

Spring 2017

Deepening Community: Dispelling the Myth of Small through a Gospel of the Small

Sarah R. Cordray
Luther Seminary

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.luthersem.edu/dmin_theses



Part of the [Christianity Commons](#), [Interpersonal and Small Group Communication Commons](#), [Practical Theology Commons](#), [Rural Sociology Commons](#), and the [Social Psychology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Cordray, Sarah R., "Deepening Community: Dispelling the Myth of Small through a Gospel of the Small" (2017). *Doctor of Ministry Theses*. 23.

http://digitalcommons.luthersem.edu/dmin_theses/23

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Theses at Digital Commons @ Luther Seminary. It has been accepted for inclusion in Doctor of Ministry Theses by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Luther Seminary. For more information, please contact akeck001@luthersem.edu.

DEEPENING COMMUNITY:
DISPELLING THE MYTH OF SMALL
THROUGH A GOSPEL OF THE SMALL

by

REV. SARAH R. CORDRAY

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

© 2017 by Sarah R. Cordray

All rights reserved

ABSTRACT

Deepening Community: Dispelling the Myth of Small through a Gospel of Small

by

Rev. Sarah R. Cordray

This transformative, mixed-methods research project utilized a modified PAR in order to strengthen inter-relationships of a congregation and with its community.

Intentional small acts of conversation and listening were utilized as the main tool to implement change, as participants were awakened from the myth of small-town living, in which assumptions of connectedness were made. This project was deepened through the use of key theoretical, biblical, and theological lenses, such as: community, social capital, open systems theory, transformational leadership, hearing, incarnation, perichoresis, and a sense of belonging. Results revealed a deepened sense of community, a growing awareness of inter-relationships, key differences in how women and men connect in congregational life, and a changed congregational behavior of reaching out to disconnected ones.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My mother, Joan Petersen, was a talented and gifted school teacher and had a passion and love for her small town. She was adamant that a small town, such as ours, had even better gifts of community than any city. She especially believed that her talented and gifted students were called to take small steps to impact the greater good of their community. I was one of her students and believe that her legacy lives on in me. During my time in the D.Min. CML program, my mom was diagnosed with ovarian cancer and died a year before graduation. I dedicate this work to her in deep gratitude for the passion of the small she instilled in my heart and life's calling.

I also acknowledge and thank God for my husband, Nicholas and two children, Nathaniel and Samantha, my sister, Ruth and sister-in-law, Sherry, and my father, Charles. They were my strength and support as they encouraged me and endured hours of homework and conversation about my studies. My dad has been a rock of faith for me always and instilled in me a strong writing and speaking ability from an early age.

I lastly want to acknowledge and thank my previous call of the four small churches and my current call of Tree of Life. They not only financially provided for me to earn this doctorate; they were also the living presence of the small becoming great. I particularly acknowledge and thank my PAR team and staff for their many contributions and help, especially during my sabbatical for writing this thesis. Thanks be to God!

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	ii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	iii
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS.....	ix
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS.....	x
 1. INTRODUCTION TO THESIS AND RESEARCH QUESTION.....	 1
Research Question	3
Variables.....	5
Importance of This Research.....	6
Key Theoretical Lenses	8
Community.....	9
Social Capital	10
Open Systems Theory	11
Transformational Leadership	13
Small Acts of Conversation and Listening.....	15
Meaningful Conversation.....	15
Listening.....	16
Biblical and Theological Lenses	18
Biblical Lenses	19
Hearing.....	19
A Gospel of the Small.....	21
Theological Lenses.....	22
Incarnation.....	22
Perichoresis	24
Sense of Belonging	25
Social Science Methodology	26
Research Design.....	28
Instruments for Study	29
Analysis.....	30
Definition of Key Terms	31
Ethical Considerations.....	32
Summary.....	34
 2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES.....	 37
Community	37
Social Capital.....	44
Open Systems Theory.....	58
Transformational Leadership.....	64

Intentional Small Acts of Conversation and Listening.....	70
Meaningful Conversation.....	71
Listening.....	78
Summary.....	83
3. BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL THEMES	84
Biblical Themes.....	84
Hearing	84
A Gospel of the Small	91
Theological Themes	97
Incarnation.....	97
Perichoresis	102
Sense of Belonging.....	109
Summary.....	112
4. METHODOLOGY	113
Social Science Research Methodology	113
Biblical and Theological Grounding of the Methodology	116
Research Design	121
Research Team	121
Population and Sample.....	121
Research Plan	122
Pre-step Process	123
Invitation to the Population.....	124
Baseline Survey.....	124
Baseline Interviews	126
Planned Interventions.....	127
Intervention One: New Member/Mentor Program	128
Intervention Two: God’s Work, Our Hands-Part Two	129
Intervention Three: Half-Time Conversations between Services.....	130
Intervention Four: Monthly 100 th Anniversary Celebrations	131
Additional Intervention: Carnival Fund-Raiser for Vertical Lift	132
Intervention Five: Home Visits to Less Involved, Younger Families.....	133
Qualitative Data Gathering from the Interventions.....	134
End-line Survey.....	135
End-line Interviews	136
Analyzing the Data.....	137
Quantitative Data	137
Qualitative Data	138
Summary.....	139
5. RESULTS AND INTERPRETATION	140
Introduction	140

PAR Team Description and Timeline	141
Description of Participants	142
Quantitative Data Participant Profile	142
Qualitative Data Participant Profile	150
Baseline and End-line Interviews.....	150
Focus Group Participants	152
Quantitative Data.....	154
Introduction	154
Overall Sense of Connectedness	156
Perception/Awareness of Connectedness.....	159
Intervening Variables Affecting Sense of Connectedness	160
Intervening Variable #1: Age Groups	161
Intervening Variable #2: Gender.....	166
Intervening Variable #3: Income Level	170
Intervening Variable #4: Educational Level	173
Intervening Variable #5: Childhood Church Background	177
Intervening Variable #6: Length of Congregational Membership	180
Intervening Variable #7: Average Worship Attendance	184
Intervening Variable #8: Congregational Involvement.....	188
Intervening Variable #9: Use of Media and Technology	191
Intervening Variable #10: Location of One's Work	195
Intervening Variable #11: Location of One's Shopping Preferences	199
Intervening Variable #12 Community Service Participation	202
Further Testing of Bridging and Bonding Capital	205
Additional Questions from End-line Questionnaire.....	208
Summary of Quantitative Data.....	211
Qualitative Data.....	212
Introduction	212
Baseline Interviews and Open-Ended Responses of Questionnaire.....	213
Initial and Continuous Connecting Points.....	216
Disconnecting Points.....	216
Reconnecting Points.....	217
Impacting Obstacles	218
Baseline Theoretical Codes	219
End-line Interviews and Open-Ended Responses of Questionnaire.....	221
Initial Connecting Points for Men.....	225
Benefitting Points as Men in Congregation	225
Initial Connecting Points for Women	226
Benefitting Points as Women in Congregation.....	226
Reconnecting Points.....	227
Continuous Connecting Points.....	227
Impacting Obstacles	228
Disconnecting Points.....	229
End-line Theoretical Codes	229
Focus Groups.....	231
Disconnecting Points: Not Knowing (Before the Change Occurred)	234

Reconnecting Points (What Changed and When Changes Happened)	235
Accompanying Membership (Why Changes Occurred)	238
Accompanying Leadership (Why Changes Occurred)	238
Impacting Obstacle (What Continues to Affect the Change)	239
Focus Groups Theoretical Codes	240
Summary	243
6. CONCLUSIONS	244
Findings: What, Who, Why, and How	245
What—A Myth of Small	245
Who the Connected and Disconnected Ones Were	246
Why Disconnection Happened	247
How Disconnected Ones Became Reconnected	248
What Changes Occurred and Why	249
Findings Cross-Examined with Lenses	256
Theoretical Lenses	256
Community	257
Social Capital	261
Open Systems Theory	268
Transformational Leadership	270
Small Acts of Conversation and Listening	272
Meaningful Conversation	273
Listening	274
Biblical Lenses	276
Hearing	276
A Gospel of the Small	279
Theological Lenses	282
Incarnation	282
Perichoresis	285
Sense of Belonging	290
Generalizability: Limitations and Possibilities	292
Future Research from This Project	297
Summary	299
EPILOGUE	301
APPENDIX A	303
APPENDIX B	304
APPENDIX C	305
APPENDIX D	316
APPENDIX E	318

APPENDIX F.....	320
APPENDIX G.....	323
APPENDIX H.....	325
APPENDIX I	330
APPENDIX J	331
APPENDIX K.....	333
APPENDIX L	334
APPENDIX M	336
APPENDIX N.....	338
APPENDIX O.....	340
APPENDIX P.....	342
APPENDIX Q.....	345
APPENDIX R.....	348
APPENDIX S.....	350
APPENDIX T	352
APPENDIX U	354
APPENDIX V	357
APPENDIX W	360
APPENDIX X.....	361
BIBLIOGRAPHY	363

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CML	Congregational Mission and Leadership
D.Min.	Doctorate of Ministry
ELCA	Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
PAR	Participatory Action Research

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Tables

Table 5.1. Participant Profile with Age Groups.....	144
Table 5.2. Participant Profile with Gender	144
Table 5.3. Participant Profile of Income Levels	145
Table 5.4. Participant Profile of Educational Levels	145
Table 5.5. Participant Profile of Childhood Church Background.....	146
Table 5.6. Participant Profile of Length of Congregational Membership	147
Table 5.7. Participant Profile of Average Worship Attendance	147
Table 5.8. Participants Profile-Use of Television, Radio, and Technological Devices..	148
Table 5.9. Participant Profile of Work Location.....	149
Table 5.10. Participant Profile of Location of Shopping Preferences	149
Table 5.11. Participants' Profile of Community Involvement	150
Table 5.12. Participant Profile of Focus Groups.....	153
Table 5.13. Independent t-test Results for Overall Sense of Connectedness.....	157
Table 5.14. Paired t-test Results for Overall Sense of Connectedness	158
Table 5.15. Paired t-test Results for Overall Perception of Congregational Connectedness for Q20	159
Table 5.16. ANOVA Test Comparing Level of Connection between Age Groups for Q25 in Baseline Questionnaire	161
Table 5.17. Independent t-test Results of Connectedness Comparing Age Groups	162

Table 5.18. Paired t-test Results of Connectedness Comparing Age Groups.....	164
Table 5.19. Independent t-test Results of Connectedness Comparing Gender.....	166
Table 5.20. Paired t-test Results of Connectedness Comparing Gender	167
Table 5.21. Independent t-test Results of Connectedness Comparing Income Levels...	170
Table 5.22. Paired t-test Results of Connectedness Comparing Income Levels	171
Table 5.23. Independent t-test Results of Connectedness Comparing Educational Levels	173
Table 5.24. Paired t-test Results of Connectedness Comparing Educational Levels	175
Table 5.25. Paired t-test Results of Connectedness Comparing Childhood Church Background	179
Table 5.26. Independent t-test Results of Connectedness Comparing Length of Congregational Membership.....	181
Table 5.27. Paired t-test Results of Connectedness Comparing Length of Congregational Membership	182
Table 5.28. Independent t-test Results of Connectedness Comparing Average Worship Attendance	185
Table 5.29 Paired t-tests Results of Connectedness Comparing Average Worship Attendance	186
Table 5.30. Independent t-test Results of Connectedness Due to Involvement in Congregational Activities	188
Table 5.31. Paired t-test Results of Connectedness Due to Involvement in Congregational Activities	190

