were seen as at least somewhat helpful to over 47% of those who utilized them.

The next five questions asked respondents if the practices listed were helpful in informing their decisions when they met to vote at a congregational meeting on the topic listed. A summary listing of practices was used in this set of questions as was used in the question of helpfulness to the overall ministry at Countryside above. The number of people responding varied from practice to practice because many of the answers on the questionnaire were left blank or not answered if they had not used that particular practice. The results for each of the five decisions made by Countryside Community

since 2010 are represented in tables Appendix G.1 through Appendix G.5 found in Appendix G. These tables represent those people who responded “yes” to a practice, and the percentage is based on the frequency (N), representing the total number of respondents who responded to the question in either a “yes” or “no” manner. Table 6.13 below represents the top practices named in all five of the decisions.

**Table 6.13. Top Practices from all Five Decisions**

<b>Top Practices from all Five Decisions</b>	
1. Worship	Most helpful practice in all five decisions
2. Large Group Conversations	Second most helpful practice listed in three out of the five decisions
3. Prayer	Third most helpful practice in three of the five decisions
4. Small Group Community Conversations	Named as top five most helpful practice in varying positions in all five decisions
5. Community Events with Groups Directly Affected by Our Decisions	Named as top five most helpful practice in three out of the five decisions
6. Scripture Reading	Named as top five most helpful practice in two out of the five decisions

Tables Appendix G.1 through Appendix G.5 report that at least 50% of respondents reported the practices of public lecture, website information centers, classes specific to the discernment topic, social media, and movies as not helpful in these decisions. One reason for this result could be that many of these practices were not provided by, nor encouraged by, Countryside Community as a part of the discernment. These practices were continually being developed within the community over the five years of these decisions and, as in the decisions to establish the Community Cupboard and to designate Countryside Community as an “Open and Affirming” congregation, had

a much shorter discernment period that included only those people who were voting members in attendance at the Council meeting where the decision was made.

It is also interesting to note that of those practices listed as being most helpful in informing the decisions made (table 6.13 above), at least three of the top five were practices performed within a community and not done individually. Worship, large group community conversation, small group community conversation, and community events with persons directly affected by our decision, are practices that involved the congregation and its leadership providing opportunities for the community to come together in an open and safe conversation to discern the decision.

#### Additional Influences on Decisions

The next set of questions asked of the respondents concerned any additional influences that were involved in their decision making for each of the communal decisions. Each of the respondents was asked if any of the nine possible intervening variables had any influence on their choice within the communal decision. The possible intervening variables provided were Physical plant/Facilities, Location, Relationship with the neighborhood, Relationship with the wider Omaha community, Finances, Debt, Conflict in our congregation, Additional staffing needs, and Global relationships.

Many of the answers on the questionnaire were left blank or not answered if the respondents did not participate in that particular decision. The number of people responding differed from variable to variable. The results from these questions represent those people who answered “yes” to a variable. The percentage is based on the number of people who responded to the question in either a “yes” or “no” manner (N). Each of the decisions had unique groups of people affected by our decision, yet within all five of the

communal decisions the relationship with others outside of our community were reported by 50% or more of the respondents. Finances were a variable reported by 50% or more of the respondents for four out of the five decisions, while the physical plant and location were reported as additional influences by more than 50% of the respondents in only three of the five decisions. The communal decision concerning the Tri-Faith Relation was the only decision where all of the variables but one (additional staffing) were reported as an influence in the choice made by 50% or more of the respondents. These results can be found on tables Appendix H.1 through Appendix H.5.

#### Attendance at Congregational Meetings

The next question asked of the respondents concerned their attendance at the meetings where decisions are made by Countryside Community Church. A list of seven congregational and council meetings were provided and each respondent was asked if they were in attendance there. The (N) in the Table 6.14 below represents those respondents who either answered “yes” or a “no,” while the percentages are based on those who answered “yes.” (n). The meetings listed in the following table are not in chronological order, but instead represent those meetings that had the highest valid percentage of attendees of those who responded.

**Table 6.14. Attendance in Decision Making Meetings**

<b>Attendance in Decision Making Meetings</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>n – “Yes”</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Congregational Meeting in June 2014 which determined that Countryside was called to Interfaith Ministry through the Tri-Faith Initiative and should move forward in discernment toward relation of Countryside to the Tri-Faith campus	246	205	83.3
Congregational Meeting in April 2015 which approved the relocation of Countryside to the Tri-Faith campus	245	202	82.4
The Annual Meeting in February 2015	245	162	66.1
Congregational Meeting in January 2013 which approved the continuation Darkwood Brew as an ongoing ministry of Countryside beyond the two year pilot project phase	246	119	48.4
Congregational Meeting in November 2013 which established the Converging Paths Ministry and called a third pastor.	246	110	44.7
Church Council Meeting in September 2011 which approved the designation of Countryside as an "Open and Affirming" congregation of the UCC	246	62	25.2
Church Council Meeting in February 2010 which established Countryside Community Cupboard	246	59	24.0

One note of interest here is that the level of participation in the meetings where these decisions were being made rose with each of the meetings chronologically. The only exception to this was the Congregational Meeting in June 2014 that determined Countryside Community was called to Interfaith Ministry through the Tri-Faith Initiative and should move forward in discernment toward relocation to the Tri-Faith campus. This meeting had the highest reported attendees of the respondents even though it happened a year prior to the meeting with the second highest reported attendees.



### Level of Agreement to the Statement Made in Question Twenty-Five of Questionnaire

Question 25 of the questionnaire asked respondents to report their level of agreement with the statement “The discernment practices we utilize at Countryside Community greatly inform the decisions we make as a congregation regarding our ministries in our community.” The total number of respondents (N), frequency (n), and percentage of those who responded either “strongly agree” or “somewhat agree” to this statement were calculated. The total number of respondents to this question was 226, of which 206 responded in agreement at some level for a percentage of 91.2%.

### Did Demographics Affect the Level of Agreement Regarding the Influence of Practices on Informing Our Decision Making at Countryside Community Church?

One of the comparisons that can be made between the means determined by the frequency tests run for the results on the questions above is testing to see if there was any relationship between the tendency to agree with the statement regarding the practices informing our decision making and who it is that is making those decisions. I conducted an independent t-test comparing the means of gender to the means of those who responded with “strongly agree” or “slightly agree” to the statement “The discernment practices we utilize at Countryside Community greatly inform the decisions we make as a congregation regarding our ministries in our community.”

The overall mean of the group who responded in agreement with the statement was 1.65. The independent t-test compared this overall mean with the mean of male (1.75) and female (1.60) respondents. There was no statistically significant difference between the males and the females in their levels of agreement to this statement in question 25. The Likert scale that was used in this question equated the “strongly agree”

response to with the label “one” which meant that the lower the mean, the higher the level of agreement with the statement. This design in the scale means that even though the males had a slightly higher mean than the females, it was not enough of a difference to signify a pattern of females agreeing more often than males to this statement.

Oneway ANOVA tests were run to compare the means of those in agreement with the statement in question 25 with the age groups by decade and the educational levels of those who participated in the questionnaire. None of the categories in either the age groups or the levels of education reported a significance of higher than .05, indicating no statistical difference between demographics and agreement with the statement.

#### Did Demographics Affect the Attendance at the Community Meetings where Ministry Decisions Are Made?

Another comparison of means was made to test the relationship of age, gender, and educational levels to those respondents who reported attending the congregational and council meetings listed in question 24. Chi square test results are listed in the cross-tab Table 6.15 below. The Pearson chi-square was used to determine if there was a significant relationship between the demographic and the attendance reported for each of the meetings.

**Table 6.15. Demographic Data Compared with Attendance at Meetings**

Demographic Data Compared with Attendance at Meetings									
	Gender			Age Groups			Education		
	Chi-Sq Value	df	Sig	Chi-Sq Value	df	Sig	Chi-Sq Value	df	Sig
Nov 2013 Cong Mtg Converging Paths	2.831	1	.092	17.218	6	<b>.009</b>	4.015	4	.404

The only statistically significant relationship reported in these tests was between the age groups and the congregational meeting in November of 2013 that established the ministry of Converging Paths. It is likely that the topic of the discernment for this particular meaning was the cause significance. The third pastor called to lead this ministry was a retired minister who served the congregation in previous years and was well liked by retired-aged members of our congregation because they spent a lot of time together in bible studies. When the decision came to call this pastor to be responsible for the Converging Paths ministry, all of his friends attended the meeting to cast their vote in his favor. Table 6.16 below shows the breakout of age groups in attendance at the November 2013 congregational meeting where a third pastor was called to establish the Converging Paths ministry at Countryside. Only 23 attendees were under the age of 50 (21.7%), while 83 attendees were 50 years of age or older (78.3%).

**Table 6.16. Age Groups Compared with Attendance at Nov 2013 Congregational Meeting which Established Converging Paths Ministry**

Cross Tab Table – Age Groups Compared with Attendance at the Congregational Meeting in November 2013 which Established the Ministry of Converging Paths			
N=241			
Age Group	Yes - Attended	No – Did Not Attend	Total
24-29	2	1	3
30-39	7	21	28
40-49	14	27	41
50-59	17	27	44
60-69	26	35	61
70-79	24	18	42
80+	16	6	22

### Did Participation in Practices affect Attendance at Meetings?

All of this quantitative research has led to the exploration of whether or not discernment practices have had a direct influence on participation in the decisions made regarding our ministry priorities at Countryside. A frequency comparison of data regarding participation in practices and participation in meeting attendance has shown that 68.7% of those that participated in any of the practices listed in the questionnaire also participated in the meetings that decided our ministry priorities since 2010. Table 6.17 below shows the results of the comparison.

**Table 6.17. Participation in Practices and Meetings**

<b>Participation In Practices and Meetings</b>		
	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Participation in one or none	91	31.3
Participation in both	200	68.7
Total	307	100

### The Interviews: Qualitative Research

The survey results presented above gathered quantitative data concerning demographics, practices, participation, and decision making at Countryside Community Church. Countryside can now use this information to build future discernment processes that are even more helpful to our community members in informing the decisions they make concerning our ministry together as a faith community. Together with this quantitative data we also wanted to understand more deeply what makes a practice helpful to our members. This understanding will allow us to better help the leaders of Countryside develop meaningful processes for all of our future decisions. We chose to interview a sample population of our community and ask them to explain more fully

about the practices they use and what makes these practices helpful, or not, for informing the decisions they have participated in at Countryside Community.

We issued the invitation to participate in such interviews on the last page of the survey, asking those who wanted to participate to let me know of their interest by sending their contact information to me via email. Our intention was that the people we chose to interview must have also participated in the survey in order to understand the frame of reference of the questions developed for the interview protocol. I received fifteen responses to our request for interviews, and from these responses we chose a purposive sample of six people to interview. The criterion for selecting persons within this nonprobability quota sample was securing gender equality and including those persons who had been participants in as many of the five major ministry decisions made since 2010 as possible.

The first question of the interview protocol established the level of engagement this person had within the ministry at Countryside Community (see Appendix B). The conversation then led into the practices each person used within the discernment periods prior to each of the identified communal decisions. Each person was asked what it was about the practice that made it useful to them, or not, for informing their decision on the topic up for vote. We also asked them to identify any other factors that might have contributed to their choices, including what level of influence the clergy and the church leadership had on their decisions. We then asked each person if they believed their decision would have been the same even if they had not participated in the discernment process prior to making their choice. The follow up question asked if they believed their discernment practices directly influenced their decisions in any way.

The original design of the interview protocol stopped after this question, but it became clear within the very first interview that I was interpreting much of the person's response in relation to what I believed was the activity of God within the discernment process, even though the person being interviewed had never actually stated that they believed it was indeed God who was acting through the practices they were utilizing. To address this realization within the interview, I decided to append the protocol to include specific questions concerning the role of God and the person's unique understanding of the word *discernment* so as to clarify the information being provided by the person being interviewed rather than inserting my own assumptions into the results. The three questions added to the protocol were:

- What would you say is the role of God in our decisions here at Countryside?
- How do you intentionally listen for God's voice in discerning?  
Probe: How do you sense God's presence among us here at Countryside?
- How would you define the term "discernment?"  
Probe: Would you have defined it this same way prior to your participation in practices here at Countryside?