Table 5.32. Independent t-test Results of Connectedness Comparing Use of Technological Device, Television, Radio, and/or Computer.....	191
Table 5.33. Paired t-test Results of Connectedness Comparing Use of Technological Device, Television, Radio, and/or Computer.....	193
Table 5.34. Independent t-test Results of Connectedness Comparing Location of One's Work	196
Table 5.35. Paired t-test Results of Connectedness Comparing Location of One's Work	198
Table 5.36. Independent t-test Results of Connectedness Comparing Location of Shopping Preferences.....	200
Table 5.37. Paired t-test Results of Connectedness Comparing Location of Shopping Preferences	200
Table 5.38. Independent t-test Results of Connectedness Comparing Community Service Project Participation.....	203
Table 5.39. Paired t-test Results of Connectedness Comparing Community Service Project Participation.....	204
Table 5.40. Independent t-test Results of Bridging Capital with Tree of Life Lutheran's Community	206
Table 5.41. Paired t-test Results of Bridging Capital with Tree of Life Lutheran's Community	207
Table 5.42. Percentages of Participation in Interventions	208
Table 5.43. Reasons Why Participants Feel More Connected.....	209

Table 5.44. Reasons Why Participants Feel More Connected through the Congregation to the Community (Bridging Capital)	210
Table 5.45. Interest in Future Activities Similar to Interventions	211
Table 5.46. Baseline Focused Codes	214
Table 5.47. Baseline Axial Codes.....	215
Table 5.48. End-line Focused Codes	222
Table 5.49. End-line Axial Codes.....	223
Table 5.50. Focus Group Focused Codes	232
Table 5.51. Focus Group Axial Codes.....	233

Figures

Figure 2.1. Flora and Flora's Social Capital Typology	48
Figure 4.2. Modified PAR for Tree of Life	123
Figure 4.3. Baseline Interview Participants	126
Figure 4.4. End-line Interview Participants	136
Figure 5.5. Overview of Modified PAR	142
Figure 5.6. Participant Profile of Baseline Interviews.....	151
Figure 5.7. Participant Profile of End-line Interviews.....	152
Figure 5.8. Baseline Theoretical Codes	220
Figure 5.9. End-line Theoretical Codes	230
Figure 5.10. Focus Groups Theoretical Codes: Where the Change Occurred.....	241
Figure 5.11. Spiral of Deepening Community through Reiterations of Participating Cycle of Tree of Life	242

Figure 6.12. Spiral of Deepening Community through Reiterations of Participating Cycle of Tree of Life	258
Figure 6.13. Flora and Flora's Social Capital Typology with Tree of Life's Baseline Assessment.....	263
Figure 6.14. Flora and Flora's Social Capital Typology with Tree of Life's End-line Assessment.....	265
Figure 6.15. A Shift through the Incarnational Presence of Accompanying Membership	284
Figure 6.16. Perichoretic Nature through Accompanying Leadership Spun Out into Tree of Life's Participating Cycle	286

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION TO THESIS AND RESEARCH QUESTION

Tree of Life Lutheran Church is typically presented as a healthy, stable congregation that celebrated its 100th anniversary in 2016.¹ They are the largest congregation with over six hundred active members in a small Nebraskan town that has grown from 1,764 in the 2000 census to 1,942 in the 2010 census.² Tree of Life Lutheran members are often leaders in the community as they have initiated and provided leadership for ministries such as a community food pantry, a backpack food program for at-risk children, an after-school children's ministry program, and a community vacation bible school. Members of Tree of Life Lutheran seek to live out their mission statement, "Remember, Rejoice, and Reach out," but their struggles became apparent in the last ten-to-fourteen years.

Worship attendance and offerings decreased.³ Volunteers became difficult to recruit for both short- and long-term commitments. Generations became disconnected between two different worship services of traditional and contemporary. Relationships weakened as church activities moved away from the social center of members' weekly routines. Tree of Life Lutheran found itself shifted away from presumably a tight-knit

¹ Pseudonyms are used in this thesis for all proper names of persons and places.

² I accessed census data, but cannot cite specific URL due to confidentiality (accessed June 10, 2015).

³ "Full Trend Report," <http://www.elca.org/tools/FindACongregation.org> (accessed June 12, 2015). Tree of Life Lutheran's worship attendance decreased 7.7% from 2000 to 2014.

family to an increasingly disconnected, church community. Robert Putnam names this as a weakened social capital. “Social capital refers to connections among individual-social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them.”⁴ Tree of Life Lutheran’s weakened social capital led to weakened social inter-relationships with one another. A social inter-relationship is defined as “a close or mutual relationship.”⁵

Tree of Life Lutheran previously seemed unaware of their weakened social inter-relationships as they assumed connectedness in their small community congregation. They were living in a myth of being small where they assumed everyone knew each other. However, their panicked questions and failed quick-fixes indicated an awakening to this changed reality. Questions such as, “Where is everyone? What do we need to do to get them coming back to church?” left members frustrated with no answers. Their desire in the recent past to work harder with bigger, more attractive programs and hire a larger staff left them exhausted with fewer resources and energy. As a result, Tree of Life Lutheran began to realize their solutions were not found in the seemingly big fixes; rather, they began to wonder if God could be up to something through the small.

God has been up to something in the small throughout God’s story when human reality presented struggles. A small shepherd boy, David, defeats Goliath. Jesus uses a small lunch of five loaves and two fish in order to feed a crowd of five thousand men, as well as the women and children. A small mustard seed becomes a great bush where birds may build their nests in the shade. A small, tender sprig that is weak and vulnerable becomes a mighty cedar upon a mountain. A small babe is born as Immanuel, *God with*

⁴ Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2000), 19.

⁵ “Interrelate,” <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/interrelate> (accessed July 7, 2015).

us, and becomes the savior of the world. God uses the small and brings forth the greatness of God's kingdom in order to transform our human struggles into new life.

Science has even begun to explain the success of small efforts as well through a quantum view. Margaret Wheatley explains, "Changes in small places also affect the global system, not through incrementalism, but because every small system participates in an unbroken wholeness."⁶ Small efforts can affect the entire fabric of whole systems.

The fabric of our connectedness thinned at Tree of Life Lutheran, but new, small threads also began to be woven into our life together. God began to show us that God uses our seemingly *small acts of conversation and listening* and weaves together an even greater social fabric connecting us with one another and our community around us. As senior pastor of Tree of Life Lutheran, I led us through this research to further explore *intentional small acts of conversation and listening* in order that we might experience God increasing our social inter-relationships for the greatness of God's kingdom.

Research Question

We have been talking about *intentional small acts of conversation and listening* since I began with this congregation after a difficult interim period and an all-time low worship attendance. We initially listened to one another in conversations with SWOC analyses, informal questioning, and times of exploration with staff, council, and other informal small groups.⁷ My doctoral studies provided us with the opportunity to form a missiological ecclesiology using the biblical metaphor of God's tree of life, which

⁶ Margaret J. Wheatley, *Leadership and the New Science: Discovering Order in a Chaotic World*, 3rd ed. (San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler, 2006), 45.

⁷ Gilbert R. Rendle and Alice Mann, *Holy Conversations: Strategic Planning as a Spiritual Practice for Congregations* (Bethesda, MD: Alban Institute, 2003), 69. SWOC is an assessment tool used to name strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and challenges.

reframed our conversations to include identity, purpose, and God's mission. These examples of *intentional small acts of conversation and listening* with one another led us to consider *God-sized dreams*.

These dreams merged into three focal points: being a church outside our building, living a contagious joy, and building a sense of community. Continued conversation of these dreams began to reshape our imagination of how God was calling us to increase our social capital and rebuild our sense of community in both our congregation and our relationship to our small-town. For example, a survey with twenty of our uninvolved parents of Sunday school and confirmation youth began to expose our assumptions about how to build our congregation's community. We assumed that we must somehow get these parents to attend worship in order to increase our social capital and build our connections with them. We assumed that church was not a meaningful activity for these families. However, this small act of listening through the survey began to expose our false assumptions and challenge us to connect with these parents in their homes where they indicated their identity, purpose, and sense of community are primarily shaped. This research began to move us outside our church building and into our *God-sized dreams* where we have begun to imagine connecting together differently through *intentional small acts of conversation and listening*.

Margaret Wheatley expresses, "We never know how our small activities will affect others through the invisible fabric of our connectedness."⁸ I built upon Wheatley's statement as I proposed my thesis project that explored how these *intentional small acts of conversation and listening* allowed my congregation to witness and know God's

⁸ Wheatley, *Leadership and the New Science*, 45.

kingdom of the small being used for God's purposes. I changed Wheatley's statement somewhat, arguing that we would come to know how our small actions would impact our connectedness of our social inter-relationships. My research question is:

How might a Participatory Action Research intervention utilizing small acts of conversation and listening increase the social inter-relationships within Tree of Life Lutheran and our awareness of them?

Variables

A modified Participatory Action Research (PAR) project utilizing well-defined *intentional small acts of conversation and listening* was the primary independent variable in this project. These *intentional small acts of conversation and listening* were developed in consultation with my PAR Team. An example of these intentional acts was the conversations that were carried into the homes of these uninvolved Sunday school and confirmation parents.

The primary dependent variable in this project was the social inter-relationships of the congregation, which included but was not limited to the congregation itself. We sought to increase connectedness that did not exist solely inside the church building; rather, we sought increased connectedness that transferred into our daily interactions with one another. It was my hope that the variety of *intentional small acts of conversation and listening* which were developed would carry over into our members' everyday practices of discipleship. Awareness of our social relationships was another dependent variable as we continued to move away from the myth of a small-town congregational family to deepened relationships for the sake of God's kingdom.

There were a number of possible intervening variables that provided opportunity for cross-tabulation with research results in order to examine their effect upon outcomes.

These included things such as: age, gender, income level, educational level, church background, congregational membership, other congregational involvement, frequency of worship attendance, use of media and technology, location of one's work and shopping preference, and community involvement. Utilizing cross-tabulation of the data with these variables allowed me to further analyze how the intervening variables related with the dependent variable. I was aware that other possible intervening variables could also arise in the development of our project's intervention.

Importance of This Research

This research came at a crucial time in Tree of Life Lutheran's life together. They were tired of being a stuck community with a thinned social fabric focused only on the problems of decreased attendance and offerings. They were tired of failed big fixes and panicked questions that were based on fear. Rather, they desired to enter their 100th anniversary strengthened as they deepened their roots for reaching out into God's future for them. Tree of Life Lutheran was ready to increase their social inter-relationships and restore their connectedness. "Restoration comes from the choice to value possibility and relatedness over problems, self-interest, and the rest of the stuck community's agenda."⁹ The congregation was ready to choose possibility and relatedness as we embraced a humble, listening posture in *intentional small acts of conversation and listening*.

I believe this research is important not only for our formerly, stuck congregation, but also for several others who currently face similar struggles. They, like us, have looked outside themselves for the big, quick-fix program or larger-than-life staff and

⁹ Peter Block, *Community: The Structure of Belonging* (San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2008), 47.

have ended up weakened as well. This research with Tree of Life Lutheran gave us the opportunity to discover and create with what was already within ourselves as we looked to small acts that would have effects on the entire system. Tree of Life Lutheran's small acts of this project, such as Margaret Wheatley explained, had effects on the whole system of other congregations and our community to which we relate. We share our story of God transforming our small acts into a greater community for the sake of God and others.

This research was of great importance to me because I have a passion to lead people in discovering how God transforms our faithful small acts for the sake of God's kingdom. I specifically in this project drew from Jesus' parable of the mustard seed, which illustrates how God transforms the small into the greatest to grow the kingdom. "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches" (Matthew 13.31-32).¹⁰ I believe God promises to use our faithful small acts and transform them into the greater purposes for the sake of God and others.

Prior to my call at Tree of Life Lutheran, I served as lead pastor in a four-point parish. I witnessed these congregations discover God's great work in their midst through *intentional small acts of conversation and listening* to food pantry clients. A touch of the hand, the respect of looking eye-to-eye, and the gift of sitting together were the small acts that created relationship. These congregations' social capital strengthened as they discovered God was already there with them in the eyes and voices of the poor. Their

¹⁰ All biblical references will be cited from the NRSV.

social inter-relationships were also strengthened as they witnessed God's kingdom in their midst and community was built in small acts with those they least expected.

The Apostle Paul confesses, "God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong" (I Corinthians 1:27-28). I would also add that God transforms the small into the greatness of the kingdom through a gospel of the small. Alan Roxburgh names the reality of my passion for the small with a new imagination:

There is no better description of the congregation today, no better description of what many leaders have concluded about their people. The amazing, counterintuitive reality of the One we meet in Jesus is that God enters the ordinariness of our confused congregation and its organizational system. God enters among people who don't get it who are often compromised beyond hope, and there God calls forth new imagination.¹¹

The importance of this research gave our congregation, those with whom we relate in our small community, and me the opportunity to go forth in a new imagination as we began with the small.

Key Theoretical Lenses

This thesis project utilized five key theoretical lenses, which were: community, social capital, open systems theory, transformational leadership, and *intentional small acts of conversation and listening*. The definition and current state of community initially explores today's context of many congregations similar to Tree of Life Lutheran. Social capital is explained as one of the results of today's current state of community. Open systems theory is explored with adaptive change as a way through which congregations may consider adapting. Transformational leadership describes the type of leadership

¹¹ Alan J. Roxburgh and Fred Romanuk, *The Missional Leader: Equipping Your Church to Reach a Changing World*, Leadership Network Series (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006), 30.

needed to cultivate the environment for adaptive, open systems. Lastly, *intentional small acts of conversation and listening* are examined as a tool through which congregations may adapt and transform.

Community

The basic definition of community is explored as “the promise of belonging and call of us to acknowledge our interdependence.”¹² Peter Block defines the sense of community and its functions as he argues, “The key to creating community, then, is to see the power in the small but important elements of being with others.”¹³ Nancy Ammerman also contributes to this basic working definition as she examines the current state of community today through a variety of studied congregations.¹⁴

However, the current state of our community most often found in today’s society is defined as fragmented or stuck, which then marginalizes possibility, devalues associational life, and reinforces self-interest and isolation.¹⁵ Volf also describes the current state of community as a result of the “malfunctions of faith” through which we have become idle, have obtained misdirected busyness, have reduced or even replaced God with other idols, or have lived into a hyperactive faith that oppresses the vulnerable. He also describes how our satisfaction has become unsatisfying as we compare our

¹² Block, *Community*, 3.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹⁴ Nancy Tatom Ammerman and Arthur Emery Farnsley, *Congregation & Community* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 65-309.

¹⁵ Block, *Community*, 42-46.

treasures to others and yearn for more.¹⁶ Paul Born contributes to the description as he names this type of community as shallow or fear-based community.¹⁷ This definition of community and an exploration of its current state begins to identify the main foci of our conversations today and how they contribute to the current state of our community. This lens was instrumental for this research project as it gave us language for describing the current state of our community and congregation. Definitions, such as fear-based and shallow, enabled us to describe where we hoped to grow as a deeper community with our social capital increased and our social inter-relationships strengthened.

Social Capital

Robert Putnam defines social capital as, “connections among individuals—social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them.”¹⁸ He expands this term into bonding and bridging social capital.¹⁹ Sociologists Cornelia Butler Flora and Jan Flora expand these terms in rural contexts stating that “bonding social capital refers to close ties that build community cohesion.”²⁰ Bridging social capital “connects diverse groups within the community to each other and to groups outside the community.”²¹

¹⁶ Miroslav Volf, *A Public Faith: How Followers of Christ Should Serve the Common Good* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2011), 7-20.

¹⁷ Paul Born, *Deepening Community: Finding Joy Together in Chaotic Times* (San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc., 2014), 19-20.

¹⁸ Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 19.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 22-23.

²⁰ Cornelia Butler Flora and Jan L. Flora, *Rural Communities: Legacy and Change*, 4th ed. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2013), 125.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 127.

Robert Wuthnow and John Coleman further define social capital as they draw connections between social capital and religion. Wuthnow underscores Putnam's argument that religious involvement has been identified as an important source of social capital as Wuthnow "has examined relationships between religious involvement and various measures of social capital."²² Coleman believes that "the social capital of churches, spills over beyond their members into whole neighborhoods" thus strengthening the bridging capital.²³

Putnam and Flora and Flora lay a foundational understanding of social capital as they describe how and why it has weakened. Flora and Flora are particularly helpful as they work with the bonding and bridging concepts in a rural context. Wuthnow and Coleman further strengthen this study's argument as connections are drawn between religion and social capital, especially as they argue that congregations are often catalysts for change in communities. Congregations can be catalysts in community when they function through an open systems theory.

Open Systems Theory

Open Systems Theory is a modern-based management theory designed to create healthy, innovative, and robust organizations and communities in today's changing environment. The theory places the organization as an open system that has direct correlation to the external environment, such as a congregation to its community. Mary Jo Hatch works through this organizational theory as she compares and contrasts a closed

²² Robert Wuthnow, "Religious Involvement and Status-Bridging Social Capital," *Journal for Scientific Study of Religion* 41, no. 4 (2002): 669.

²³ John A. Coleman, "Religious Social Capital: Its Nature, Social Location, and Limits," in *Religion as Social Capital: Producing the Common Good*, ed. Corwin Smidt (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2003), 34.

system to an open system.²⁴ Margaret Wheatley also contributes to this discussion as she illustrates how open systems can adapt to the changing environment as they respond to even a small variation, which can “amplify into completely unexpected results.”²⁵ Craig Van Gelder further enhances this theory as he draws a correlation between a congregation as the open system to its community and environment where the inputs are the people and the outputs are the ministry.²⁶ This theory enhanced this study as it explores how a small variation, such as a *small intentional act of listening and conversation*, can be amplified through the open system of our congregation in order to bring forth the output of ministry for the purpose of greater, strengthened inter-relationships that increases social capital.

An opened-system, such as a congregation, is therefore readied to make adaptive changes in the midst of today’s stuck, fear-based, or shallow community. Adaptive changes are not technical, quick fixes, such as Tree of Life Lutheran tried when they hired more staff or added bigger programs. Robert Bellah challenges us to move beyond these technical fixes as he states, “The problems our society faces today require that we expand our repertory far beyond these familiar examples, that we think hard and critically about what has too long been taken for granted.”²⁷ Heifetz and Linsky explain that these adaptive changes require, “experiments, new discoveries, and adjustments from

²⁴ Mary Jo Hatch, *Organization Theory: Modern, Symbolic, and Postmodern Perspectives* (Oxford; New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2013; repr., 3rd Edition).

²⁵ Wheatley, *Leadership and the New Science*, 120-122.

²⁶ Craig Van Gelder, *The Ministry of the Missional Church: A Community Led by the Spirit* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007), 134-152.

²⁷ Robert N. Bellah, *The Good Society* (New York: Random House, 1991), 42.

numerous places in the organization or community.”²⁸ The adaptive challenge of strengthening our inter-relationships and increasing our social capital is formed from “each small step to capture a quality of aliveness and the need for it to evolve in an organic way.”²⁹ I argue in this study that the adaptive change needed for our community comes through a different kind of leadership than that of closed systems; it comes through *transformational* leadership.

Transformational Leadership

Transformational leadership is defined as the necessary leadership required through which processes are utilized that change and transform people in the midst of discontinuous change.³⁰ This style of leadership is not a prescribed list of how to be successful; rather, it is a general way of thinking. Peter Northouse argues specifically that this leadership “emphasizes ideals, inspiration, innovations, and individual concerns.”³¹

This leadership is also described in direct contrast to *transactional* leadership, which focuses upon the interactions between leaders and followers, such as the exchanges of negative feedback and reinforcement. Sociologist James MacGregor named this type of leadership and further expands why this leadership is no longer effective.³²

²⁸ Ronald A. Heifetz and Martin Linsky, *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive through the Dangers of Leading* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 2002), 25.

²⁹ Block, *Community*, 11.

³⁰ Peter Guy Northouse, *Leadership: Theory and Practice*, 7th ed. (Los Angeles, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2015), 180.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid., 162.

Ronald Heifetz and Martin Linsky also name why this leadership must be transcended, as they underscore the challenge and risk that must be exercised by today's leaders.³³

Peter Northouse further expands the concept of *transformational* leadership as he includes particular behaviors, factors, and common strategies. His book especially compliments Alan Roxburgh's and Fred Romanuk's missional leadership as he emphasizes ideals, motivation, and individuals. Roxburgh and Romanuk specifically call for leadership to listen to the stories of individuals.³⁴

Roxburgh and Romanuk also add to Northouse's argument as they introduce the need for *transformational* leadership to cultivate an environment that brings forth for congregations a missional imagination, one that includes wondering about what God is up to in the world. Peter Block also expands this conversation as he speaks about the shifts necessary in such a cultivated environment, such as from problems to possibility.³⁵ Robert Wuthnow brings forth a necessary consideration in cultivating this environment, as he examines the uniqueness of small-town America.³⁶

The lens of *transformational* leadership was necessary for this study, so that our PAR team and I could develop an understanding of what kind of leadership was needed for transformational change to develop. It also provided an opportunity for our staff and council leadership to examine our leadership styles and what ways we were called to change those styles in order to create the necessary environment to increase our inter-

³³ Heifetz and Linsky, *Leadership on the Line*, 20.

³⁴ Roxburgh and Romanuk, *The Missional Leader*, 25.

³⁵ Block, *Community*, 85.

³⁶ Robert Wuthnow, *Small-Town America: Finding Community, Shaping the Future* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), 185-187.

relationships and social capital through *intentional small acts of conversation and listening*.

Small Acts of Conversation and Listening

Meaningful Conversation

A meaningful conversation is communication through the act of talking and listening that results in a deeper level of community. Margaret Wheatley further describes meaningful conversation as she includes: sharing different human experiences, discovering a sense of unity, remembering that we are part of a greater whole, and discovering together a collective wisdom.³⁷ Block argues that meaningful conversation is the key to restoring community.³⁸ A variety of methods are found as tools to create meaning conversation.

Possible methods highlighted in this study are: Circle, World Café, and Appreciative Inquiry. Christina Baldwin describes the method of Circle to be the basic form underlining all other forms of participatory process through which group reflection occurs.³⁹ World Café is a method which Juanita Brown explains as small groups conversing around small tables (four-to-five people) about a conversation that matters to them or some work they are trying to do together. She believes it is an ideal way to find

³⁷ Margaret J. Wheatley, *Turning to One Another: Simple Conversations to Restore Hope to the Future*, 2nd ed. (San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2009), 32.

³⁸ Block, *Community*, 47.