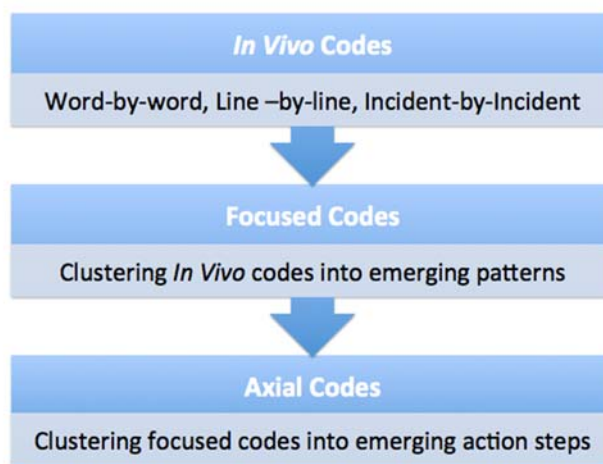
### Collecting Qualitative Data from Three Streams of Information

Each of the interviews was recorded and transcribed by me and these transcripts became the main source of qualitative data collected for this research. A second source of qualitative data included the open-ended comments on questions within the questionnaire. This stream included comments attached to three of the questions in the questionnaire. Question number twenty-five located the respondent's level of agreement with the statement concerning the influence of practices. Questions number twenty-six and twenty-seven asked for suggestions to improve the discernment process at

Countryside, and any other comments concerning discernment, in general, they wished to share. A third source of qualitative data included the transcription of my personal memo writing throughout the research process. Each of these streams of data was coded separately and used to discover patterns emerging from our conversations that might be enlightening to our conversation on practices.

### Coding the Responses

Each of the three streams of qualitative data was coded separately by me according to guidelines suggested by Kathy Charmaz in her book *Constructing Grounded Theory*.<sup>3</sup> My initial *in vivo* coding was developed through word-by-word, line-by-line, and incident-by-incident coding, and I created focused codes by clustering the *in vivo* codes. Focused codes were then clustered into summary axial codes and then reviewed to reveal any relationships that emerged among the axial codes. This process is represented in figure 6.3 below.



**Figure 6.3. Qualitative Data Coding Process**

<sup>3</sup> Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*, 42-62.

### Data Stream One: Five Interviews

Six individuals were chosen from fifteen volunteers to be interviewed for the qualitative interviews for this research. Each of the individuals was chosen to create a balance of gender, age, and years of participation within the community, and their participation in the meetings where the ministry decisions were made. Table 6.18 below represents the participants of the interviews.

**Table 6.18. Interview Participants**

<b>Interview Participants (Pseudonyms)</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Education</b>	<b>Membership Since</b>
Andy	45	Male	Graduate School	2005
Laurie	58	Female	Graduate School	2010
Jeff	62	Male	Graduate School	1989
Amy	82	Female	Graduate School	1965
David	48	Male	Graduate School	1997

The initial list of *in vivo* codes from the stream of interview transcripts included 358 shared and unique words and phrases from among all five of the interviews. The interview protocol asked respondents to name the practices they currently used from among a list of practices that had been taken from the questionnaire and used again within the protocol. All five of the persons interviewed were given this list of practices at the start of the interview to remind them of the practices discussed on the questionnaire. All five of the respondents then also used this same language of practices within their responses. Shared *in vivo* codes of all five interviews included practice words such as



*small group, prayer, listening, read, scripture, practices, hear, and worship.* Other *in vivo* codes shared by all five interviews included words that described the process that the leadership at Countryside Community utilized to inform the community of how these practices were accomplished, and how we brought people together to teach them and encourage their use. These *in vivo* codes included words such as *leadership, church, various roads or paths, talk, conversation, being involved, and participating.* There were many other shared words such as *community, volunteer, engage, everyone, inclusion, perspective, viewpoint, right/wrong, discernment, Tri-Faith, decision, Spirit, and listening for God,* that also seemed to resonate well as all five of the interviews included these words.

Words that were present in at least three or four of the interviews stretched the listing to include *taking time, stepping back, music, meditation, reflection, examen, communion, experience, learning, logistics, opportunity, process, structure, congregational, energy/spirit hovering/feeling, God acting through others, guidance, direction, understanding, ideas, voice, influence, faith, paying attention, wisdom, insight, accept, impact, challenge, and options.* Many of these words were common to language utilized within the discernment processes themselves and I was pleasantly surprised that they came back to me from the people who had participated in many of these processes within our community. There were also many words spoken within these interviews that were unique to each of the persons responding. Words such as *truth, consensus, tolerance, empathy, honest, transparent, sacred, emerge, ecumenical, history, space, tension,* and *confession* were only used once within all five of the transcripts. I heard most of these unique *in vivo* codes throughout the discernments since 2010. Many of

these were used over and over again to critique the process we chose to use for the latest decision concerning our relocation to participate in the Tri-Faith Initiative. It was then surprising to me that these words such as *transparent*, *history*, *consensus*, and *honest* were only mentioned once within the full series of interviews.

The transcripts from these interviews were the main source of qualitative data in this research. Many of these same words found in this main source of data were also included in the other streams of qualitative data. A pattern of process and participation emerged within an overview of both the repeated and unique words and phrases from the interview transcripts. The pattern included words and phrases regarding how Countryside developed the discernment opportunities and the relationships that were included within the ongoing conversation. Much of the responsibility for developing the practices and then providing the opportunities for their use fell to the clergy and program ministry staff at Countryside and then were carried further out into the community through small group facilitators, board and committee chairs, and worship planning team participants. This process of development may have been part of the reason why the language used in both the questions and the responses to the questions seemed to emerge within this pattern suggested by the focused codes developed from them. Table 6.19 represents the focused codes developed from coding the five interview transcripts:

**Table 6.19. Focused Codes from the Five Interviews**

Focused Codes From 5 Interviews	<i>In Vivo</i> Codes from 5 Interviews	
1. Small Groups	Small groups Neighborhood Kids	Youth Friendship Experiential learning
2. Worship	Worship Church Body of Christ Baptized	Sanctuary Communion Music
3. Conversation/ Discussion/ Communication	Conversation Disagreement Discussion Communicate	Discussion to see clearly Get people talking Voice
4. Resources	Center for Faith Studies Boards Teaching Sunday School Resources Process of decision making People	Tri Faith Initiative Expense Congregationalists Gifts Clerk Leadership
5. Energy / Engagement / Environment	Energy Members have strong voice Horizontal Responsibilities Honest transparency Permission giving Trust Feel strengthened Bigger Feeling Home Destiny Inclusion	Less vibrant Open Engaged Bigger life All in Courage Tension Acceptance Tolerance “There is a moment that everybody shares and however you feel about the outcome, you were there for the moment that it happened. And there is something special about that no matter what happens after it.”
6. Prayer	Prayer Reflecting	Examen Practices
7. Listen	Listen Big Tent Hear Dissention needs to be heard	Ecumenical Interfaith Partners Real concerns Open ears and minds Hear all voices

**Table 6.19 Focused Codes from the Five Interviews (Continued)**

Focused Codes From 5 Interviews	In Vivo Codes from 5 Interviews	
8. Direction / Focused Reflection	Direction Focused Reflection Sharing Journaling Defining who we are intentionally Process Focused meditation What's right What's best for people Conscious decision making	What God calls us to Reading Retreats Consider our options Pay attention Write Discernment Work through confusion True answer "Asking for direction and information and waiting for the answer"
9. God / Spirit Still Speaking	God is still speaking Spirit We have been called God's activity through me Listening for God	God Faith Spiritual Experience Presence Sacred
10. Scripture	Scripture reading	Bible Study
11. Taking Time to Listen	Connection between members and decisions Seek Advice/Reach Out Extended process	Take Time Step Back Space Not rushed and thoughtful

It seems clear from the words and phrases expressed through these transcripts that the people were trying to understand how a process of discernment works: what's involved, who is participating, and for what purpose or outcome. The phrases that emerged from the interview question concerning the definition of discernment spoke clearly to developing an understanding for what discernment is and how it is being utilized at Countryside Community. These phrases included *trying to see clearly*, *work through the confusion*, *true answer*, *Gods calling for us*, *not rushed and thoughtful*, *listening all the time*, *asking for direction and information and waiting for the answer*, *having enough resources and information to ponder from*, *focus and stay still reflecting*

*and make some kind of record so you can remember, and considering options to make a decision.*

The focused codes developed from the *in vivo* codes from these interviews point toward engaging a process of discernment that most fully represents the *What*, *Who*, and *Why* that the community is beginning to formulate in the connection between practices and decision making. Many of those interviewed seemed to clearly understand the process of gathering people together in order to make a decision or to take a vote on a direction they think the congregation should take as a community. What was new in this research for these folks was the idea that what God was already doing among us and in our neighborhoods could be connected to the decisions we make by taking the time to practice listening to God, each other, and our neighbors. Once this concept was introduced through the sample survey and the interview protocol, a relationship between practices and decision making became apparent when discerning how God is calling our community to participate in the world.

The axial codes in table 6.20 below represent how intentionally engaging discernment practices help to deepen our relationships with each other and with God that we, as a community, might hear how God is calling and leading us in ministry with the world.

**Table 6.20. Axial Codes from the Five Interviews**

Axial Codes for 5 Interviews	Focused Codes
1. Listening for God	Energy / Engagement / Environment Listen God/Spirit Still Speaking Time to Listen
2. Discussing together	Resources Conversation / Discussion / Communication Small Groups
3. Worship as an opening to hear God	Worship Scripture
4. Prayer as communicating	Prayer Direction / Focused Reflection

The purpose of this research is to develop discernment processes that are utilized by our community and are helpful for informing the decisions we make concerning our ministries. The axial codes presented in table 6.19 help us determine the elements that need to be included in a process that fulfills the purpose of this research. Figure 6.4 below shows the relationship between the axial codes that emerged from the five interviews.

**Relationship of Axial Codes From Interviews****Figure 6.4. Relationship of Axial Codes from the Five Interviews**

### Data Stream Two: Questions 26 and 27 of Questionnaire

The second stream of qualitative data coded for this research comes from the comments from questions 26 and 27 of the questionnaire. These questions ask “What suggestions would you offer for improving our discernment process at Countryside?” and “What else would you like to share with us concerning your experience with discernment processes or practices at Countryside?” A total of 120 comments were collected and coded. The *in vivo* codes for this data totaled 142. The patterns of these *in vivo* codes gave rise to 5 focused codes as presented in table 6.21 below.

**Table 6.21. Focused Codes from Questions 26 and 27 of Questionnaire**

<b>Focused Codes from Questions 26 and 27 of Questionnaire</b>	<b><i>In Vivo</i> Codes (120 total)</b>	
1. Practices	Practice Influence Consider Christian Communication	Worship Small group Conversation Question
2. Process	Opportunity Process Tri-Faith Honest Congregation Conflict / disagreement Congregational Inclusion Church Ministry Leadership Balanced Voice / opinions Guide	Meetings Helpful Space for difference Learn/educate Fair Coordination Point of view Deliberateness Agendas Directives Debate Inspire Ideas Challenge
3. Role of God	Love God Spiritual Jesus Calling	

**Table 6.21. Focused Codes from Questions 26 and 27 of Questionnaire (Continued)**

Focused Codes from Questions 26 and 27 of Questionnaire	<i>In Vivo</i> Codes (120 total)	
4. Role of People	Discussion / talk Willingness Open Accepting Respectful Involved Non-polarized Struggle Attended	Experience Believe Trust Participate Grateful Buy in Speak up Empathy and understanding Values
5. Discernment/Decisions	Decision Discernment Informed Move Consider Tension	Evaluation Consensus Refine Unfold Determine Change

The first two focused codes chosen represent exactly those things that make up the *What* of the discernment including the *practices* and the overall *process* for using the practices within a gathered community. The next focused codes represent the *Who* of discernment including the *role of God* and the *role of the people*. The last focused code represents the outcome of the process or *discernment* itself. From these 5 focused codes 3 axial codes were created to describe elements needed for developing effective and useful processes for discernment through practices and relationships. These axial codes are represented in table 6.22 below.

**Table 6.22. Axial Codes from Questions 26 and 27 of Questionnaire**

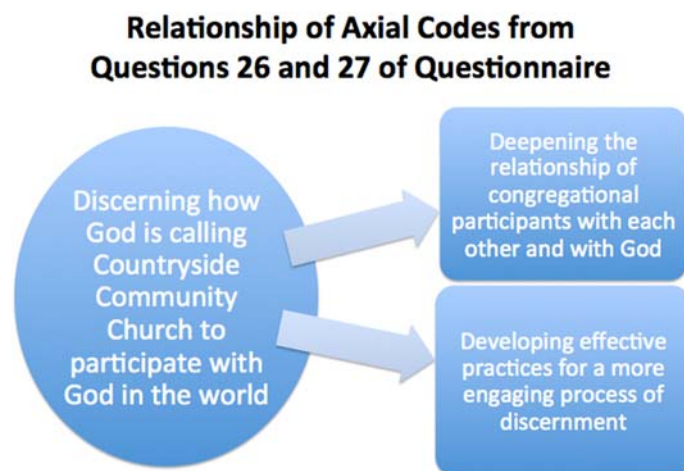
Axial Codes for Questions 26 and 27 of Questionnaire	Focused Codes
1. Developing effective practices for a more engaging process of overall discernment	a) Practices b) Process
2. Deepening the relationship of congregational participants with each other and with God	a) Role of the People b) Role of God



3. Discerning how God is calling Countryside Community Church to participate with God in the world.	a) Discernment
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The relationship between these axial codes is represented by figure 6.5 below.