³⁹ Christina Baldwin and Ann Linnea, *The Circle Way: A Leader in Every Chair* (San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2010).

out what community is thinking and feeling about a topic.⁴⁰ Another method, Appreciative Inquiry, focuses upon the positive, asks about stories of life-giving forces, locates themes and selects topics for future inquiry, creates images for a preferred future, and finds innovative ways to create that future.⁴¹ Appreciative Inquiry has as an underlying assumption the belief that “an organization, such as a church, can be recreated by its conversations.”⁴²

Conversation starters, which Wheatley provides, and other tools given through the methods of Circle, Word Café, and Appreciative Inquiry helped guide our PAR team into ways in which we practiced new behaviors of meaningful conversation that enabled us to adapt and increase our social capital. They also provided opportunities to increase our practice of listening.

Listening

Listening is paying attention to someone in order to hear what is said.⁴³ Michael P. Nichols defines listening as “forgetting ourselves and submitting to the other person’s need for attention.”⁴⁴ Hans-Georg Gadamer highlights this key understanding as he states:

In human relations the important thing is, as we have seen, to experience the Thou truly as Thou—i.e., not to overlook his [*sic*] claim but to let him [*sic*] really say

⁴⁰ Juanita Brown, *The World Cafe: Shaping Our Futures through Conversations That Matter* (San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc., 2005).

⁴¹ Mark Lau Branson, *Memories, Hopes, and Conversations: Appreciative Inquiry and Congregational Change* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2004), 28.

⁴² *Ibid.*, xiii.

⁴³ See <http://www.merriam-webster.co/dictionary/listen> (assessed July 7, 2015).

⁴⁴ Michael P. Nichols, *The Lost Art of Listening: How Learning to Listen Can Improve Relationships*, 2nd ed. (New York, NY: Guilford Press, 2009).

something to us. Here is where openness belongs. But ultimately this openness does not exist only for the person who speaks; rather, anyone who listens is fundamentally open. Without such openness to one another there is no genuine human bond. Belonging together always also means being able to listen to one another.⁴⁵

We sadly do not always listen to one another and submit to the other person's need for us to pay attention. As a result, a decreased sense of belonging and interrelatedness occurs. Nichols explores reasons why we do not listen, such as how our assumptions prejudice our listening. Nichols furthers his discussion, however, as he uncovers the lost art of listening in order to help us connect to one another as we build our inter-relationships and bridge the space between us.⁴⁶

Van Gelder specifically names the development of congregational members' capacity to listen as the key to transform or adapt. He states, "These are in some respects very simple things, relative to the complex strategies, programs, and fixes on which many churches spend their energy today."⁴⁷ Both Patrick Keifert and Alan Roxburgh emphasize the need for leadership that develops the listening capacities of their congregations. Roxburgh specifically names that innovation in missional imagination "requires leaders to form a community in which people are able to hold listening conversations with one another at the level of awareness and understanding."⁴⁸ Keifert calls for listening leaders who have the gift to guide others into meaningful conversations.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd ed. (New York, NY: Crossroad, 1989), 355.

⁴⁶ Nichols, *The Lost Art of Listening*, 37-39.

⁴⁷ Van Gelder, *The Ministry of the Missional Church*, 165.

⁴⁸ Roxburgh and Romanuk, *The Missional Leader*, 115.

⁴⁹ Patrick R. Keifert, *We Are Here Now: A New Missional Era, a Missional Journey of Spiritual Discovery* (Eagle, ID: Allelon Publishing, 2006), 79.

This lens of listening enhanced this research project as it provided a key tool for equipping participants to focus on the other and broaden our capacity to adapt and transform together. Interventions involving this lens created the potential for bridging the spaces between people and entering into meaningful conversations with one another.

Biblical and Theological Lenses

The *intentional small acts of conversation and listening*, as well as the other theoretical lenses, are framed around key biblical and theological lenses that center this research project in the core of Lutheran-Christian values and beliefs. Bolman and Deal explain that an organization is able to adapt or evolve when it has “a profound sense of its own ethical and spiritual core.”⁵⁰ This thesis project explores two biblical lenses and three theological lenses that provide several key concepts of our Lutheran-Christian core beliefs and values.

The biblical lenses are hearing and *a gospel of the small*. The theological lenses are incarnation, perichoresis, and sense of belonging. Hearing recasts the theoretical lens of listening so that the purpose of this act is centered in a biblical understanding of our ethical call to care for the other in our conversations and the gift of collective wisdom that develops in such acts of hearing. *A gospel of the small* is explored as the main focus of this argument that through the small, “God is constantly present in places where no one would logically expect God’s future to emerge, and yet it does, over and over.”⁵¹ These biblical concepts move the argument to the theological lens of incarnation, which

⁵⁰ Lee G. Bolman and Terrence E. Deal, *Reframing Organizations: Artistry, Choice, and Leadership*, 5th ed. (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2013), 406.

⁵¹ Roxburgh and Romanuk, *The Missional Leader*, 18.

is a key Lutheran-Christian doctrine that holds that God became a human being and through the Spirit continues to be present with us. God continues to be present with us today through perichoresis, which lays the theological grounding of God as the triune community drawing us into community with God and one another. Lastly, a sense of belonging is explored as a core theological lens framing how we belong through Christ and our call to tend to one another through *intentional small acts of conversation and listening*.

Biblical Lenses

Hearing

The theoretical lens of listening gives way to the key biblical concept of hearing, through which understanding is discovered. Jean-Luc Nancy describes listening as “the practice that enables hearing. To hear with the ear, one must listen, just as to smell with the nose, one must sniff. However, listening and hearing have a special relationship. In hearing, there is understanding.”⁵² Nancy’s concept of listening illuminates the biblical narrative of hearing as the two disciples walk on the road to Emmaus where they listen, hear, and then are opened to understand (Luke 24.13-35).

The unrecognized, risen Jesus travels with the two disciples, who are talking about everything that has recently happened in the betrayal and crucifixion of their Messiah. The disciples’ discussion is downcast as they do not believe what they have heard from the prophets. They hear the promise of the prophets, but understanding unfortunately does not come because their hearts are not opened. Jesus explains what is

⁵² Jean-Luc Nancy and Charlotte Mandell, *Listening* (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2007), 5-6.

in the scripture concerning him while they are still traveling. However, it is not until Jesus breaks the bread and disappears that understanding comes for the two disciples. They realize that Jesus opened their hearts to hear and understand all that has happened. “Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the scriptures to us” (Luke 24.32)? Jesus’ presence and speaking opened the scriptures for them to understand. Jesus later opens the minds of the rest of the disciples so that they too will come to understand (Luke 24.45).

This biblical lens grounds hearing in scripture as it is centered in the act of Christ’s presence amidst those in conversation. Christ is the subject acting upon the listeners so that they may hear and understand. Hearing centered in Christ’s action becomes for the church “a communal hermeneutical practice.”⁵³ This practice creates the space for us to listen, hear, and understand in communal conversation with ourselves opened to scripture and to one another.

This biblical lens of hearing deepened our common theoretical understanding of listening in this research project. It centered our *intentional small acts of listening and conversation* in the action of Christ opening our minds to the scriptures and one another as we were reminded of his teaching, “Let anyone with ears, listen” (Matthew 11.15). This biblical lens also broadened our understanding of how hearing brings forth wisdom of God’s kingdom where there is *a gospel of the small*.

⁵³ Aaron Perry, “The Phenomenological Role of Listening in Shaping the Church into a Leading Community,” *Wesleyan Theological Journey* 47, no. 2 (2012): 174.

A Gospel of the Small

A *gospel of the small* is the good news that God uses the small in order to bring forth a greater result or aspect of the kingdom of God. Several biblical stories illustrate how God chooses to act through the small. A small shepherd boy is brought forth to slay the giant Goliath. A small lunch from a boy is used by Christ to feed a crowd of five thousand, in addition to the women and children. A small sprig grows into a mighty cedar on the mountain. A small babe is born as the awaited Messiah. The parable of the mustard seed is specifically highlighted as Jesus teaches that when a small mustard seed is planted in the soil, it grows to become the greatest of shrubs that becomes a tree for the sake of birds building their nests (Matthew 13.31-32). Mark Bailey highlights the tree and its greater purpose, as it was grown for the sake of the birds flocking to it to find shelter in its shade.⁵⁴

God constantly uses the small and *transvalues* it for the sake of God and God's kingdom.⁵⁵ Kittel uses the word *transvalues* in describing God's action of transforming the value of a few means into a greater sum. "God can work much with few means and so can the righteous with God's help. What matters is not that they have little but that they know how to use it."⁵⁶

This biblical frame was the focal catalyst of our core understanding of what God was up to through us in this research project. As we learned how to use *intentional small acts of conversation and listening*, God transvalued the small into the greater experience

⁵⁴ Mark L. Bailey, "The Parable of the Mustard Seed," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 155 (October-December 1998).

⁵⁵ Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey William Bromiley, and Gerhard Friedrich, "Alpha-Gamma," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 10 vols., vol. I (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964), 171.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

of God's kingdom where we sensed God's presence through the incarnation of Christ with us.

Theological Lenses

Incarnation

The incarnation is simply defined as Christ with us. The Son of God takes on human flesh and becomes fully human, while simultaneously remaining fully divine. Jürgen Moltmann further defines a fortuitous incarnation as the fulfillment of God's love as God desires to be present and living among humanity.⁵⁷ God desires to be present, rooted in our very culture and lives.

The gospel of Christ always comes rooted in cultural forms as the incarnation. Dwight Zscheile argues that "God's definitive revelation to humanity in person—through a particular human life, lived in a particular culture, in deep continuity with God's revelation to Israel. Jesus embodies God's presence as the one in whom humanity is reborn."⁵⁸ God revealed God's self embedded in an ordinary culture of an ordinary community. Author Alan Roxburgh traces the incarnation of Christ through the biblical stories of Luke and Acts. He underscores the ordinary birth of Christ into "the concreteness of place at a specific time to particular people with names and addresses."⁵⁹ This revealed self of God will go on to tell stories with neighbors and ordinary people,

⁵⁷ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom: The Doctrine of God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993).

⁵⁸ Dwight J. Zscheile, *The Agile Church: Spirit-Led Innovation in an Uncertain Age* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 2014), 8.

⁵⁹ Alan J. Roxburgh, *Missional: Joining God in the Neighborhood*, Allelon Missional Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011), 72.

but the way he will tell them will turn their “expected ways upside down.”⁶⁰ Jesus will also continue to turn expected ways upside down as he chooses not force or power, but weakness and vulnerability as he will suffer and die a human death on the cross so that the power of sin and death will be once and for all turned upside down and defeated forever. The incarnation of God in Jesus Christ was born, lived, suffered, and died so that we may never be separated from the indwelling of God in the ordinary of our lives again.

The incarnation of God in Jesus Christ is what intersects, transforms, and inverts our sense of lost community with weakened social capital. The incarnation uproots our cherished assumptions and ways of living and replants us so we may grow deep roots together as a new community transformed by the Spirit that is to branch out in new ways. This theological lens framed this research project’s process and goal in the core belief that it is God present in us who acts, moves, and transforms. This lens also laid the foundational understanding of God’s presence in the midst of our *intentional small acts of conversation and listening*. The key doctrine of incarnation also aided us in differentiating these conversations from typical, institutional meetings and agendas to the act of experiencing the incarnation of Christ in one another. Moltmann explains how the incarnation points us to the experience of community. “God’s fullness ‘dwells’ in Christ bodily and the Holy Spirit ‘dwells’ in our bodies and our community as her temple.”⁶¹ Our hope is that these experiences of the incarnation will root us deeply in the perichoresis of God’s community drawn together.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 73.