The discernment process is developed through engaging people and God through helpful practices and processes for informing communal decisions for ministry. There is no distinct order of influence suggested in these codes, but rather a gathering of all of the elements and participants involved to establish a more effective discernment.



**Figure 6.5. Relationship of Axial Codes from Questions 26 and 27 of Questionnaire**

### **Data Stream Three: Memo Writing**

The third stream of data includes the memo writing collected throughout the research project. I took many notes during the interview process and often recorded thoughts about the project and the congregational practices along the way. These notes and recorded thoughts were transcribed and coded yielding 106 initial *in vivo* codes that gave rise to five focused codes as represented in table 6.23 below.

**Table 6.23. Focused Codes from Memo Writing**

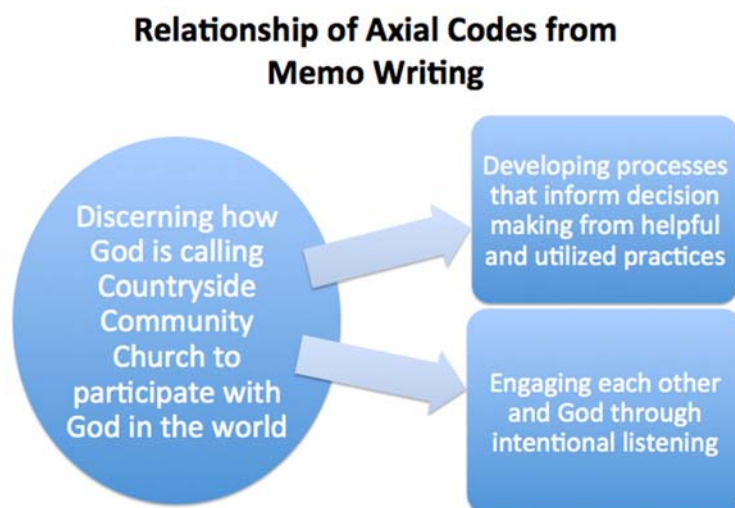
Focused Codes from Memo Writing	<i>In Vivo</i> Codes		
1. What God is Doing	Spiritual God Reveal Change Spirit	Space Presence Being Revelation God's Activity	Energy Relational/relationship Broken open
2. How People Respond	Involved Perspective Choose Active Ideas Regular attenders Recognize Disconnect Attend People Sense / Feel Name it Following	Congregational Discussion Power Inviting Time Part Trust Faith Articulate it Agency Human Vote	Lived experience Experience Information New Thought Patterns Hearts Minds Seeking Leadership Waits Imagine Worldview
3. Practices Used	Community Cupboard Worship Discernment Practices Meditation	Prayer Open and Affirming Converse/Talk Guided meditation	Large group Listening Sermon Small group
4. Overall Process	Process Congregation Clearly Opportunities Participate Decisions Church Teach Open	Environment Influence Meeting Role Present Space Shift Available Cultivate	Hearing Expanding Knowledge Language Prepare Community Structure Story Different
5. Next Steps	Relocation Ministry Adaptive change World		

These focused codes lead Countryside to consider how they might develop processes of discernment through engaging one another and God in a variety of practices of intentional listening, conversation, and prayer. The axial codes represented in table 6.24 below help to show how these processes might be developed and for what purposes.

**Table 6.24. Axial Codes from Memo Writing**

Axial Codes from Memo Writing	Focused Codes
1. Developing processes that inform decision making from helpful and utilized practices	c) Practices Used d) Overall process
2. Engaging each other and God through intentional listening	c) How people respond d) What God is Doing
3. Discerning how God is calling Countryside Community Church to participate with God in the world.	b) Next Steps

Figure 6.6 below shows the relationships between the practices utilized by the community and engaging one another and with God. The purpose of this engagement is to discern God's calling for the community in order to make better decisions about our ministry in our neighborhoods and in the world.



**Figure 6.6. Relationship of Axial Codes from Memo Writing**

### Summary

The results from this research on how Countryside Community Church utilizes practices and which of these practices are most helpful in our communal decision making allows our community to better engage with what God is already doing in the world. Our wish is to intentionally practice ways of discernment that open us most fully to God's revelation in our lived experiences and deepen our engagements with one another in the process. Research results from this project inform these activities within our community.

We now know, for instance, which of these practices are most helpful to our community in informing the decisions made for ministry directions in our community. We also have a clearer understanding now that *any* practice that opens us to listening to one another and to God is a helpful practice and should be encouraged no matter how many people engage with it at any given decision.

The next chapter reviews these results within the theoretical, biblical, and theological lenses identified in chapter four. Countryside Community Church can now use these results to begin shaping new discernment processes for determining our next best steps into ministry that participates with God in the world.

## CHAPTER 7

### CONCLUSIONS

The first step in discernment for any community is intentionality. One of the expressions I have come to appreciate most from our recent social justice campaigns is “totally woke.” This expression speaks to the heart of being fully aware of the reality we face together as neighborhoods, cities, nations, and global communities. This reality has been stripped of all illusions and perceptions that have blocked us from seeing those things that make us uncomfortable, scared, angry, or leave us in despair. We need to allow what is happening all around us, the good and the bad, to be embraced by God’s love if we are to be “totally woke.” We can be led into authentic relationships, free from bias, once we seek God’s voice in our discussions. This intentionality opens us to see each other as God sees us. We are open to the revelation of God in our midst when we engage one another in God’s love. For us to be “totally woke” we need to see the importance of sharing our gifts with one another and we need practices that encourage conversation and intentional listening for what God is communicating among us.

This research has been an intentional attempt to let go of our assumptions about what made Countryside Community Church an important place to be, and to sit for a time considering the ways Countryside makes decisions and develops ministries for engaging our communities. The discoveries made through this intentionality inform our future ministry decisions by following the Spirit into the world rather than being led by our biases. Our experience has taught us the importance of sitting quietly in prayer, engaging

each other in explorative conversation, and experimenting with what might emerge from collaborating with ministry partners different from our own. We have provided opportunities to listen for God's revelation to us, and how we might respond to God's call to participate most fully with creation, both human and non-human.

### **Summary of Results**

This research focused on four main types of discernment practices introduced and encouraged at Countryside surrounding the five major ministry decisions made by the Countryside community since 2010. The four types of discernment practices include prayer practices, conversational practices, community practices, and media practices. There was no distinction made in this research between what might be commonly termed spiritual practices versus any other kind of practice. The term I use for *practices* was defined by Dorothy Bass in chapter one of this research as "things Christian people do together over time to address fundamental human needs in response to and in light of God's active presence for the life of the world."<sup>1</sup> Bass clearly believes all practices engaged in by Christian communities include the activity of God and are therefore *spiritual* in their very nature. I share Dr. Bass' belief and would add that this nature concerning practices is true not only for Christians, but for all faith communities that intentionally seek God's presence among them.

The questions asked by this research included which practices are actually being utilized within the Countryside community, which practices are most helpful for informing our communal decisions on ministry, and how might we improve our

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<sup>1</sup> Volf and Bass, *Practicing Theology*, 18.

discernment processes by further developing those practices? The results of the research identified the most utilized practices within each of the four types of practices identified.

The most utilized practices overall included:

1. Informational meetings on the discernment topic held prior to the congregational decision making meeting (community practice - 75%)
2. Personal meditation (prayer practice - 66%)
3. The *examen* prayer, practiced weekly in each of our worship services (prayer practice - 64%)
4. Darkwood Brew worship services and community theological discussion (community practice - 66%)
5. Website information on discernment topics (media practices - 59%)
6. The guided visioning process designed and led by the architects preparing schematic designs for a new church building (community practice - 58%)

Additional practices were named within the most utilized practices for each of the four practice types, but all of them were identified by less than 50% of the respondents. These additional practices included:

1. The reading of scripture, group prayer or devotion time, and centering prayer (prayer practices);
2. Wednesday night community dinners, large group and panel discussions, and classes on discernment topics (conversational practices);
3. Community events that include people of those communities most effected by our ministry decisions such as the Tri Faith Initiative picnic, and the distribution of food, books and medical services through our Countryside

Community Cupboard ministry on the first Saturday of every month  
(community practices)

4. Social media communication and conversation, and documentaries or other movies provided as resources for the topic of discernment (media practices).

There were several practices named as the most helpful overall for each of the respondents within all four of the types of practices identified. All those practices listed as somewhat or incredibly helpful by more than 50% of the respondents included:

1. Worship (prayer practices - 94%)
2. Prayer (prayer practices - 90%)
3. Small group discussions (community practices - 90%)
4. Public lectures (community practices - 88%)
5. Community events with groups directly affected by our ministry decisions  
(community practices - 87%)
6. Large group community conversations (community practices - 86%)
7. Classes specific to discernment topics (community practices - 82%)
8. Scripture reading (prayer practices - 75%)
9. Website information on discernment topic (media practices - 74%)
10. Social Media announcements, information and group discussions (media practices - 57%)

This research also identified those practices that were specifically helpful for informing the five major ministry decisions of Countryside since 2010. Worship, large group discussion, prayer, small group discussion, community events with people most affected



by our ministry decisions, and scripture reading, were identified by at least 50% of the respondents in the questionnaire.

### **Importance of Findings**

The importance of identifying those practices most utilized by our community as well as those practices named as most helpful (both overall and for decision making) is that now we can begin to provide expanded opportunities for participating in these practices. Participation with these practices encourages us to deepen our engagement with one another and with God. This research suggests that the more we engage in these practices as a community the more we participate in the decision making regarding the ministry priorities of the congregation. Participation in discerning our communal ministries deepens our participation in seeking the activity of God's presence among us.

The importance of a deeper participation with God in the world through opening to God's revelation to us as a Spirit-led congregation cannot be overstated. Countryside Community Church's mission statement clearly speaks to the priority of God's activity in the world and our wish to participate in what God calls us to become through that activity among us. Our statement reads:

We are an inclusive, open and affirming, family of faith, welcoming all to God's table of love and acceptance. We are diverse, yet united by Chris's example. We care for one another, support one another, and challenge one another to become all that God creates us to be. We work together to nurture our community and to promote peace and justice in our conflicted world.

### **Key Insights**

In addition to intentionality, the findings of this research suggest four key insights that step beyond the statistical analysis of the data gathered from the community and help

us to consider the relational nature of these practices for building community and making communal decisions for the benefit of all.

### **Practices Done in Community Were Preferred**

The first insight of this research involves the communal nature of the practices themselves. The practices listed as both the most utilized and the most helpful are all practiced within a community rather than through personal devotions or meditation. All but one of the seven practices identified as the most utilized and all but two of the ten practices identified as the most utilized are practiced within community. It is even true that many of the prayer practices listed as most utilized and most helpful involve the community as well.

The qualitative data gathered from the five interviews regarding practices most utilized and most helpful further support the quantitative data from the questionnaire. The axial codes determined from the interview transcripts included listening for God, discussing together, worship as an opening to hear God's voice among us, and prayer as a primary source of communication with God. All of this activity with God involves practices engaged through community.

This insight leads us to explore more communal-based practices for engaging one another and with God. Countryside needs to be more intentional about providing opportunities for coming together for worship, communal prayer, large and small group conversations, and expanding conversations to include those voices from outside of our congregation who are equally concerned with the larger community surrounding our congregation. Intentionally building a broader and stronger sense of community within

our congregation and surrounding our congregation should now be a primary focus of developing discernment processes.

### **All Practices Are Important**

A second insight drawn from this research is that *all practices are important* to the discernment process no matter the number of people actually using it. If a practice actually helps even one person engage their community and God in a deeper way, it is important. The practices introduced as a part of an intentional discernment process at Countryside were not new to our community. Many were a version of something the congregation was already familiar with so it was not such a stretch of the imagination or of one's personal courage to take a step deeper into prayer as an intentional practice. Reading the scripture and talking about Bible passages in groups was not a new thing either, but taking the time to sit with the passage in silence before any discussion took place helped introduce our community to a deeper level of conversation with the scriptures.

When we introduced what we called *pneuma divina*, a practice that asks participants to identify a word or a verse in the reading that stood out for them in some way, it seemed like a natural extension of personal devotion and Bible reading that they were already comfortable doing. The difference between a practice and a habit is the intentionality of inviting God, and others, into the conversation with you. The communal conversation deepens through practices to a fuller and richer discussion that engages our community in something bigger than themselves. This deeper engagement seeks authentic responses from the participants and encourages exploration of our actions, enhancing the experience for everyone involved.

Participating in intentional practices to deepen your engagement with the world is always a good thing, whether it is as an individual or together with several people.