⁶¹ Jürgen Moltmann, “Perichoresis: An Old Magic Word for a New Trinitarian Theology,” in *Trinity, Community, and Power: Mapping Trajectories in Wesleyan Theology*, ed. Douglas Meeks (Nashville, TN: Kingswood Books, 2000), 112.

Perichoresis

Perichoresis describes God's community between three persons of the Holy Trinity. Volf states, "In their mutual giving and receiving, the Trinitarian persons are not only interdependent, but mutually internal ... this determines the character both of the divine persons and of their unity."⁶² Van Gelder and Zscheile write that "All three persons of the divine community mutually indwell one another in relational unity while maintaining their distinct identities."⁶³ Moltmann explains how this triune community expands as it is wide open to the world.

Mutual indwelling and perichoresis are also the life secrets of the whole new creation, because in the end God will be "all in all" (1 Cor. 15.28) and everything will be in God. The perichoretic unity of the triune God should therefore be understood as a social, inviting, integrating, unifying, and thus world-open community. The perichoretic unity of the divine persons is so wide open that the whole world can find room and rest and eternal life within it.⁶⁴

The perichoretic nature of God is a world-open community that draws us into a sense of community with God and one another. We become the "human community in the divine community and the divine community in the human community in mutual indwelling."⁶⁵ Volf states that this "indwelling of other persons is an exclusive prerogative of God."⁶⁶ God chooses us to dwell within as the community of the Holy Trinity shapes our community with God and one another. Zizioulas also adds to the

⁶² Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity*, Sacra Doctrina (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1998), 208.

⁶³ Craig Van Gelder and Dwight J. Zscheile, *The Missional Church in Perspective: Mapping Trends and Shaping the Conversation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic 2011), 54.

⁶⁴ Moltmann, "Perichoresis," 117.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 122.

⁶⁶ Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 211.

description of perichoresis as he expands upon the *communion* of the three persons of the Trinity and with us.⁶⁷ Our community is primarily shaped in love “that draws a person so much out of himself or herself that the person “ek-sists” in the other.”⁶⁸ We live as persons who live out the selfless love of God for one another as we give ourselves to each other in community.

This lens was the theological grounding in this research project to explain how the triune God is our source of community with our mutual giving and receiving. The perichoretic nature of community, reflected in selfless love, reinforces how our *intentional small acts of conversation and listening* hoped to exemplify our human community in the midst of the divine community. We found, as a result, that our sense of belonging was deepened with one another in the midst of this congregation and community.

Sense of Belonging

We are being called for the sake of community into a self-emptied and opened posture of listening and meaningful conversations in order to discover what God is up to through one another’s stories where God is already dwelling. This posture reorients us in God’s divine community to deepen our roots with one another as a new sense of belonging is discovered in our journey together. Diana Butler Bass explains that our sense of belonging comes as,

... the risk to move beyond the world we know, to venture out on pilgrimage, to accept exile. And it is the risk of being with companions on that journey, God, a

⁶⁷ Jean Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church*, Contemporary Greek Theologians no 4 (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985), 88.

⁶⁸ Moltmann, “Perichoresis,” 115.

spouse, friends, children, mentors, teachers, people who came from the same place we did, people who came from entirely different places, saints and sinners of all sorts, those known to us and those unknown, our secret longing, questions, and fears. Whose am I? O God, I am thine!⁶⁹

This sense of belonging, through the presence of our perichoretic God, is transformed from individualistic preferences and beliefs to consideration of who we are because of God and one another. Our sense of identity is formed not in our loose connections; rather, our sense of identity is formed because “to be human is to belong. To be a person is to be in relationship—with our creator, with one another, and with the wider created order.”⁷⁰

To be human is to first belong in the divine community that manifests itself in our human community. We as Christ’s church are given a deepened sense of belonging in the life of the Holy Trinity, where Zscheile argues we have “tremendous opportunity to rehear the gospel, to deepen the church’s identity and practice, and to learn how to form community with new neighbors.”⁷¹ This theological lens provided purposeful direction of potential outcomes of strengthened inter-relationships and increased social capital in this research project. This lens served as a reminder to enter a freedom to risk, experience, and embrace this opportunity toward a new, deepened sense of community as we were grounded in our core Lutheran-Christian biblical and theological beliefs.

Social Science Methodology

The primary social science research approach for this project was a modified participatory action research (PAR). I chose this method because it is “social research

⁶⁹ Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity after Religion: The End of Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening* (New York: HarperOne, 2012), 197-198.

⁷⁰ Zscheile, *The Agile Church*, 50.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 55.

carried out by a team that encompasses a professional action researcher and the members of an organization, community, or network ('stakeholders') who are seeking to improve the participants' situation."⁷² Specifically, the project utilized a transformative mixed methods study.⁷³ This PAR became modified through the process of the study. The PAR team participated in the interventions and in the process of reflecting and creating the next interventions; however, a modified action research (AR) was implemented as the other participants were not involved in the reflecting and creating process.

Both qualitative and quantitative research was conducted for collecting data for this study. The study used baseline and end-line surveys to gather data that were compared to measure change. In addition to these surveys, six baseline and end-line interviews were conducted in order to enrich those data. These gathered data were analyzed to discover what, if any, change had occurred through the research project. A modified PAR with this process was appropriate as it gave my congregation and me, as the researcher, the ability to manage our congregational inter-relationships more effectively and to keep improving our capacity to do so within a more sustainable sense of community.

The goal of this modified PAR project was to increase our social capital as we behaved our way into a new way of thinking. This new way of thinking, *intentional small acts of conversation and listening* for the purpose of increasing our social capital, gave

⁷² Davydd J. Greenwood and Morten Levin, *Introduction to Action Research: Social Research for Social Change*, 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2007), 3.

⁷³ John W. Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*, 4th ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2014), 212.

our congregation the opportunity to live into the hermeneutical turn of human knowing and understanding while we participated with God in creating community.

Research Design

This transformative mixed methods study included: a baseline survey supplemented by six interviews; a series of five interventions plus an additional one, each followed by focus groups; and, an end-line survey supplemented by six interviews. The baseline survey provided perspective regarding the participants' perceptions of their inter-relationships with others in the congregation. A census of volunteer members of the congregation, who were over eighteen years of age, was the population that was surveyed. The baseline survey was supplemented by six qualitative interviews. The population for these interviews was a nonprobability purposive sample with each person representing a decade within the range of age twenty to seventy-nine.

A qualitative data gathering process utilizing a series of five interventions was implemented after the baseline research was conducted. These interventions included: home visits to our uninvolved Sunday school and confirmation parents conducted by our PAR Team; Sunday morning Half-Time conversations from pairs with one person from the 8 a.m. and one from the 10:15 a.m. services; Mentor Program for recent new members within the last two years; a community service project that also invited participants to share highlights and experiences together; and lastly, monthly 100th Anniversary celebrations. An additional event, a fund-raising carnival for a vertical lift was also added into consideration with the other interventions because it was listed as having impact in focus groups and the end-line survey. Each intervention included conversation starters and reminders of active listening. Each intervention was followed

by a focus group of six-to-nine participants who reflected on their experience for the purpose of qualitative data collection. The focus groups were a nonprobability convenience sample of those who volunteered to participate. I, as the researcher, also maintained a journal to record initial insights and interpretations of data shared from the focus groups.

The end-line survey and supplemental six interviews were then conducted after the intervention phase. The end-line survey, which was almost identical to the baseline survey with a few additional questions in the end-line questionnaire, was conducted among the census of members of the congregation over eighteen. Both the baseline and end-line surveys had correlating respondent numbers for a paired t-test analysis to be conducted later. Lastly, four of the original six from the nonprobability purposive sample of the baseline interviews participated in the end-line interviews. The original two who did not participate in the end-line interviews chose not to participate in the interventions. Two additional participants were selected, as a result, to reflect the same gender, age range, and circumstances of connectedness. These supplemental interviews created a more robust analysis between baseline and end-line.

Instruments for Study

A questionnaire was developed for the baseline and end-line surveys. A protocol was developed for the baseline and end-line interviews. Each focus group, which reflected upon a particular intervention, utilized a protocol of questions. Each of these instruments sought to measure the perceived social capital or the level of connectedness in the congregation's inter-relationships. These instruments were field tested prior to their actual use in order to clarify questions, check for adequacy and clarity of response

categories, discover the time requirement to complete the survey, and practice entering data. I field tested the questionnaires and protocols utilizing members of another local congregation similar to Tree of Life Lutheran's context.

Analysis

This longitudinal research study was conducted over multiple points in time with the baseline, five interventions and additional fund-raising carnival, and end-line. The results of this research project were to evaluate our measured social capital from the baseline and compare to our measured social capital at the end-line after the series of five interventions of *intentional small acts of conversation and listening*. The PAR Team and I hoped to see an effect of increased social capital as a result of the opportunities given for us to grow deeper in our inter-relationships.

I as researcher coded according to Kathy Charmaz's layers of coding for the data gathered through the qualitative baseline and end-line interviews and focus groups. These layers included initial and focused coding.⁷⁴ Initial coding included word-by-word, line-by-line, and incident-by-incident to generate *in vivo* codes. I engaged in focused coding to identify categories by clustering the *in vivo* codes and then create axial codes by clustering focused codes. My final level of coding identified theoretical relationships among the axial codes.

I reported descriptive statistics in the total number of the sample (N), frequency, percentage, and mean where necessary for the data gathered through quantitative instruments. I utilized inferential statistically measures, specifically conducting

⁷⁴ Kathy Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*, 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2014).

independent t-tests and paired t-tests for analyzing the baseline and end-line questionnaires. I also utilized cross-tabulations of the data, which allowed me to further analyze how the intervening variables related with the dependent variable. I used SurveyMonkey, Excel and SPSS as tools to analyze my data.⁷⁵ I also engaged in coding, as described above, for all open-ended questions.

Definition of Key Terms

Several key terms and phrases are used throughout this work. The following definitions provide an understanding of how these terms and phrases are used. The definitions come primarily from the literature referenced and the working understanding of the researcher.

A gospel of the small: The good news that God transforms seemingly small acts of conversation and listening for the greater purpose of God's kingdom in care for others.

Bonding capital: Refers to the close ties that build community cohesion.

Bridging capital: Involves weak ties that create and maintain bridges among organizations and communities.

Hermeneutical turn: The term used to describe the shift that occurred in human knowing and understanding during the 20th century. This shift occurred as it was no longer possible to find one right common answer or shared interpretation to define reality.

⁷⁵ "SurveyMonkey," Palo Alto, CA: SurveyMonkey Inc., www.surveymonkey.com; IBM SPSS Statistics for Macintosh Ver. 23, IBM Corp, Armonk, NY.

Incarnation: A theological term used to describe the Son of God taking on human flesh and becoming fully human, while simultaneously remaining fully divine. This term is also used to describe how Christ is present in humanity through the Holy Spirit.

Listening: The act of paying attention to someone in order to hear what is said.

Meaningful conversation: Communication through the act of talking that connects us to a deeper level community.

Open systems theory: The concept that healthy organizations function best when they affect and are affected by their external environments.

Participatory action research: A research approach in which all participants actively participate in the process through collaborative experimenting with the intention to bring forth change in the broader system.

Perichoresis: A theological term describing the mutuality and social nature of the relationship of the three persons of the Trinity.

Sense of belonging: The inherent sense to form and maintain relationships reflective of community, particularly religious community.

Social capital: The connections among individuals formed through networks with the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them.

Social inter-relationships: A reciprocal relationship in networks of daily life.

Ethical Considerations

I was aware of several ethical considerations, particularly confidentiality and my role as pastor, as I constructed and implemented the various components of the research study. The Institutional Review Board of Luther Seminary (IRB) reviewed this proposal. I conformed to all requirements of that board, which focuses upon the standards of the

Belmont Report. Specifically, the Belmont Report provides guidelines to protect human beings who participate as research subjects. The Belmont Report highlights the following:

Respect for Persons, meaning that the researcher will respect the dignity and autonomy of all human subjects, particularly caring for those who are most vulnerable;

Benefice, which calls for researchers to do all they can to minimize possible risks and maximize anticipated benefits for those whom they research; and,

Justice, which means that the benefits and burdens of the research will be fairly distributed.⁷⁶

The research respected all those participating in the study by maintaining confidentiality. Pseudonyms were used for the congregation and all participants. Informed consent forms were used with all interviews and focus groups (see appendix D). Implied consent forms were attached to all questionnaires (see appendix A). Both of these were drafted following IRB guidelines for content and procedure. I transcribed and coded the data. Sensitive questions and vulnerable population, as defined by the IRB, were not used.

I, the researcher, am the only pastor of Tree of Life Lutheran and, thus, the pastor to all those from the congregation who are part of the research. I took care to explain to the participants that as I took part in interviews, focus groups, and interventions, I was primarily functioning in the role of researcher and not of the pastor. I realized my words and actions carried authority as the pastor of the congregation. As a result, I needed to especially tend to the potential that my power could have influenced the direction of change, silenced others' voices, or shunned others' participation. I sought to ask

⁷⁶ "The Belmont Report," <http://hhs.gov/ohrp/humansubjects/guidance/belmont.html> (accessed September 4, 2015).

questions and encourage follow-up responses, but not play a pastoral role of direction, planning, or leading conversation.

All congregational members who participated were over the age of eighteen who were not considered vulnerable by IRB standards. All data are kept in a locked file drawer in the church's main office, and only I have access. These records will be kept until May 31, 2020, and then destroyed. The benefits of this study helped the congregation grow in its inter-relationships and social capital. These benefits outweigh any nominal risks from this project.

Summary

Our small-town lives in assumptions about our connectedness. Council members listed several of these assumptions during our recent retreat:

- Everyone knows everyone.
- You are probably related to everyone.
- If you aren't related it takes at least thirty years sometimes to be "one" of the family.
- Our way is the best way.
- You know as much about your neighbor as you know about yourself.
- When you ask directions and they give people's houses instead of street names.
- You lock your car doors to stop people from putting zucchini in it.⁷⁷

These assumptions revealed that we think our community is already connected, but they also revealed how difficult it is for an outsider to find a sense of belonging and offer other ways of doing things. Sadly, our small-town lives in more fear than simply locking our doors to fend off our neighbor's abundance of zucchini. We live in fear as we have lost a sense of connection with each other and possess fear of the unknown other. Our

⁷⁷ Tree of Life Lutheran Council members at council retreat on August 16, 2015.

reflections, focused upon this fear and shallowness, simply chooses to live on assumptions like these.

This study allowed our congregation to break out of our fear and shallowness. It allowed us to test our assumptions, retrain our listening ear, engage in meaningful conversations, and deepen our sense of community both in the congregation and throughout our small town. The significance of this study empowered us to recapture the gift of who we are as a small-town congregation. We already had the gift of closeness of proximity, a functional downtown with surrounding businesses, and a school system that provides community structure. This study allowed us to utilize these gifts, while becoming intentional in growing our social inter-relationships. It also allowed us to center ourselves in our life together, which God forms in the image of God's perichoretic community.

This study reinforced that God uses small things, like our small town, in order to do great things for God's purpose. God chooses to use a mustard seed to grow into a great bush that houses the birds. God chooses us as well to grow so that we may provide, love, care, and connect with our neighbors for the sake of God's kingdom. Our congregation grew through these *intentional small acts of conversation and listening* as we increased our social capital and grew in God's nature of community called together.

The following chapters explore and explain the research project through which we grew our inter-relationships and increased our social capital. Chapter two discusses theoretical lenses that framed the project. Chapter three explores biblical and theological lenses that further framed this project within the context of a community of Christian believers. Chapter four explains the research methodology, a modified PAR, utilized in

order to change and increase our inter-relationships. Chapter five names the results of the study, which lists important tables and figures. Chapter six summarizes and draws conclusions, bringing data and lenses together.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

Five key theoretical lenses and a related literature review inform this project of increasing Tree of Life Lutheran's social inter-relationships. These lenses come from the social science field of sociology, which studies social behavior including its origin, development, and organizations.¹ The five lenses explored are community, social capital, open systems theory, *transformational* leadership, and *small acts of conversation and listening*. The definitions and exploration of community and social capital provide initial frames to examine reasons why social inter-relationships have weakened and a sense of connectedness has decreased. Open systems theory shifts discussion to explore how an organization, such as a congregation, can create healthy and innovative changes in order to increase their social inter-relationships. *Transformational* leadership is next explored in order to name what type of leadership is needed to work with an open system of an organization working through adaptive change. Lastly, meaningful conversations and listening are appraised as behavioral tools through which social inter-relationships and connectedness are increased.

Community

Advertisers know that community matters. Words of relationship and connection flood their slogans. Insurance company slogans are built upon concepts of neighbors and

¹ "Sociology," <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/sociology> (accessed November 7, 2015).

belonging: “Like a good neighbor, State Farm is there,” and, “Farmers will get you back where you belong.” Banks promise that they are “The Relationship People,” that you can “Come and talk to the listening bank,” and, they are “Where you know your banker and your banker knows you.” Even the technology of Nokia promises that they are the “Connecting People.”² The idea of community is all around us as it sells trying to meet us in the ways we lack or long for it. The idea also appears in the mission statements of several institutions. There are community centers, community sports leagues, community medical centers, and community organizers to name just a few. There was even a television sitcom called “Community” that ran from 2009-2015.³ However, advertisers and entertainment, for better or worse, only begin to allude to the reasons why community matters. The definition of community, its benefits, and its current state are needed to further draw us into sustainable, meaningful reasons why community matters to us.

Community is demographically defined as a group of people who live in the same neighborhood, town, or city. It can also be socially defined as a group of people who share the same interest, religion, race, etc.⁴ Sociologist Peter Block says, “We are in community each time we find a place where we belong.”⁵ Individual preferences give way to interdependence when we find a place to belong. Citizens have the experience of

² “Nokia Slogan: The Connecting People,” <http://brandongaille.com/nokia> (accessed November 7, 2015).

³ “Community Network Show,” <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1439629/> (accessed November 7, 2015).

⁴ “Community,” <http://www.merriam-webster/dictionary/community> (accessed November 7, 2015).

⁵ Block, *Community*, xii.

being connected to those around them. Margaret Wheatley writes, “The instinct of community is not peculiar to humans but is found everywhere in life, from microbes to the most complex species.”⁶

This natural instinct of community enables us to discover the benefits of being together. Such benefits are an increase in effectiveness, mutual aid and success, improvement of health and well-being, and a gained sense of identity and purpose. First, individuals experience an increase in effectiveness as their efforts and resources multiply with others in the community. We join groups that bring promise of transformation and nurture so that our efforts and resources may bring a larger influence in our communities and world. Our connections themselves become greater resources from which to draw possibilities for effectiveness. Another increased resource from togetherness is collective wisdom, which creates conditions for formulating innovative possibilities. Collective wisdom is a communal knowledge that becomes available when human beings gather together with a variety of awareness and insights. Wheatley describes from where this collection vision emerges, “When this knowing and sense of right action emerges, it does so from deep within the individual participants, from within the collective awareness of the group. This collective wisdom is the hope for our future in these chaotic times.”⁷ A community’s effectiveness increases when their combined resources and wisdom are transformed into collaborative creative power, innovative ideas, operative influence, and aid for others.

⁶ Margaret J. Wheatley, *Finding Our Way: Leadership for an Uncertain Time* (San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2005), 47.

⁷ Born, *Deepening Community*, 87.

A second benefit of community is for the mutual aid and success for one another. “The community needs to enable people to work and care for one another ... it needs to care for the poor.”⁸ Our shared resources and collective wisdom in community can transcend us to care for others. Mutual aid becomes an unquestionable community response especially during illnesses, natural disasters, or insufficient income. A local fitness instructor’s husband suffered a severe stroke at an early age and a local benefit raised over forty-thousand dollars for accrued medical expenses. Three families each have a child with serious medical needs and another local benefit raised over forty-thousand dollars for on-going therapeutic and mobile needs of the children. A baby was born premature at twenty-five weeks and the young couple was given over twenty-thousand dollars from their community to pay the hospital bills. Community food pantries, ministerium collections, and thrift stores also collaborate to care for the needs of the community’s poor.

These are examples of mutual aid given for the sake of the other. Mutual success is experienced as all members are cared for in the community. Robert Putnam argues that through this mutual aid we are better together and experience a positive epidemic. “The visible and active presence of a remarkable number of people who think it’s possible to do things convinces others that it is possible, desirable, and even expected that they, too, will participate and accomplish something.”⁹ Mutual aid and success draws others in the community to participate as they witness how care is accomplished and makes a difference in the lives of others.

⁸ Bellah, *The Good Society*, 194.

⁹ Robert D. Putnam, Lewis M. Feldstein, and Don Cohen, *Better Together: Restoring the American Community* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2003), 255.

Such collaborative differences also improve the health and well-being of community members, a third benefit. Taking care of one another, living in relationships, and staying together brings massive benefits. Dr. Dean Ornish, one of the most prominent heart specialists in North America, observed that patients with heart disease, who had a greater amount of significant relationships, lived longer. Dr. Ornish also shared a study in which eight large-scale, community-based studies were conducted to examine the relationship between social isolation and death and disease between 1979 and 1994. Those who became socially isolated had at least two-to-five times the risk of premature death compared with those who had a strong sense of connection and community. Dr. Ornish prescribed community as the best medicine. “When we gather together to tell and listen to each other’s stories the sense of community and the recognition of shared experiences can be profoundly healing.”¹⁰

These benefits all contribute to a gained sense of identity and purpose, which is the final benefit discussed. Community is the context in which we can gain our sense of identity and purpose through our interconnections with one another. Our community shapes our sense of identity as we adopt the behaviors we experience in communal experiences. Our interactions with others broaden our sense of self. We see beyond our individual perspectives as we affirm, challenge growth, and shape one another through commonalities and differences. Nancy Ammerman says, “We broaden the person we see,” and hence, shape our identities through our interactions.¹¹ We also are given opportunities to build organizational, communication, and leadership skills as we work

¹⁰ Dean Ornish, *Love & Survival: The Scientific Basis for the Healing Power of Intimacy* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 1998), 24-45.

¹¹ Ammerman and Farnsley, *Congregation & Community*, 352.

together. Such opportunities move us together rather than apart. “Connections to diverse persons, made through associations at work and school, in neighborhoods, clubs, politics, and the marketplace, keep identities and loyalties from polarizing.”¹² Face-to-face interactions open us to diversity and draw us together, rather than apart, as we engage in community. Our current state of community, however, reflects a different reality rather than being drawn together in its benefits.