Practices reach different people in differing ways. The willingness to experiment with many types of practices helps people find that one practice, or combination of practices, that best suits them by expanding their conversations with God, neighbor, and self.

This research asked which practices were most utilized in our community, but we wondered early on in the research if perhaps we were asking the wrong question. The practices most utilized within a community is good information, but the broader issue underlying this information is that all practices help deepen our engagement with one another. Our focus has now shifted from “most utilized practices” to encouraging more people to participate in practices at any level. Our next steps will now be focused on expanding the types of practices we introduce and encourage, rather than narrowing the possibilities to a simple few that “work best.” When the Spirit is moving within a community of people, each person hears their calling within their own unique conversation with God. Opening the possibilities for that listening seems like a much better step into practices than seeking expertise in just a few.

### **Relationship of Influence between Practices and Meeting Participation**

A third insight from the research concerns the relationship between practices and decision making. The data suggest that the more a person is engaged with practices of discernment, the more likely that person is to participate in making the decisions regarding the ministries that stem from the discernment. The attendance numbers for the congregational or council meetings that decided the five major ministry decisions since 2010 rose chronologically. This finding suggests that the greater the community's

experience with practices, the greater the probability that members of the community would participate in the communal decisions on the topic of discernment. The research did not study the numbers of members participating in congregational ministries such as Sunday school, choral groups, governance boards and committees, or volunteering for the church office or in the nursery on Sunday mornings. I would suspect that if these numbers were documented we would also see an increase in participation in these ministries as well. Congregational meetings are the least attended ministry opportunity within the community in my experience, so it may be that if the numbers are rising in this area it might also hold true for all other areas of ministry. This is an area where more research would be welcomed.

This research did show that 68.7% of those participating in practices of discernment also participated in the congregational or council meetings that decided the ministries that sprang from their discernment. This is a significant relationship between practices and decision making.

There is no statistically significant data to support the idea that because this relationship between practices and participation exists at Countryside Community Church that it would also be true in other congregations in other places. However, the earlier insight that any intentional practice is important because it deepens engagement with God, neighbor, and self, would suggest that if other congregations adopt a more intentional participation in practices for discernment, their communities would also experience a richer sense of connecting with each other and with God on at least some level.

### **Practices Inform Our Ministry Decisions**

A fourth insight from the research is that an extremely high number of practice participants believe that practices influence the communal decisions for ministry at Countryside. Question 25 of the questionnaire asked respondents to state their level of agreement with the statement, “The discernment practices we utilize at Countryside Community greatly inform the decisions we make as a congregation regarding our ministries in our community.” The choices given for response was a range from strongly agree to strongly disagree. A total just over 91% of the respondents chose somewhat agree or strongly agree.

It is clear from both the quantitative and qualitative data that respondents felt more informed and more confident in making a decision concerning ministry after having participated in at least some of the discernment practices offered to the community prior to the meeting where the decision was made. What is interesting to me in this result is that the community seems to acknowledge a direct relationship between practices and decisions, but they are less able to articulate that relationship.

The language used by many of the respondents in the comments of the questionnaire and in interview responses did not always use the terms *discernment*, *following God’s presence*, *intentionally listening*, or *spirit-led community*. They used more corporate terminology such as *taking the right path*, *doing what is best for the community*, and *taking the time to consider our best options*, to express the same sentiments. Perhaps our next steps for enriching discernment processes at Countryside might be developing practices that help us connect the spiritual and the secular.

### **Interrogating these Findings with Theoretical, Biblical, and Theological Lenses**

The last question asked of this research was how we might improve our discernment processes at Countryside Community Church by further developing our discernment practices. This question is best answered through the engagement of our findings and insights with the theoretical, biblical, and theological lenses identified in chapters 3 and 4 of this research.

#### **Theoretical Lenses**

##### **Practices**

I stated that Countryside now chooses to put practices first, before beliefs in the discussion of the theoretical lens of practices in chapter 3. The hope is to find ways to articulate our beliefs through developing ministry opportunities that encourage our community to share in the wonder of God that surrounds us. It is this ability to articulate and demonstrate our beliefs through our ministries that is a priority for us as we move further into developing discernment processes.

When asked the question in an interview, “What do you believe the role of God is in our discernment processes?” one person responded, “I don't know how God works and I don't spend any time trying to figure it out, because I'll never figure it out.” My response was “You said earlier in this interview one of the reasons why you pray was because God opens your ears and your heart to listen to what other people are saying and to let that affect how you are thinking about things. Do you think that might be a role of God?” He laughed and agreed. We had a long conversation after the interview on how our community is participating in, and continually seeking for, the activity of God in the

world, yet they do not seem to have the vocabulary to talk about discernment in theological or spiritual language.

I am unsure whether it is possible to practice this theological/spiritual language together in order to incorporate it more often into our storytelling, but clearly this is an area where we need further exploration. Spiritual language is used every Sunday in our worship together, but perhaps creating discussion groups or Bible studies around theological concepts using implicitly spiritual language would be an added place for practice. Some in our community are just plain reluctant to speak about seeing the activity of God among us, and fewer still would be so bold as to speak on behalf of God, even if they feel God's presence among them in their everyday lives.

One of the benefits of practices is that we can provide expanded opportunities to *practice conversation* within our community, which gives us the opportunity to gain a confidence level in both speaking about God and how God is speaking to us. This strength of conversation and the ability to articulate one's faith is of particular importance to us at Countryside as we enter further and further into partnership with the Tri-Faith Initiative. It is essential to our ongoing relationship with our Jewish and Muslim brothers and sisters that we learn to speak to what brings us joy within our faith tradition. Learning to speak about God and how God is active in our lives is unavoidable if we are to articulate our joy in conversation with our partner communities.

### **Emergence Theory**

Emergence theory is a helpful lens for interpreting the data gathered in this research. It speaks to the relational aspect of creation and how creation itself teaches us to work together in openness and flexibility in order to discern God's voice in our decision



making. Our data show that Countryside finds communal types of practices most helpful for informing the decisions we make concerning the ministries we develop. Emergence theory encourages the gathering of information through open source conversations and community discussions concerning our history, our values, and the rituals that shape our priorities for ministry.

When asked in their interview, “Would your decisions have been the same had you not participated in the practices?” one person answered, “I think my decisions are almost 180 degrees different generally, and I think my decisions are all based on me and what I am thinking, not on anybody else, and those can't be ... so I gotta believe my decisions based on the people in my life are better decisions.” Emergence opens us to a way of living that embraces the experienced reality of *God with us*, rather than gathering together to talk *about* God. Conversations that ask us to acknowledge and articulate our experiences of God in the world help us to better discern together how God is calling our community into our neighborhoods.

The practices found to be most helpful in our research included: public lectures, large group conversations or panel discussions, community events with groups who are directly affected by our decisions, and classes on the topic for discernment. These practices open our conversations to diverse groups of people from within our own community and with those outside of it. Listening to diverse opinions and expressions of faith enhances our understanding and provides an expanded opportunity for God’s voice to be heard among us and through us.

One of the practices of Countryside that is supported by this data is not allowing proxy votes or absentee ballots in our congregational meetings. The belief that the Spirit

engages with the process of conversation to the extent that opinions can be changed directly corresponds to the emergent understanding that when individual parts begin to interact or relate to one another, something altogether new is created that cannot be undone. Margaret Wheatley writes, “Emergence is a process whereby interactions create something new and different that cannot be changed. Once something has emerged, it is here to stay. The only way to create something different is to start over, to begin again.”<sup>2</sup> Decision making within this theory, then, is not simply gathering a consensus, but rather, together with God, unfolding a new creation in the moment.

### **The Abundant Community**

To create *The Abundant Community* as described by Peter Block and John McKnight, we must encourage communities to become competent and self-organizing communities that act through communal practices, or the sharing of gifts. McKnight and Block posit that such a community needs time and a safe place to be able to process their past, present, and futures.<sup>3</sup> Dwight Zscheile argues that an abundant community also needs the knowledge and perspective of many in order to address those situations and questions for which we have yet to find answers. Zscheile goes on to say we can learn from each other while we discover new ways of being in the world as we share in conversation and common inquiry.<sup>4</sup> Nancy Tatom Ammerman says that churches

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<sup>2</sup> Wheatley, *So Far from Home*, 32-33.

<sup>3</sup> McKnight and Block, *The Abundant Community*.

<sup>4</sup> Zscheile, *The Agile Church*, 121-122.

participate in the building of this abundant community by providing places where people actually choose to spend time talking to one another about things that matter to them.<sup>5</sup>

The wish to be such an abundant community is expressed at Countryside Community Church by inviting more and more people into the conversations concerning our ministries together in our shared neighborhood. The decision made to participate as the Christian presence in the Tri-Faith Initiative was not made solely because the Bible tells us to love our neighbors and our enemies. The decision to participate came after a year and a half of discernment, separated into two parts. The first discernment was forty days of listening to each other. We listened to voices within our congregation, to members of our current neighborhood, and to members of the Tri-Faith communities. Our purpose was to discern if our faith community was called to interfaith ministry in general. After that initial discernment we spent over a year seeking outside consultation on what it would cost to fulfill this calling by moving our congregation to a new facility on the shared Tri-Faith campus.

Throughout this discernment we sought opportunities to provide people with safe places to talk about things that mattered to them. For many, those conversations included how our current church building holds many memories of baptisms, confirmations, weddings, and funerals. For others, the conversations included concerns for fiscal responsibility and how the money might be better spent in a different type of ministry such as social justice or human services. We came together and shared our gifts with one another, including educating each other concerning the Tri-Faith partner communities and their faith traditions. We prayed together, read scripture together, and worshipped

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<sup>5</sup> Ammerman and Farnsley, *Congregation & Community*, 370.

together, opening ourselves to hearing the important things from our past, considering the positive things in our present situation, and imagining together the possibilities that the future might hold for us. We were seeking a decision that could not be easily predicted and could only emerge through shared practices of discovery.

### **Five-Phase Discernment Processes**

Two models for discernment were reviewed in chapter three as theoretical lenses for our own discernment process at Countryside. The first was Craig Van Gelder's discernment process that incorporates the 5A's *Attending, Asserting, Agreeing, Acting, and Assessing*.<sup>6</sup> Van Gelder emphasizes that a process for discerning should be fluid and interactive in order for persons to enter at any point in the process, engaging in the conversation at different speeds, with varying degrees of background information. The purpose for creating such a process is to help congregations who hope to discover how God is speaking to their community through an engagement with scripture, an engagement with their cultural context, and through a self-understanding of what it means to be a community created by the Spirit in order to take action in the world.

The second model was offered by Peter Senge and also employs a five-step approach. The first step is personal mastery and is designed to help a community to look at its present reality in an objective way. The second step asks the community to explore the assumptions and generalizations that frame their current worldviews by creating mental models of this vision and reviewing it for biases and relevancy. The third step brings the community together to imagine shared visions of its future and then take the

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<sup>6</sup> Van Gelder, *The Ministry of the Missional Church*, 116-119.

fourth step of building teams to learn together what it would take to make those shared visions a reality. In the fifth and final step, a community would outline actions steps needed to achieve their vision and set in motion a process for repeating these five steps at a later point to constantly be evaluating where they are in their present context.<sup>7</sup>

Senge's approach gives communities permission to identify who and where they are in the present, while letting go of any assumptions or expectations that no longer support that emerging identity. Communities are then free to imagine many differing possible futures and be in conversation with one another to evaluate which future vision fits them best.

Countryside's processes for discernment and the relationship these processes have to ministry decisions embodied characteristics from both of the models described above. Our prayer practices, conversational practices, community practices, and media practices are all designed to allow community participants to enter the discernment discussions at any point within the process. They also included persons from both inside and outside our congregation and emphasized how the Spirit is leading us into community with our neighbors. Our processes are designed to be cyclical so there is an ongoing evaluation of how our current ministries are engaging our context and what gaps might necessitate additional conversation.

Countryside makes it a practice to intentionally spend time in conversation with one another objectively reviewing our ministries and governance and the unintentional biases that may be a part of them. We monitor our educational programs for inclusive language and open-ended questions that encourage children and adults to gather their

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<sup>7</sup> Senge, *The Fifth Discipline*, 7-12.

own conclusions and interpretations to the biblical stories we share with one another. We bring in other voices to speak to us honestly on things like privilege and responsibility for the care of our neighbor and creation. We intentionally set aside space and time for prayer together to invite God's voice within our conversations and use insights from these discernments to propose new visions that help us to follow the ever-moving Spirit of God's activity into the world.

These models for process have helped to guide Countryside in practices that help us engage one another, God, and our neighbors in meaningful ways. This research has shown that our members value this intentionality and are happy to be participating in those communal practices that bring people together to talk about things that matter to them. Countryside members tell us they are growing in their confidence in speaking to matters of importance for the community through these processes for discernment, and through this conversation have increased their participation in all levels of ministry, including attendance in those congregational meetings that decide our future ministries.

This influence of practices on ministry is one every community of faith hopes for as they strive to build abundant communities that trust one another and engage with the activity of God that is happening in the neighborhoods they are called to serve.

Expanding the variety of our practices can only expand our member participation, allowing new visions and insights to emerge from the community itself. Processes of discernment are themselves an intentional practice toward a deeper relationship with all that is.

## Biblical Lenses

Three biblical lenses were identified in chapter four of this research: Intentional Listening, I Kings 19:9-13; Trusting in God's Leading, Exodus 13:21-22; and Spirit-Led Church, Acts 15:4-29. Each of these scripture texts frames a vision of how God is present and active in our current contexts and how God invites us to participate in this activity in the world. The first biblical lens speaks directly to this idea of intentionality for taking time and space to listen for God's voice among us in our conversations for discerning. Many within our research mention the importance of learning to listen with the aim of understanding and accepting rather than listening in order to form a response. The communal practices named as being most helpful allow for both listening in order to learn something new and speaking to share our experiences with one another.

### **Intentional Listening, I Kings 19:9-13**

In I Kings 19, Elijah is intent on hearing God's voice for guidance and direction. Even when that voice is not found in predictable forms, Elijah has the expectation that God can and will speak to him and lead him on the path to which he has been called. Countryside lives out this same expectation for hearing God through similar practices of intentional listening. Our membership has developed practices of prayer, meditation, community conversation, and learning that lead them to a deeper participation in ministries that emerge from our practices. These emergent ministries provide opportunities for us to engage one another in ways that deepen our connection with one another, while building trust and acceptance of the other. Elijah's story is an example for us to intentionally sit, watch, and listen for God to be present with us and help us discern our next steps together.

### **Trusting in God's Leading, Exodus 13:21-22**

The second biblical lens gives Countryside direction on recognizing the various ways God communicates with us. God continues to move us out of our predictable lifestyles and into expanded world-views. Through these expanded visions we can better focus our ministries on those things that directly impact the community around us. In Exodus 13 the people of Israel are freed to live in a new way, but that new way is not immediately visible to them. The Israelites follow the pillars of cloud by day and pillars of fire by night to the destination God has chosen for them. In their wandering Israel learned to trust God's presence among them and remembered God's covenant with them as God's beloved people instead of living in fear of not knowing one's destination.

Countryside is not always aware of how our ministries will call us into the world or when we might be called to uproot all that we have and set forth in a new direction. The discernment to participate as the Christian presence of the Tri-Faith Initiative has called us to pull up stakes in our current neighborhood and stand together with our Jewish and Muslim brothers and sisters in a new place. We do not know exactly how we will get to this new place or how many of our people will be lost along the way, but we do trust that it is God who is directing our path. We continue to seek God's guidance in our conversations and shared events in the Tri-Faith Initiative that help us to see our way more clearly into the shared visions of our future together.

The listing of valued practices from the interviews in this research included listening for God, discussing together, worship as an opening for hearing God, and prayer as a form of communicating with God. All of these practices are pillars of cloud and fire that help our community recognize God's activity that in turn directs and guides our



participation in that activity. If we intentionally seek God's presence with us, we are able to let it lead us to our callings in the world.

### **Spirit-Led Church, Acts 15:4-29**

Acts 15 is the third biblical lens we use to interpret the findings of our research. The early church struggled with what practices were acceptable and if those practices could be expanded to include people from outside the original community of God's beloved people. Those believers who have the privilege of birthright for acceptance as God's beloved people could have refused to accept this new community of believers, but open conversation and discernment among all involved, provided that space for new opportunities to emerge. The conversation began with Peter sharing his dream for inclusion, and Paul and Barnabus were able to chime in with their stories of conversion among the Gentles. Then James was able to point to their own tradition for welcoming the stranger and how ministry among the gentiles was actually a fulfillment of their own prophetic story. People from both inside and outside the community were permitted to share their experience and gifts with one another in open conversation, thus allowing the Spirit to move them, leading them toward what God was already creating among them.

Countryside's discernment practices incorporate the same expectation for the Spirit to move among us. We invite the stranger to share their perspective with us. We provide lectures, workshops, classes, and panel discussions to ponder together the implications of a culture that is constantly changing and growing in unexpected ways. We value any practice that moves a person into a deeper relationship with God and find space for that practice even if only one person utilizes the space. *That* we seek God's voice and expect to hear it and be guided by it is what is important in communal discernment. *How*

God's voice is revealed among us is always a part of the mystery of the Spirit moving in and through our practices.

### Theological Lenses

#### **Perichoresis**

I used Dwight Zscheile's description of *perichoresis* in chapter 4 of this research. Zscheile talks about *perichoresis* as a relationship of shared participation between the persons of God and claims that the strength of the relationship is the distinctiveness of each person that sets them in relatedness to each other. Zscheile writes, "The triune community is composed of distinct persons united in a life of loving communion (*koinonia*, fellowship, sharing, belonging, or participation) precisely because of their otherness and difference. Difference makes communion possible."<sup>8</sup>

In the united persons of the Triune God, God is understood as communal and relational in essence, and thus, all of creation can find room within this essence of God. All of creation can find a resting place in God because God loves all of creation.

In this understanding of the relationship of God to creation, the Holy Spirit is the experienced God that dwells among us. The church then becomes that place where people gather to seek the activity of this Spirit in order to share these experiences and become a community that lives into its fullest expression of God's love for creation. When the church follows the activity of God by making room for the other and for creation, the energy of the Spirit abounds.

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<sup>8</sup> Zscheile, *Cultivating Sent Communities*, 14.

The role of the church is to continually practice trust, collaboration, and gratitude toward the other as it follows the Spirit into the world, extending the Triune community. We open ourselves to all people and invite others to the table of conversation and engagement, giving each a safe place to ask their questions, review their shared gifts, and listen together for how God is calling us into ministry with God's mission in the world.

The process of discernment sets us intentionally in the pathway of the Spirit by gathering our communities together to listen, share with one another, learn from one another, and move beyond tolerance into acceptance of one another. All of the insights of this research carry a piece of this perichoretic nature of God. Countryside seeks community with our neighbors and values their opinions within the conversations that inform our decisions for ministry in our neighborhoods. We prefer those practices that are communal in nature so in our conversations we are deepening our relationships and sharing our gifts toward the building of an abundant community. The diversity of practices that we encourage and provide opportunities to use are valued no matter how many people may be taking advantage of them at one time, since all practices lead into this communal nature of God.

The perichoretic nature of God dwells with us, and models for us, a community in relationship with one another. We are called and led toward those practices that open us to being in full relationship with all that surrounds us as the Spirit continues to move among us in this relational way. When we follow the Spirit through these practices we allow our care for the other and for creation to direct our priorities for ministry.

## Spiritual Practices

I identified spiritual practices in chapter four of this research by using Miroslav Volf and Dorothy Bass's description. Volf and Bass identify spiritual practices as having these four characteristics: (1) practices resist the separation of thinking from acting; (2) practices are social, belonging to groups of people across generations; (3) practices are rooted in the past but are also constantly adapting to changing circumstances; and (4) practices articulate wisdom that is in the keeping of practitioners who do not think of themselves as theologians.<sup>9</sup>

The working definition of spiritual practices for this research is "spiritual practices are those intentional rituals aimed at opening us up to participate in the creative activity of God that calls to us through creation." We are all aware that God is active all around us all the time, but we are never sure of what role we play in that activity, or how we might participate in such a way as to let it include us.

It was clear from quantitative results of the questionnaire that people were participating in all those opportunities provided for them to practice intentional rituals of prayer, conversation, community, and media for the sake of building relationships within our faith community. This clarity was confirmed within the interview responses as well. What was interesting in the qualitative results was that even though all of the members could share their stories with me concerning how they could feel the energy of the Spirit moving within the community through these practices, many of them never actually used the language of "Spirit" or "practices." The language they used were phrases like *energy*,

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<sup>9</sup> Volf and Bass, *Practicing Theology*, 6.

*consideration, taking time, and collaboration.* The specific words one respondent used were,

I'm ok listening and going along with a group of people I trust. It was a spiritual experience for me. And then being in the process that I have been in, clearly there is a huge desire to do this. I get my answers from the mouths of others, my direction from God comes from people I have in my life so praying about it gets my ears open to it, my heart open to the conversation and then over the course of a given day maybe I'll hear something. When the ears are ready, the message will be there kind of a thing.

I asked this same respondent later in the interview what he felt the role of God was within the processes of making decisions. He answered, "I don't know how God works and I don't spend any time trying to figure it out ... I look to you and Eric (clergy) to lead, to present opportunities. It's your job to try to have God be an integral part of what's going on and I forget about God all too often. I like to get reminded." Many of the respondents shared this hesitation to claim that God was participating in the conversation itself.

The benefit of introducing and encouraging participation in spiritual practices is providing a community the opportunity to see spiritual practices not as something distinct from the beliefs that one holds, but rather as integral to them. Intentional diligence in practices opens us to recognizing God's presence with us, so both our actions and our beliefs are influenced by our discoveries. The discernment processes undertaken by Countryside Community Church since 2010 have exactly this aim in mind.

The future ministry priorities of Countryside will include our Jewish and Muslim partners from the Tri-Faith Initiative. Through this partnership we hope to be introducing a more diverse set of practices and rituals from each of the faith traditions that will help us experience additional revelations of the God all around us.

## **Processes of Discernment**

The processes of discernment of Countryside as discussed in this research have always been resolved by a decision that was made concerning a ministry that was either established or expanded. Countryside has embarked on another forty-day period of discernment during Advent of 2016 to review our current mission statement and examine it for its present day impact on our calling to follow God's activity in the world. We are not evaluating one particular ministry possibility, but rather we are reconsidering the theological frame from which all our ministries are drawn. Does this statement of mission reflect what we think church should be in 21<sup>st</sup> century America, or does it point to God's mission in the world and how we are choosing to participate in it? Are those two things the same or different? In light of the changes taking place across our country and how those changes will affect the global political climate, does our vision of what God is calling us to be about in this world continue in the same path or should we go by way of another route?

This cyclical process of discernment is not new to our community. What is new to us is how we evaluate what we have discerned through the process if we do not have a decision making congregational meeting that follows the process. Our discernment could be articulated through a revised version of our mission statement, but what if we decide we are still following God's lead, though we now see additional opportunities for reaching out to stand for those most at risk in our changing climate and political uncertainty? One way of recognizing the outcome of the discernment period is to look for increased participation in the ministries that we currently pursue, as well as looking for

new ministry starts in the areas of advocacy and journey groups who want to reach out to those populations to which they feel called to serve or stand with as allies.

This research has helped make clear that participation in discernment practices has increased the confidence of our congregation to articulate their own stories of joy in their faith. Part of that articulation includes taking action in ways that draw them together in communal ministry pursuits. One step forward in expanding or deepening our processes would be to acknowledge the practices we do within them even more often and not just during time when major ministry decisions need to be made. Spiritual practices are those that connect us into the life and being of God's activity in the world. Such practices should be encouraged regularly.

This research shows the importance of listening more intentionally for God's voice on five of our major ministry decisions. Does it follow then that intentional listening would also be important for making decisions in our everyday lives? If practices increase our participation in the life of the church and its ministry, how might these same practices be used to increase our participation in life overall?

I discussed an idea from Diana Butler Bass in the introduction to this research. Bass describes a shift from the modern assumption of believing, behaving, and belonging, to a postmodern understanding that our belonging in a community shapes our behaviors and informs our beliefs. This idea is extremely relevant to our discussion on discernment. Processes of discernment are at their foundation a relational endeavor. We gather our community and provide safe places to practice those conversations that provide opportunities for transformation that deepen our beliefs.

Father Richard Rohr, a Franciscan priest of the New Mexico Province and founder of the Center for Action and Contemplation (CAC) in Albuquerque, New Mexico, explains the power of practices of discernment well. Rohr writes, “Prayer is sitting in the silence until it silences us, choosing gratitude until we are grateful, and praising God until we ourselves are an act of praise.”<sup>10</sup> Countryside Community Church seeks to pray in a silence that silences us, we choose to develop ministries of gratitude until we are grateful, and we praise God until we, as a community led by the Spirit, become an act of praise. May it be so.

### **Limits of Generalizing From These Findings**

So much of what Countryside has been able to experiment with in the areas of practice and discernment stems from the leadership which values engaging the mysteries of the Spirit in conversation with our community. The results of these experiments with discernment practices may not be replicable in every context simply by encouraging the same practices. I do believe, however, that any intentionality given to opening a community to the revelation of God will result in transformations of some kind. Congregations who engage with these practices and allow their discoveries to influence their ministry decisions will provide their communities an opportunity to enrich their internal relationships as well as those relationships with the people who are directly affected by their ministries. Each congregation will need to find the practices that suit their unique conversation with God, and from them, to develop unique processes for discernment that guide their future ministry decisions.