Our current state as a community has received multiple names as we struggle together in our various contexts. Peter Block describes our current state as “the fragmented community” or the “stuck community,” where we live in a marketed fear as a fault finding culture.¹³ Daniel Bell names it as a “distortion of our desires” as a result of capitalism.¹⁴ Robert Wuthnow names our current state as fragmented communities that are made up of loose connections.¹⁵

The ramifications have been costly no matter what name or description has been given to describe the current state of community. Volf names such ramifications as “malfunctions of faith” through which we have become idle, have obtained misdirected busyness, reduced or even replaced God with other idols, or have lived into a hyperactive faith that oppresses the vulnerable. He also describes how our satisfaction has become unsatisfying as we compare our treasures to others and yearn for more.¹⁶ Similar to

¹² Ibid., 357.

¹³ Block, *Community*, 1, 37.

¹⁴ Daniel M. Bell, *The Economy of Desire: Christianity and Capitalism in a Postmodern World*, The Church and Postmodern Culture (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012), 59-68.

¹⁵ Robert Wuthnow, *Loose Connections: Joining Together in America's Fragmented Communities* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 1-8.

¹⁶ Volf, *A Public Faith*, 7-20.

Volf's use of malfunction, Bell uses the term *distorted desires* where capitalism has drawn us to "desire the very thing that dominates and exploits us."¹⁷ He also believes that our desires are disordered because we desire things that do not satisfy and bring us only temporary happiness. We have become enslaved in our current state to our economy's market where our desires are regulated and even controlled by the market. Peter Block names the ramifications of our current state in the ways in which we focus our conversations upon problem solving, fear, and retribution as we center ourselves on the problems and negativities of life together in community.¹⁸

Closely tied to Peter Block's argument, Paul Born charts out such conversations and their effects as he illustrates no-community, shallow community, and a fear-based community.¹⁹ A no-community is one that asks, "What's in it for me?" as one only looks out for the interests of self. A shallow community has no emotional bonds, time-limited connections, occasional associations, and distant greetings. Clicking "like" on facebook shows shallow support with no emotional bond for example. A fear-based community is based on an "us versus them" mentality. Community members bond together against others or something because they are wrong and we are right. A sense of entitlement empowers members to preserve what is theirs. The conversation about immigrants, for example, provokes a fear-based community when members attempt to protect what is theirs and keep *them*, the immigrants, out of the community. Each of these three types of communities deny members the opportunity to live in a deepened sense of community

¹⁷ Bell, *The Economy of Desire*, 59.

¹⁸ Block, *Community*, 29.

¹⁹ Born, *Deepening Community*, 62-63.

where there are trusting relationships, a shared identity, mutual acts of caring, desired deeper connections, a shared purpose for the benefit of all.

This theory informed my research by providing a basis through which to define community, its benefits, and the reasons why we would want to increase our sense of community. It also gave this research project a means through which to define the current state of community, such as none, shallow, or fear-based. Much of this theory was used as orientation for the modified PAR interventions in order to give participants a common language to name their own experience, as reasons were discovered why there is a need for increased social capital, where they feel bonded and bridged with one another.

Social Capital

One way in which social scientists have framed what has happened in our communities is through the use of the concept, “social capital.” Robert Putnam builds upon the historical use of this concept in the twentieth century, as he defines social capital as, “Connections among individuals—social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them.”²⁰ Flora and Flora expand Putnam’s definition as they state, “Social capital involves mutual trust, reciprocity, groups, collective identity, working together, and a sense of a shared future.”²¹ Ferdinand Tönnies, a German sociologist who wrote in the late nineteenth century, also describes the concept of social capital through the German word, *Gemeinschaft*. Tönnies particularly uses *Gemeinschaft* to describe rural societies that are based on “personal relationships and face-to-face interactions in which social relations are valued as an end

²⁰ Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 19.

²¹ Flora and Flora, *Rural Communities*, 11.

or goal.”²² *Gemeinschaft* was particularly useful in this research project as it relates to Tree of Life’s German roots and its rural community, which particularly hopes to embody face-to-face interactions centered upon reciprocity and trust.

Reciprocity and trust are two foundational concepts that these sociologists use to define social capital. Social networks foster a sense of reciprocity, which can be either specific or generalized. An example of specific reciprocity is, “I’ll do this for you if you will do that for me.” An example of generalized reciprocity is, “I’ll do this for you without expecting anything specific back from you, in the confident expectation that someone else will do something for me down the road.”²³ Generalized reciprocity shapes a more efficient community as it is produced through frequent interactions with one another. Reciprocity develops trust, as social capital thickens and inter-relationships deepen.

Cnann, Boddie, and Yancey argue that trust is the outcome of social capital. “In social capital, we start with face-to-face interactions and then progress to personal exchanges; these exchanges may grow into obligations, and ideally end up with trust.”²⁴ Trust refers to people’s beliefs that one’s neighbors, elected officials, co-workers, and fellow citizens will act on one another’s behalf, not against. Two types of trust, thick and thin, develop according to the types of interactions. A thick trust builds “in personal

²² Ferdinand Tönnies and Charles Price Loomis, *Community and Society = Gemeinschaft Und Gesellschaft* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2002), 33-34.

²³ Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 20-21.

²⁴ Ram A. Cnann, Stephanie C. Boddie, Gaynor I. Yancey, “Bowling Alone but Serving Together,” in *Religion as Social Capital: Producing the Common Good*, ed. Corwin Smidt (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2003), 21.

relations that are strong, frequent, and nested in wider networks.”²⁵ Thin trust develops through the outward-looking, occasional connections beyond one’s community.²⁶ Thick and thin trust builds through reciprocity, which results in building the social capital of community together.

Social capital is one of the seven types of capital that builds community as Flora and Flora thoroughly explore.²⁷ Flora and Flora argue that, “When those [community] resources, or assets, are invested to create new resources, they become capital.”²⁸ Sustainable communities are those that have balance of all these capitals. This particular study emphasizes only social capital, but with an awareness that it relates to and interacts with other capitals in community. For example, human capital, the skills and abilities of people, is needed in order to build social capital.

Social capital by itself is wide-ranging as it expands into two types, bonding and bridging. Bonding social capital is like the superglue that connects communities together through face-to-face interactions and relationships. “[It] consists of connections among individuals and groups with similar backgrounds. These connections may be based principally on class, ethnicity, kinship, gender, or similar social characteristics.”²⁹ Further connections of diverse groups within the community or with other groups outside the

²⁵ Janel Curry, “Social Capital and Societal Vision: A Study of Six Farm Communities in Iowa,” in *Religion as Social Capital: Producing the Common Good*, ed. Corwin Smidt (Waco, TX: Baylor Press University, 2003), 139.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Flora and Flora, *Rural Communities: Legacy and Change*, 10-11. Other capitals that contribute to building a sustainable community are: natural, cultural, human, political, financial, and built.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid., 125.

community are drawn together through bridging social capital. “[It] involves singular ties between individuals or organizations. Those ties are generally instrumental—that is, single purpose—and therefore do not involve an exchange of emotion or affect.”³⁰

Both of these social capitals reinforce each other as their balance determines the sustainability and social health of a community. For example, *extreme individualism* becomes the shape of community when both bonding and bridging capitals are low and there is a lack of social capital. *Clientelism* forms when bridging is high and bonding is low. Elite professionals or local bosses hold the power as decisions are made on outsider influence. *Strong boundaries* shape the community when bonding is high and bridging capital is low. There is internal investment with little to no outside trust or communication. *Progressive participation* occurs when both bonding and bridging capital are high. Together, community participants decide upon priorities based on the common good.

³⁰ Ibid., 140.

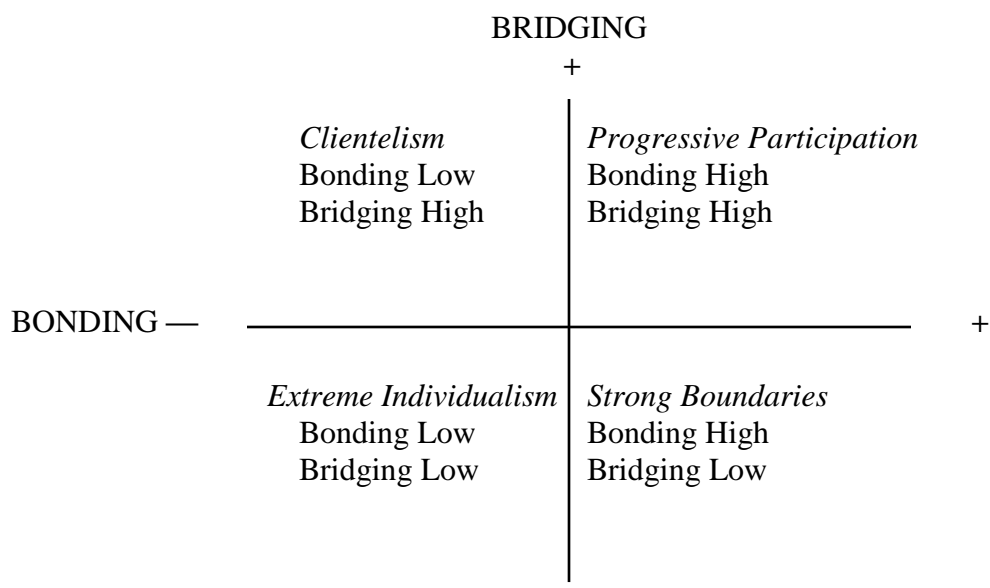


Figure 2.1. Flora and Flora's Social Capital Typology³¹

Locating one's community in Flora and Flora's typology is an effective tool for identifying where community currently is and where growth of social capital is needed. This is especially needed as social capital has been decreasing steadily in our communities for the last several decades.

Putnam summarizes this decrease as he describes a rapid fall of leadership roles, community involvement in clubs and organizations, and volunteering.

During the last third of the twentieth century formal membership in organizations in general has edged downward by perhaps ten-twenty percent. More important, active involvement in clubs and other voluntary associations has collapsed at an astonishing rate, more than halving most indexes of participation within barely a few decades.³²

Putnam summarizes data that illustrates the decrease of leadership roles by fifty percent between 1973 and 1994, the decrease of active involvement in local clubs and organizations that fell by more than half in the last several decades of the twentieth

³¹ Ibid., 128.

³² Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 63.

century, and the decrease of time spent in community organizations as it fell from seven percent in 1965 to less than three percent in 1995. Another way to describe this decrease of social capital is *Gessellschaft*, a German word by Tönnies used as the opposite of *Gemeinschaft*. *Gessellschaft* is a shallow community where, “relationships are impersonal, formal, and frequently guided by contractual arrangements.”³³

The decreased social capital, which is the reality of communities that resemble Tönnies’ *Gessellschaft*, has brought forth widespread studies in order to discover what has caused the decrease. Putnam’s study, especially as reported in *Bowling Alone*, has extensively studied the areas of rising pressures and time, mobility and sprawl, technology and mass media, and generations. Putnam concludes that both categories of time and pressure and mobility and sprawl account for less than one-tenth of the decline. “Despite somewhat conflicting evidence, it seems reasonable to conclude that the last three decades have seen no general decline in free time.”³⁴ However, he does argue that this free time has shifted from concentrated to scattered moments in a harried schedule. Mobility and sprawl, alongside pressure and time, are equated for in Putnam’s examination, but his research shows that mobility had not increased up to the 1990s. On the one hand, time and pressure and mobility and sprawl do not contribute greatly to the decline in social capital; but on the other hand, technologies with mass media and generations have contributed greatly.