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<sup>10</sup> Richard Rohr, OFM, Daily Meditations, Center for Contemplation and Action, Albuquerque, NM <https://cac.org/category/daily-meditations/>, accessed December 29, 2016.



The limits of this research include the study of one particular congregation with a unique history of progressive and interfaith dialogues within their local community. All data were gathered from members of Countryside, so any results gathered from the data is purely an insider's perspective. A wider perspective could be achieved by asking our neighboring communities how they experience the effect of Countryside's ministry within the larger community.

Also worth noting is that all of the practices researched were those done during a time period that led to a formal vote through a congregational or church council meeting. It might be worth asking how these practices might change when applied to everyday decisions made by boards or committees who implement the congregation's ministry decisions.

### **Other Questions Raised by This Research**

Other questions from information gathered in this research could arise concerning what suggested action strategies might be best for Countryside in our future decisions. Additional research opportunities might include steps taken to develop or enrich the ministries identified in the discernment process. Another project might center on how those ministries might provide more effective opportunities to expand and deepen our practices together.

Another related project might be to analyze the role leadership plays in communal discernment and decision making. The Senior Pastor of Countryside Community was the one who emphasized listening for God's voice among our community and introduced many of the practices we currently utilize in our discernment processes. Our current processes are not dependent on the Senior Pastor to keep them active, but I do believe

that leadership plays a large role in encouraging the value of discernment. In this research, leadership was identified as modeling various practices, helping to cultivate opportunities for these practices, and connecting our communal decisions with how we participate with what God is already doing in our neighborhood. How big a role leadership plays in discernment and to what degree they influence any decisions made would be an interesting question for further research.

### **Summary**

Countryside Community Church begins all ministry decisions by intentionally listening for God's voice in our discussions. We use The Phoenix Affirmations (as outlined in chapter 2 of this research) to remind us of the three great loves of God, neighbor (both human and non-human), and self that inform and guide our communal decisions for ministry. This means that all discernment practices must provide opportunities for us to listen to these voices through conversation, community engagement, prayer, and study together. All of these discernment practices are enhanced and continued through the opportunities presented through social media and advances in technology.

This research has supported our assumption that all practices that engage our community in intentional opportunities for deepening our relationships with one another and with God are valuable for our ministry discernment. The two questions our community has learned to ask regarding our ministry are "How is God working in the world?" and "How might we be called to participate in God's activity?" Discernment as a community is how we ask these questions.

Discernment then becomes developing and promoting practices that open us to God's revelation among and through us. Our priorities as a faith community become providing spaces for safe and open conversation, education, consideration and listening that lead to a stronger sense of call in the decisions we make for ministry. This research has shown that an increase of discernment practice leads to an increase of participation in making those ministry decisions. This research has also shown that our community overwhelming recognizes this influence of practices on the decisions we make.

For Countryside Community Church, it is clear that we are a Spirit-led community. We believe that God is active among us, and that God's continual creation calls for our participation in what God is already doing. Our future as a faith community will continue to be intentional in our discerning what that participation looks like in our neighborhood and in our world.

## EPILOGUE: DISCERNMENT FOR MINISTRY

The discernment processes at Countryside Community Church were a new concept for me when I began my call to this community in December of 2010. The Senior Pastor, Eric Elnes, had begun introducing the idea of intentionally listening for the voice of God among us and the importance of prayer and meditation in our practices as a community since he accepted his call to this community in 2008. My ministry at Countryside has been shaped by this practice of discernment and I have watched the response of the community for over six years. It is abundantly clear to me that this community has a much richer and deeper understanding of relationship, and our connection to God through relationship, than any other community I have served.

The assurance of this conviction came while experiencing the process of discernment the Countryside community underwent for its decision to participate as the Christian presence of the Tri-Faith Initiative in Omaha. I was one of the initial participants to receive the invitation from the Tri-Faith Initiative and thus helped to develop a process for discernment that involved the whole of the congregation and the surrounding community in conversation toward our response. This process was comprised of discernment practices that included prayer, conversation, community dialogue, and connecting points for information sharing through social media and websites. Our community immersed ourselves in a forty-day period of research, conversation, learning, debating, and community prayer, seeking a path that would allow us to share in the creative activity of God in our neighborhood. It was our aim to invite God into our conversations and actually expect to be moved through the Spirit to our

calling from God. I believe the results from this research added statistical support for the experience of God our congregation felt through this discernment process. Over 91% of the respondents of the questionnaire answered that our discernment practices greatly informed our ministry decisions at Countryside.

The direction for ministry at Countryside is shaped by our discernment of God's calling us to participate in the life of our community. My ministry as a faith leader in this community, is therefore, shaped by the processes that help to discern this calling. My research through this Doctor of Ministry program has helped me to explore the experiences of our community. Through this research I am better able to understand what it is about our discernment processes that draw us together to become better listeners with one another. I can also now point to research that shows the importance of discernment that seeks consultation and collaboration with as many different communities as possible in order to broaden our understanding of all who might be affected by our decisions. I have learned how to articulate the importance of inclusion for all of the ministries we develop rather than relying on our practices to inform only our major decisions.

I have also learned the benefit of taking time in making decisions regarding our ongoing ministries at Countryside. Discerning our calling from God takes time. How we develop the ministries to fulfill these callings also takes time. To be intentional about listening to diverse groups of people within our community we must be about providing consistent opportunities to share in conversation. We must move beyond our sanctuaries and take prayer out into our systems of governance, administration, and classrooms in order to practice this intentional listening and conversation. We must encourage our

congregations to act out of these practices, articulating our experiences of God for our larger communities through the ministries developed from our discernment.

My next steps for ministry leadership will be to develop a new system of governance that intentionally incorporates these discernment practices. Our ministry staff has already been re-organized into ministry teams that collaborate through regular prayer and conversation. These teams are also responsible for recruiting advisory groups within their areas of ministry to expand those conversations. We are currently in discernment about the re-organization of our supporting boards and committees for each of these ministries and how we might re-vision these to include more members in less restricted ways. By expanding participation in these supporting networks we hope to open our systems to include more voices and expand our imaginations toward innovative ministries.

One challenge for ministers using discernment processes for developing innovative ministries will be how to measure the outcome of their discernment. This research has discussed the influence of discernment on decisions that were made to establish new ministries. The outcome of our discernment was measured by the decisions made by our church council or in a meeting of our congregation. How then do we determine the outcome of discernment in ongoing administration of ministry where there is no congregational vote to direct us?

We are beginning to see the direct influence of how discernment practices are helping to lead our members toward their vocational callings at Countryside. Our Life Ministries Director filed an annual report on the activities of volunteer activity in our congregation. The statistics in this report showed that fewer people are actually

volunteering in the established ministries of the congregation, but those areas where volunteerism increased suggested that people were developing new ministries in areas that spoke to their passion for service. We believe these statistics support our assumption that discernment practices help us discern where God is calling us to participate through ministries that connect us to each other and our larger community.

We hope to generate deeper relationships with one another through conversation in our discerning, but it is also true that each person within the community will have their own unique conversation with God through these discernment practices. There will be times where our discerning may lead us in several different paths of ministry that are developed from only one stream of discerning.

These diverse expressions of God's calling for us as a community are not necessarily a source of conflict on their own, but when setting priorities for the use of human and financial resources for ministry, we will need to be intentional about honoring all discernment as Spirit-led, and find ways to validate our discoveries. Not all Spirit-led congregations will be called in the same direction. How might we allow for those who feel called by God to serve in a different direction to follow those calls without feeling abandoned by the very community from which their calling was discovered?

It is a challenge to develop systems that are flexible and expansive enough to include the variety of discoveries articulated by the community in discernment. We must consider systems of organization that help us to stay open and inclusive through processes for discernment that includes practices that allow us to listen and recognize the revelation of God so that we might truly be a community led by the Spirit.

## APPENDIX A

### QUESTIONNAIRE FIRST STAGE SURVEY

#### Discernment Process and Practices Survey

1. Welcome to my survey on the Discernment Process and Practices of Countryside Community Church!

**This survey is designed to help Rev. Chris Alexander, and our church, learn more about our discernment processes and practices at Countryside Community and how these practices are used in relation to our decision making as a community.**

**My goal is to provide you a safe opportunity to answer honestly, so all of your answers will be kept confidential, and will only be reported in summary form. This is designed to take you approximately 15 minutes to complete, and the survey will remain open until Noon on December 31, 2015.**

**Your return of this survey is implied consent. No benefits accrue to you for answering the survey, but your responses will be used to help our church most fully develop ongoing processes for discernment.**

**Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your relationship with Countryside Community Church, or me, your pastor. If you decide to participate, you are free to discontinue participation at any time without prejudice.**

**If you have any questions, please ask. You can contact me through my email or call me at the church office.**

**As this is also a research project for my Doctor of Ministry in Congregational Mission and Leadership at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, MN, I want to thank you for helping me gather important information toward my thesis!**

**Peace to you – Chris**



## Discernment Process and Practices Survey

### 2. The Communal Decisions on Ministry at Countryside Community

Since 2010, several significant ministry initiatives have been introduced through the boards of Countryside Community and were recommended for discernment by the congregation. These ministry initiatives were discerned through various levels of congregational discussions, and at different times within the history of the congregation's experience with spiritual practices. Five of these communal decisions along with the spiritual practices being utilized at Countryside Community during the time of the decisions are being explored through this survey. The five decisions include:

1. Countryside Community Cupboard - Approved by Church Council in February 2010
2. Countryside Community designated as an "Open and Affirming" congregation of the UCC – Approved by Church Council in September 2011
3. Continuing Darkwood Brew as an ongoing ministry of Countryside Community (***beyond the two year pilot project phase***) – Approved by a Congregational Meeting in January 2013
4. Converging Paths Ministry and the calling of Rev Bruce Van Blair to Countryside Community – Approved by a Congregational Meeting in November 2013
5. Participation in the Tri-Faith Initiative – 2 phase decision:

40 day discernment to determine if Countryside Community was called to Interfaith Ministry through the Tri-Faith Initiative – Approved by a Congregational Meeting in June 2014

Decision to relocate Countryside Community to the Tri-Faith Campus – Approved by a Congregational Meeting in April 2015

Please keep these communal decisions in mind as you proceed with this survey. Some of you might not have been members at Countryside Community during the time these decisions were made, and others of you, though members at the time, may not have actively participated in these decisions. There is an option to state these instances on the questions as they arise in the survey.

Thank you again for your participation.

## Discernment Process and Practices Survey

### 3. Your relationship to Countryside Community and Demographics

1. How long have you been an active participant of Countryside Community Church?

- ☐ 1-6 Months
- ☐ 7-11 Months
- ☐ 1-3 years
- ☐ 4-6 years
- ☐ 7-10 years
- ☐ More than 10 years

Comments:

2. Are you a member of Countryside Community?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

If "Yes," what year did you become a member?

3. About how often do you attend worship?

- ☐ Usually every week
- ☐ Several times a month
- ☐ About once a month
- ☐ Several times per year
- ☐ About once a year
- ☐ I do not attend worship

Comments:

4. Which one of the following statements best describes your church experience prior to participating at Countryside Community?

- ☐ Countryside Community is the only church I have ever attended
- ☐ I previously attended another United Church of Christ Congregation
- ☐ I previously attended church in another Christian denomination
- ☐ I attended services in a religious community other than a Christian tradition
- ☐ I have no worship experience prior to participating at Countryside Community
- ☐ Other:

5. What is your gender?

☐ Male

☐

Female

6. In what year were you born? (enter 4-digit birth year; for example, 1976)

7. What is the highest level of school you have completed or the highest degree you have received?

- ☐ Less than high school degree
- ☐ High school degree or equivalent (e.g., GED)
- ☐ Some college but no degree
- ☐ Associate degree
- ☐ Bachelor degree
- ☐ Graduate degree

## Discernment Process and Practices Survey

### 4. Discernment Practices

9. Which of the following prayer or scripture reading practices are you currently engaged in using?

	Yes	No
Examen		
Centering Prayer	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Open Chapel Prayer		
Personal Meditation	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Guided Meditation		
Prayer Retreats	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Prayer Journals		
Prayer Walking	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Pneuma Divina		
Dwelling In The Word	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Private Devotions and Scripture Reading		
Group Prayer and Devotions (In small groups, boards, or committees)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Comments:		

### 10. Have you ever participated in the following community conversation opportunities?

	Yes	No
Small Group Discussions		
Wednesday Night Community Dinners	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Large Group or Panel Discussions		
Public Lectures	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Classes Specific to Discerning a Community Decision (examples: LGBT 101, Muslim 101, The Jesus Fatweh, The Faith of Jesus in a Pluralistic World)		

Comments:

### 11. Have you ever participated in the following Media opportunities?

	Yes	No
Movies Specific to Discerning a Community Decision (examples: "Of Many" and "Facing Fear")		
Project Interfaith Presentation "Ravel/Unravel"	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Following Facebook Pages (examples: Countryside Community, Tri-Faith, Temple Israel, American Muslim Institute, PFLAG, Heartland Clergy for Inclusion, Ready To Marry, Darkwood Brew)		
Following the information regarding discernment events and practices on Websites (examples: Countryside Community, Tri-Faith, Temple Israel, American Muslim Institute, PFLAG, Heartland Clergy for Inclusion, Ready To Marry, Darkwood Brew)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Comments:

## 12. Have you ever participated in the following events?

	Yes	No
Seder Meal at Temple Israel		
Eid Celebrations at American Muslim Institute	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Tri-Faith Neighbor to Neighbor Dinners		
Interfaith Thanksgiving Service	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Darkwood Brew Tri-Faith Episodes		
Tri-Faith Picnic	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Heartland Clergy for Inclusion Press Conference		
Pridefest Events	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
LGBTQ 101		
Darkwood Brew Services	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Community Cupboard Saturday Distributions		
Tri-Faith Visioning Process with Alley, Poyner, Mechetto Architects	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Information Meetings prior to the Congregational Meeting on the Tri-Faith Relocation		

Comments:

## Discernment Process and Practices Survey

### 5. Decision Making at Countryside Community

13. How helpful are the following discernment practices in informing the decisions you contribute to regarding the overall ministry at Countryside Community?

	Not helpful at all	Of very little help	Somewhat helpful	Incredibly helpful	I don't know
Worship					
Prayer	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Scripture Reading	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Large Group Community Conversation	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Small Group Community Conversation	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Public Lecture	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Classes specific to discernment topic	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Movies	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Social Media	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Website Information Center	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Community Events with Groups Directly Affected by our Decision	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Comments:

14. Which of the following discernment practices were helpful to you in informing your choices within the community decision regarding the ministry of Community Cupboard? (If you did not participate in this decision, please skip to the next question.)

	Yes	No	Not Applicable
Worship			
Prayer	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Scripture Reading			
Large Group Community Conversation	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Small Group Community Conversation			
Public Lecture	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Classes Specific to Discernment Topic (examples: Muslim 101, The Faith of Jesus in a Pluralistic World, LGBTQ 101)			
Movies	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Social Media (examples: Facebook Pages, Twitter)			
Website Information Centers	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Community Events with Groups directly effected by our Decision			

Comments:



15. Which of the following discernment practices were helpful to you in informing your choices within the community decision regarding the "Open and Affirming" Congregational Designation for Countryside Community? *(If you did not participate in this decision, please skip to the next question.)*

	Yes	No	Not Applicable
Worship			
Prayer	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Scripture Reading			
Large Group Community Conversation	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Small Group Community Conversation			
Public Lecture	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Classes Specific to Discernment Topic (examples: Muslim 101, The Faith of Jesus in a Pluralistic World, LGBTQ 101)			
Movies	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Social Media (examples: Facebook Pages, Twitter)			
Website Information Centers	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Community Events with Groups directly effected by our Decision			

Comments:

16. Which of the following discernment practices were helpful to you in informing your choices within the community decision regarding the continuation of the ministry of Darkwood Brew beyond the two year pilot project phase? *(If you did not participate in this decision, please skip to the next question.)*

	Yes	No	Not Applicable
Worship			
Prayer	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Scripture Reading			
Large Group Community Conversation	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Small Group Community Conversation			
Public Lecture	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Classes Specific to Discernment Topic (examples: Muslim 101, The Faith of Jesus in a Pluralistic World, LGBTQ 101)			
Movies	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Social Media (examples: Facebook Pages, Twitter)			
Website Information Centers	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Community Events with Groups directly effected by our Decision			

Comments:

17. Which of the following discernment practices were helpful to you in informing your choices within the community decision regarding the ministry of Converging Paths? (If you did not participate in this decision, please skip to the next question.)

	Yes	No	Not Applicable
Worship			
Prayer	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Scripture Reading			
Large Group Community Conversation	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Small Group Community Conversation			
Public Lecture	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Classes Specific to Discernment Topic (examples: Muslim 101, The Faith of Jesus in a Pluralistic World, LGBTQ 101)			
Movies	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Social Media (examples: Facebook Pages, Twitter)			
Website Information Centers	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Community Events with Groups directly effected by our Decision			

Comments:

18. Which of the following discernment practices were helpful to you in informing your choices within the community decision regarding the Tri-Faith Initiative Relocation? (If you did not participate in this decision, please skip to the next question.)

	Yes	No	Not Applicable
Worship			
Prayer	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Scripture Reading			
Large Group Community Conversation	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Small Group Community Conversation			
Public Lecture	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Classes Specific to Discernment Topic (examples: Muslim 101, The Faith of Jesus in a Pluralistic World, LGBTQ 101)			
Movies	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Social Media (examples: Facebook Pages, Twitter)			
Website Information Centers	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Community Events with Groups directly effected by our Decision			

Comments:

19. Which of the following were an additional influence on your choices within the community decision regarding the ministry of Community Cupboard? (If you did not participate in this decision, please skip to the next question.)

	Yes	No	Not Applicable
Physical Plant / Facilities			
Location	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Relationship with the Neighborhood			
Relationship with the wider Omaha Community	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Finances			
Debt	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Conflict in our Congregation			
Additional Staffing Needs	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Global Relationships			

Comments:

20. Which of the following were an additional influence on your choices within the community decision regarding the "Open and Affirming" Congregational Designation for Countryside Community? (If you did not participate in this decision, please skip to the next question.)

	Yes	No	Not Applicable
Physical Plant / Facilities			
Location	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Relationship with the Neighborhood			
Relationship with the wider Omaha Community	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Finances			
Debt	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Conflict in our Congregation			
Additional Staffing Needs	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Global Relationships			

Comments:

21. Which of the following were an additional influence on your choices within the community decision regarding the continuation of the ministry of Darkwood Brew beyond the two year pilot project phase? *(If you did not participate in this decision, please skip to the next question.)*

	Yes	No	Not Applicable
Physical Plant / Facilities			
Location	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Relationship with the Neighborhood			
Relationship with the wider Omaha Community	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Finances			
Debt	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Conflict in our Congregation			
Additional Staffing Needs	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Global Relationships			

Comments:

22. Which of the following were an additional influence on your choices within the community decision regarding the ministry of Converging Paths? *(If you did not participate in this decision, please skip to the next question.)*

	Yes	No	Not Applicable
Physical Plant / Facilities			
Location	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Relationship with the Neighborhood			
Relationship with the wider Omaha Community	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Finances			
Debt	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Conflict in our Congregation			
Additional Staffing Needs	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Global Relationships			

Comments:

23. Which of the following were an additional influence on your choices within the community decision regarding the Tri-Faith Initiative Relocation? (If you did not participate in this decision, please skip to the next question.)

	Yes	No	Not Applicable
Physical Plant / Facilities			
Location	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Relationship with the Neighborhood			
Relationship with the wider Omaha Community	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Finances			
Debt	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Conflict in our Congregation			
Additional Staffing Needs	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Global Relationships			

Comments:

24. Did you attend the following meetings?

	Yes	No
Church Council Meeting in February 2010 which established Countryside Community Cupboard		
Church Council Meeting in September 2011 which approved the designation of Countryside Community as an "Open and Affirming" congregation of the UCC	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Congregational Meeting in January 2013 which approved the continuation Darkwood Brew as an ongoing ministry of Countryside Community beyond the two year pilot project phase		
Congregational Meeting in November 2013 which established the Converging Paths Ministry and called Rev. Bruce VanBlair	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Congregational Meeting in June 2014 which determined that Countryside Community was called to Interfaith Ministry through the Tri-Faith Initiative and should move forward in discernment toward relation of Countryside Community to the Tri-Faith Campus		
The Annual Meeting in February 2015	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Congregational Meeting in April 2015 which approved the relocation of Countryside Community to the Tri-Faith campus		

Comments:

## Discernment Process and Practices Survey

### 6. Additional Comments

25. Do you agree with this statement: *The discernment practices we utilize at Countryside Community greatly inform the decisions we make as a congregation regarding our ministries in our community.*

- ☐ Strongly Agree
- ☐ Somewhat Agree
- ☐ Do not know
- ☐ Somewhat Disagree
- ☐ Strongly Disagree

Comments:

26. What suggestions would you offer for improving our Discernment Process at Countryside Community?

27. What else would you like to share with us concerning your experience with Discernment Processes or Practices at Countryside Community?



If you are willing to participate in an interview to further discuss the discernment processes and practices at Countryside Community, please email me to leave your name and email information for me to contact you.

*(Agreeing to participate in an interview will NOT connect your name with the answers provided for this survey)*



## APPENDIX B

### STAGE TWO INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

#### **Interview Protocol**

Chris Alexander  
Qualitative Interview Protocol

Four interviews regarding the discernment practices currently utilized at Countryside Community Church and the decisions regarding the congregational ministries of Community Cupboard, The designation of Countryside Community Church as an Open and Affirming congregation of the UCC, Darkwood Brew, Converging Paths Ministry, and participation in the Tri-Faith Initiative. (A list of these practices and the recently developed ministries will be provided at the start of the interview)

1. Tell me about your engagement in ministry at Countryside Community.  
Follow Up: What ministries do you participate in here?
2. Please share a memory you have about any discernment practice you participated in at the time any of the listed ministries were being planned and developed.  
Follow Up: How helpful were these practices to you?
3. Thinking about all the discernment process opportunities at Countryside, describe your participation with them.  
Follow Up: Which ones do you find to be most helpful to you?
4. In what ways, if any, did these discernment process opportunities inform your decisions concerning these recent ministry decisions?
5. What other factors, if any, were involved in your decision making for these ministry decisions?  
Probe: Which factors proved to be most influential in your decision?
6. What influence would you say the clergy had on your decisions in the ministry areas?
7. What influence did the church council leadership have on your decision?

8. In what ways, if any, have you had a chance to utilize these discernment practices outside of your participation with the community at Countryside Community Church?

9. Would your decisions have been the same even if you had not participated in any of the discernment practices at Countryside?

Probe: How are your decisions effected by your practices?

9. What would you say is the role of God in our decisions here at Countryside?

10. How do you intentionally listen for God's voice in discerning?

Probe: How do you sense God's presence among us here at Countryside?

11. How would you define the term "discernment?"

Probe: Would you have defined it this same way prior to your participation in practices here at Countryside?

12. What have we not talked about together here that you would like us to take into consideration as we continue to cultivate our discernment process at Countryside?

## APPENDIX C

### IMPLIED CONSENT LANGUAGE

#### **IMPLIED CONSENT**

**(Included with the introductory page of the questionnaire)**

This survey is designed to help Rev. Chris Alexander, and our church, learn more about our discernment processes and practices at Countryside and how these practices are used in relation to our decision making as a community.

My goal is to provide you a safe opportunity to answer honestly, so all of your answers will be kept confidential, and will only be reported in summary form. This is designed to take you approximately 15 minutes to complete, and the survey will remain open until Noon on December 31, 2015.

Your return of this survey is implied consent. No benefits accrue to you for answering the survey, but your responses will be used to help our church most fully develop ongoing processes for discernment.

Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your relationship with Countryside Community Church, or me, your pastor. If you decide to participate, you are free to discontinue participation at any time without prejudice.

If you have any questions, please ask. You can contact me through my email or call me at the church office.

As this is also a research project for my Doctor of Ministry in Congregational Mission and Leadership at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, MN, I want to thank you for helping me gather important information toward my thesis!

Peace to you -

Chris

## APPENDIX D

### INFORMED CONSENT FORM

#### **INFORMED CONSENT FORM**

#### Interviews Regarding the Discernment Process and Practices of Countryside Community Church

You are invited to be in a research study of the Discernment Process and Practices of Countryside Community Church. You were selected as a possible participant because you are a member of Countryside's community. We ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

This study is being conducted by me, Rev. Chris Alexander, as part of my doctoral thesis project in Congregational Mission and Leadership at Luther Seminary. My advisor is Dr. Craig Van Gelder.

#### **Background Information:**

The purpose of this study is to explore our spiritual practices and discernment processes at Countryside Community Church to better understand what is most helpful for people within our community in listening for God's voice within our conversations and making decisions concerning our ministry development based on what we discern God is calling us to be as participants with God in the world.

Gathering data about our practices will help us to build discernment processes that better inform our community, and can encourage us to continually seek out new ways to expand our practices and processes to engage God in deeper ways, listening intentionally for God's desire for our promised future.

#### **Procedures:**

If you agree to be in this study, we would ask you to meet with Pastor Chris Alexander for a recorded interview regarding your practices and how those practices inform the choices you make within our community decision making at Countryside.

#### **Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study:**

The study has no physical or psychological risk in your participation, and you may terminate the interview at any time.

There will be no direct benefit of money, credit, etc. received for your participation in this interview.

Indirect benefits, to yourself/or the general public, of participation are helping Countryside develop discernment practices and processes that better inform our discernment for the ministry God calls us to be about in our neighborhood.

**Confidentiality:**

The records of this study will be kept confidential. If I publish any type of report, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify you. All data will be kept in a locked file in my church office; only my advisor, Dr. Craig Van Gelder, and I will have access to the data and any tape recording. If the research is terminated for any reason, all data and recordings will be destroyed. While I will make every effort to ensure confidentiality, anonymity cannot be guaranteed.

Audio files of these interviews will be made, and the recordings will be kept in a locked file in my church office; only my advisor, Dr. Craig Van Gelder, and I will have access to these recordings, and they will be erased before Graduation in May 2017.

**Destruction of Records:**

- a. Raw data will be destroyed by May 2021

**Voluntary Nature of the Study:**

Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Countryside Community Church or with other cooperating institutions such as our Tri-Fait partner communities. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

**Contacts and Questions:**

The researcher conducting this study is Rev. Chris Alexander. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you may contact me through my email or through my cell phone. You may also contact Dr. Craig Van Gelder through Luther Seminary

You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records.

**Statement of Consent:**

I have read the above information or have had it read to me. I have received answers to questions asked. I consent to participate in the study.

Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

I consent to this interview being recorded:

Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

I consent to allow use of my direct quotations in the published thesis document.

Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Revised 1/19/1

## APPENDIX E

### FIVE CONGREGATIONAL DECISIONS AT COUNTRYSIDE COMMUNITY

#### **Five Congregational Decisions at Countryside Community**

Since 2010, several significant ministry initiatives have been introduced through the boards of Countryside Community and were recommended for discernment by the congregation. These ministry initiatives were discerned through various levels of congregational discussions, and at different times within the history of the congregation's experience with spiritual practices, and thus, decisions made by the congregation regarding each of these initiatives will need to be explored in the order in which they were made.

#### 1. Countryside Community Cupboard—Church Council Approved February 2010

In 2009 two members from our congregation, acting on their passion and following our call from God to feed the hungry made a recommendation to begin the *Countryside Community Cupboard*. These two members did all the research, licensing, and fundraising and made this information available to a Church Council meeting in February 2010, who voted to establish this ministry as an ongoing ministry of Countryside Community Church.

#### 2. The designation of Countryside Community Church as an “Open and Affirming” congregation of the UCC—Church Council Approved September 2011

When the suggestion was made at this council meeting to begin a year process to determine whether or not Countryside Community would be designated an “Open and Affirming” congregation, the council deemed it unnecessary to take a year to discern this since everyone in the room thought Countryside Community already was an O&A congregation. The vote to approve the designation was unanimous.

#### 3. The continuation of Darkwood Brew as an ongoing ministry of Countryside Community, beyond the two year pilot project phase—Congregational Meeting in January 2013

The congregation was given a private grant to pilot the ministry of Darkwood Brew for two years. It was agreed that at the end of the two year pilot project, a congregational meeting would be called to share the information gathered within the two year pilot and determine whether or not Darkwood Brew should continue as an ongoing ministry of

Countryside Community. The congregation approved the continuation of Darkwood Brew.

4. Converging Paths Ministry Approval and the calling of Rev Bruce Van Blair to Countryside Community—Congregational Meeting November 2013

Countryside Community was being offered a partnership with the BTS Center (formerly Bangor Theological Seminary) to launch a Five year vocation-based educational process utilizing small groups (Disciple Bands) and the *By This Way of Life* curriculum developed by Darkwood Brew to help people, wherever they live, explore and discernment their vocational call.

5. Tri-Faith Initiative—2 phase decision

a. 40 Day Discernment Vote—Congregational Meeting June 2014

This was a series of events scheduled within a 40 day period to help gather information, promote conversation, and listen to other Tri-Faith community partners, in order to determine if Countryside Community was called to the specific interfaith ministry of participation in the Tri-Faith Initiative. The congregation voted to approve the calling and move forward in discerning the relocation of Countryside Community to the Tri-Faith campus.

b. Relocation of Countryside Community to the Tri-Faith Campus—Congregational Meeting April 2015

This was a congregational vote on whether or not to relocate Countryside Community to the Tri-Faith campus. This meeting was called following a series of visioning process events led by the architects from Alley Poyner Mechetto, as well as congregational discussions concerning process and procedures, as well as the regular annual meeting of the congregation in February 2015. The congregation approved this relocation.



## APPENDIX F

### PRAYER AND DISCERNMENT PRACTICES CURRENTLY UTILIZED AT COUNTRYSIDE COMMUNITY

#### **Prayer and Discernment Practices Currently Utilized at Countryside Community**

- Worship
- Scripture Reading
  - Pneuma Divina
  - Dwelling in The Word
  - Bible Study Groups
- Prayer
  - Examen
  - Centering Prayer
  - Open Chapel Prayer
  - Prayer Walking
  - Prayer Retreats
  - Prayer Journals
- Meditation: Individual or guided group
- Devotions in small groups, boards or committees
- Large Group Discussion
- Small Group Discussion
- Public Lectures
- Classes specific to discernment topics
- Media Resources such as: Websites, Social Media, Movies, Podcasts etc...,
- Community events with groups directly affected by our decisions

## APPENDIX G

## QUANTITATIVE RESULTS FOR PRACTICES USED TO INFORM DECISIONS

**Table Appendix G.1. Practices Helpful to Inform Community Cupboard Decision**

<b>Practices Helpful To Inform Community Cupboard Decision</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>n – “Yes”</b>	<b>Percentage</b>	<b>Rank</b>
Worship	80	65	81.2%	1
Large Group Community Conversation	73	50	68.5%	2
Prayer	79	52	65.8%	3
Small Group Community Conversation	69	41	59.4%	4
Community Events with Groups Directly Affected by Our Decisions	68	39	57.4%	5
Public Lecture	59	25	42.4%	6
Scripture Reading	73	30	41%	7
Website Information Centers	62	25	40.3%	8
Social Media	62	19	30.6%	9
Movies	52	8	15.3%	10
Classes Specific to Discernment Topic	48	7	14.6%	11

**Table Appendix G.2. Practices Helpful to Inform "Open And Affirming" Decision**

<b>Practices Helpful To Inform The "Open And Affirming" Decision</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>n – “Yes”</b>	<b>Percentage</b>	<b>Rank</b>
Worship	86	77	89.5	1
Prayer	85	65	76.5	2
Large Group Community Conversation	78	53	67.9	3
Small Group Community Conversation	73	48	65.8	4
Scripture Reading	83	45	54.2	5
Community Events with Groups Directly Affected by Our Decisions	74	40	54.1	6
Public Lecture	68	36	52.9	7
Website Information Centers	65	25	38.5	8
Movies	58	20	34.5	9
Social Media	66	21	31.8	10
Classes Specific to Discernment Topic	57	16	28.1	11

**Table Appendix G.3. Practices Helpful to Inform the Darkwood Brew Decision**

<b>Practices Helpful To Inform The Darkwood Brew Decision</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>n – “Yes”</b>	<b>Percentage</b>	<b>Rank</b>
Worship	108	90	83.3	1
Small Group Community Conversation	96	71	74.0	2
Large Group Community Conversation	92	67	72.8	3
Prayer	98	53	54.1	4
Community Events with Groups Directly Affected by Our Decisions	77	39	50.6	5
Website Information Centers	78	38	48.7	6
Public Lecture	77	34	44.2	7
Social Media	82	35	42.7	8
Scripture Reading	94	36	38.3	9
Classes Specific to Discernment Topic	66	14	21.2	10
Movies	61	10	16.4	11

**Table Appendix G.4. Practices Helpful to Inform the Converging Paths Decision**

Practices Helpful To Inform the Converging Paths Decision	<b>N</b>	<b>n – “Yes”</b>	<b>Percentage</b>	<b>Rank</b>
Worship	62	51	82.3	1
Large Group Community Conversation	57	38	66.7	2
Prayer	61	36	59.0	3
Small Group Community Conversation	57	34	59.6	4
Scripture Reading	60	26	43.3	5
Community Events with Groups Directly Affected by Our Decisions	51	21	41.2	6
Public Lecture	54	21	38.9	7
Website Information Centers	49	17	34.7	8
Classes Specific to Discernment Topic	46	10	21.7	9
Social Media	49	9	18.4	10
Movies	44	4	9.1	11

**Table Appendix G.5. Practices Helpful to Inform the Tri-Faith Discernment and Relocation Decisions**

<b>Practices Helpful to inform the Tri-Faith Initiative Discernment and Relocation Decisions</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>n – “Yes”</b>	<b>Percentage</b>	<b>Rank</b>
Worship	210	185	88.1	1
Large Group Community Conversation	207	180	87.0	2
Small Group Community Conversation	193	165	85.5	3
Community Events with Groups Directly Affected by Our Decisions	184	148	80.4	4
Prayer	209	159	76.1	5
Public Lecture	178	129	72.5	6
Website Information Centers	177	110	62.1	7
Scripture Reading	193	97	50.3	8
Classes Specific to Discernment Topic	142	66	46.5	9
Social Media	165	70	42.4	10
Movies	133	20	15.0	11

## APPENDIX H

### ADDITIONAL INFLUENCES THAT INFLUENCE THE FIVE MAJOR DECISIONS

**Table Appendix H.1. Additional Influences that Informed the Community**

**Cupboard Decision**

<b>Additional Influences that informed the Community Cupboard Decision</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>n – “Yes”</b>	<b>Percentage</b>	<b>Rank</b>
Relationship with the Wider Omaha Community	76	71	93.4	1
Location	73	60	82.2	2
Relationship with the Neighborhood	75	58	77.3	3
Physical Plant / Facilities	70	53	75.7	4
Finances	67	41	61.2	5
Global Relationships	58	29	50.0	6
Additional Staffing Needs	63	22	34.9	7
Debt	62	16	25.8	8
Conflict in our Congregation	64	10	15.6	9

**Table Appendix H.2. Additional Influences that Informed the "Open And Affirming" Decision**

<b>Additional Influences that informed the "Open and Affirming" Decision</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>n – "Yes"</b>	<b>Percentage</b>	<b>Rank</b>
Relationship with the Wider Omaha Community	83	77	92.8	1
Relationship with the Neighborhood	77	53	68.8	2
Global Relationships	80	48	60.0	3
Location	69	32	46.4	4
Conflict in our Congregation	82	33	40.2	5
Physical Plant / Facilities	67	26	38.8	6
Finances	71	22	31.0	7
Debt	69	15	21.7	8
Additional Staffing Needs	74	14	18.9	9



**Table Appendix H.3. Additional Influences that Informed the Darkwood Brew Decision and the Converging Paths Decision**

<b>Additional Influences that informed the Darkwood Brew Decision</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>n – “Yes”</b>	<b>Percentage</b>	<b>Rank</b>
Global Relationships	90	73	81.1%	1
Physical Plant / Facilities	93	73	78.5%	2
Relationship with the Wider Omaha Community	91	69	75.8%	3
Finances	92	66	71.7%	4
Location	90	63	70%	5
Additional Staffing Needs	89	43	48.3%	6
Debt	87	37	42.5%	7
Relationship with the Neighborhood	86	35	40.7%	8
Conflict in our Congregation	85	19	22.4%	9
<b>Additional Influences that informed the Converging Paths Decision</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>n – “Yes”</b>	<b>Percentage</b>	<b>Rank</b>
Relationship with the Wider Omaha Community	54	37	68.5	1
Global Relationships	51	31	60.8	2
Relationship with the Neighborhood	52	30	57.7	3
Finances	54	30	55.6	4
Location	53	26	49.1	5
Physical Plant / Facilities	52	25	48.1	6 and 7

Additional Staffing Needs	54	26	48.1	6 and 7
Conflict in our Congregation	53	17	32.1	8
Debt	53	11	20.8	9

**Table Appendix H.5. Additional Influences that Informed the Tri-Faith Initiative Discernment and Relocation Decisions**

<b>Additional Influences that informed the Tri Faith Initiative Discernment and Relocation Decisions</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>n – “Yes”</b>	<b>Percentage</b>	<b>Rank</b>
Relationship with the Wider Omaha Community	207	182	87.9	1
Global Relationships	203	173	85.2	2
Physical Plant / Facilities	203	166	81.8	3
Location	207	166	80.2	4
Finances	204	158	77.5	5
Relationship with the Neighborhood	204	143	70.1	6
Debt	201	134	66.7	7
Conflict in our Congregation	206	133	64.6	8
Additional Staffing Needs	198	79	39.9	9

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