The single most consistent predictor of decreased social capital has been the frequency of consumption of mass media of entertainment.

³³ Tönnies and Loomis, *Community and Society*, 65.

³⁴ Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 190.

People who say that TV is their “primary form of entertainment” volunteer and work on community projects less often, attend few dinner parties and few club meetings, spend less time visiting friends, entertain at home less, picnic less, are less interested in politics, give blood less often, write friends less regularly, make fewer long-distance calls, send fewer greeting cards and less e-mail, and express more road rage than demographically matched people who differ only in saying TV is not their primary form of entertainment.³⁵

Television and other forms of mass media have privatized our entertainment. It competes for scarce time, inhibits our social participation, and undermines civic motivations through some of its programming. These forms of mass media provide a false sense of personal connection to others which weakens group attachment. Other effects include a negative encouragement of materialistic values and social ties divorced from physical encounters. Putnam discovers though, as he did with pressure and time, that television and mass media can account for only partial explanation of the decrease. Putnam believes that television, combined with generations and societal circumstances, contribute to the decrease together.

Four generations are traced in Putnam’s studies as the decrease in social capital is further examined. Members of the Civic generation, born between 1910 and 1940, engage in more community affairs and are more trusting of societal leaders. They have been “exceptionally civic—voting more, joining more, reading more, trusting more, giving more.”³⁶ Much of the decline during the last third of the twentieth century is ascribed to the generations who followed. The Baby Boomers, born between 1941 and 1964, were the first generation to be exposed to television throughout their lives. “There can be little doubt that television reduced the Baby Boomer’s contact with peers and

³⁵ Ibid., 231.

³⁶ Ibid., 254.

parents.”³⁷ Distrust also developed for this generation through the Vietnam War, the Kennedy and King assassinations, and the civil rights movement. The Gen X-ers, born between 1965 and 1980, are known as the second consecutive generation to remain disconnected, especially from politics.

They are less interested in politics, less informed about current events (except for scandal, personality, and sports), less likely to attend a public meeting, less likely to contact public officials, less likely to attend church, less likely to work with others on some community project, and less likely to contribute financially to a church or charity or political cause.³⁸

Decline also continued through the era of growth for the Millennial generation, born between 1983 and 2000. “[They are] skeptical, even cynical, about the institutions that have shaped our society, and while they retain an undiminished optimism about the future, they see themselves creating that future mostly disengaged from the institutions that have defined our culture thus far.”³⁹ Social capital has steadily decreased in the last third of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first century as pressure and time, mass media and technologies, and generations are all contributing factors. These factors have also influenced rural America.

Flora and Flora broaden Putnam’s exploration of decreased social capital as they include studies of rural communities. They define rural as “Open countryside or towns of fewer than 2,500 outside urbanized areas.”⁴⁰ Putnam may have discovered that mobility and sprawl had not increased, but the type of community found in rural towns has shifted.

³⁷ Ibid., 257.

³⁸ Ibid., 261.

³⁹ David Kinnaman and Aly Hawkins, *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians Are Leaving Church and Rethinking Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: BakerBooks, 2011).

⁴⁰ Flora and Flora, *Rural Communities*, 5.

Rural communities have been affected as, “Cars have enabled people to live in one town, work in another, and shop in yet a third.”⁴¹ Rural communities have shifted from centralized communities where citizens lived, worked, and shopped in one area to now decentralized where citizens function in multiple communities. Tree of Life Lutheran’s context has experienced this type of shift as many live in the small Nebraskan town, work in the city, and shop on their way home. These shifts dispel the myth of small-town living. No longer does “everyone know their neighbors” or “everybody knows everyone.”⁴² In fact, these shifts dispel the myth that there was ever a golden era of small-town living. “Our discussions of social capital need to abandon the myth that, in previous generations, small towns in America existed in some golden era of social capital and, as a result, all we need to do to cure our social ills today is to rediscover ways of translating that experience into modern society.”⁴³ Abandoning the myth of small-town living leads to discovering how revitalization can occur.

Putnam, Flora and Flora, and Curry draw conclusions that revitalization can occur through reform movements, grassroots efforts, and moral rejuvenation. Curry concludes that communities must assess their bonding and bridging capital, so that they may seek balance for becoming an effective community that can adapt. Wuthnow pushes this revitalizing challenge further as he encourages communities to pay attention to their institutions and their roles in the development of social capital.

⁴¹ Ibid., 10.

⁴² Tree of Life Lutheran Council members at council retreat on August 16, 2015.

⁴³ Curry, “Social Capital and Societal Vision: A Study of Six Farm Communities in Iowa,” 151.

Robert Wuthnow argues that Putnam and his followers generally ignore the important role that institutional structures play in the formation and process of social capital growth.

Interest in social capital, and indeed the revived usage of the term “civil society,” runs serious danger of being a step backward in social theorizing, not a step forward. The emphasis on the structure and functions of institutions needs to be rediscovered in order to move beyond the present, often simplistic, discussions of social capital and civil society.⁴⁴

Wuthnow supports his argument as he examines contemporary discussions of civil societies which emphasize civilian populations acting in public and cooperative behaviors in the midst of their groups, associations, and organizations. Discussions are then able to shift from “the number of relationships individuals may have to ones that include the institutional settings in which these relationships occur.”⁴⁵ Thus, arbitrary distinctions and conclusions based upon neighborly interactions are removed and institutional connections are utilized for a more systematic study and measurement. Some examples of institutions that he studied include: education, health, communication, government, family, and religion. Insights drawn from these institutional settings enable particular aspects of institutional life to be surfaced for needed attention. This institutional perspective revealed that revitalization often occurs because of institutions, their leaders, and the social movements that arise out of them. Wuthnow emphasizes the role of the religious institution in particular.

Religion as an institution has had a prominent role in generating social capital. “People who participate actively in congregations make friends with other congregants

⁴⁴ Robert Wuthnow, “Can Religion Revitalize Civil Society?,” in *Religion as Social Capital: Producing the Common Good*, ed. Corwin Smidt. (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2003), 192.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 196.

and are often more likely to interact with neighbors and hold memberships in other civic organizations.”⁴⁶ Religious institutions in society have generated movements to care for individual rights, further communication, build altruism, promote equality, reintegrate the marginalized, provide opportunities for increasing values, and create confidence in other institutions. “Those who express confidence in religion are more likely to register confidence in other institutions.”⁴⁷ Religious institutions, through past influence and current research, have the potential to be a primary influence in the revitalization of our communities.

Curry builds upon Wuthnow’s argument through her study of six Iowa communities, which specifically tested whether religion played a role in fostering a community’s mix of bonding and bridging social ties.⁴⁸ Each of these six communities has a population of fewer than 3,000 people, the local religious groups maintain strong commitments to particular theological positions, and farming is dominant in the local economy. Three discussion groups were drawn from local churches in each community and asked to respond to a narrative in a farming context that presented a dilemma.

Curry discovered a pattern of individualistic or communal motives behind these ties she studied.⁴⁹ These motives were particular to their religious groups. The German Reformed, Catholic, and Quaker members responded with individualistic motives that said very little about how the farmer’s choices impacted the community, as they primarily focused on their family farms. The Dutch Reformed, Mennonite, and Reorganized

⁴⁶ Ibid., 204.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 205.

⁴⁸ Curry, “Social Capital and Societal Vision: A Study of Six Farm Communities in Iowa,” 151.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 144.

Church of the Latter Day Saints members responded with communal motives that spoke about the impact of individual family farm choices upon the community. Another difference also arose in relation to community problems and solutions. The group, which revealed a pattern of individualistic motives, wished to address these problems outside of themselves in getting others involved and more committed. The group, which revealed a pattern of communal motives, saw these problems within themselves as related to their own willingness to reach out and serve others.

Curry concludes that these religious worldviews help to explain group patterns of building bridging and bonding capital.⁵⁰ I would, therefore, conclude from Curry's study that bonding and bridging capital are both high when members of congregations are driven by communal motives, as they see a need to maintain a sense of community and look within their own willingness to reach out and serve others. I would also conclude that where members of congregations are driven by individualistic motives for personal gain, bridging capital may be high, but bonding is low. These individualistic-driven congregations then function as closed-systems, as they are focused on their own self-sufficiency.

Religious institutions must move beyond their own beliefs, convictions, and closed-systems of self-sufficiency. Diana Butler Bass exposes churches as not being very good at being communities. "Just putting a bunch of people together in a church building doesn't make them a community. Community is about relationships and making connections. The sad fact is that many churches are not very good at being

⁵⁰ Ibid., 152.

communities.”⁵¹ This contributes to another sad fact that many churches, therefore, do not understand their role in the midst of community, especially in the midst of change.

Nancy Ammerman studied twenty-three congregations in order to understand their role in the midst of community change. She focused upon the ways in which the congregations were relating with their environment, as she measured their adaptability to their surrounding communities. The twenty-three congregations, which were studied, ranged in size from less than 100 to over 500 in membership. They were from various denominations, which fell into the five main categories of Mainline Protestant, Evangelical Protestant, Catholic, Black Protestant, and other.⁵²

Ammerman discovered that nine of these twenty-three congregations were particularly effective in generating their own connectional resources in order to rejuvenate social capital because they chose a path of internal adaptation in response to their surrounding communities.⁵³ These nine congregations specifically did not live in dichotomies, looked for *spaces of sociability*, and recognized their role as generators of social capital in their communities. The nine congregations did not live in dichotomies of either/or, public/private, individual/communal, and religious/secularized. Rather, they lived in a both/and atmosphere that recognized that relationships were spread out over wider and multiple communities, as individuals carved out *spaces of sociability*. Ammerman specifically argues that Putnam should look more closely for *spaces of sociability* that are replacing old ones. “That people are not bowling in leagues does not

⁵¹ Bass, *Christianity after Religion*, 193-194.

⁵² Ammerman and Farnsley, *Congregation & Community*, 41.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 370.

tell us that they are necessarily bowling alone.”⁵⁴ People are still networking, but differently. “It is different from the taken-for-granted belonging of earlier times and places. It is weaker in the sense that we are conscious of our ability to choose (and by implication to unchoose). But it is stronger in its consonance with individual identity and purposiveness.”⁵⁵

These congregations also utilized these *spaces of sociability* as members individually chose to be there because of their real choice and implied commitment. These members decided that their congregations would be one of their *spaces of sociability* because these congregations were “communal gatherings, collectivities that afford their members an opportunity for connections with persons, groups, divine powers, and social structures beyond their own individuality.”⁵⁶

These nine, adaptive congregations also recognized their role as generators of social capital in their communities. These specific congregations functioned as vehicles to make necessary changes for those in need in their community. They also utilized their civic skills of leadership and service in their communities for the betterment of everyone. These congregations lived out their role as part of the communities’ infrastructure, as they used their connections to build social capital. “Congregations are among the most effective generators of ‘social capital,’ those connections of communication and trust that make the organization of a complex society possible.”⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Ibid., 365.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 354.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 352.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 362.

Ammerman's study illustrates Butler Bass' argument that many congregations, fourteen out of Ammerman's twenty-three, are not very good at community at all. The other nine congregations, however, point to how some congregations are, indeed, very good at being community as they have adapted and increased the social capital of their communities. These nine underscore that, "Congregations are both sacred places, making claims for the power of a transcendent Other in the midst of this world, and civic places, mobilizing all sorts of resources for the sake of community."⁵⁸

Social capital is a necessary theory that further placed my research project within the larger scope of what is happening in our culture around us. It enabled this research to also be connected with religion and the church's part in the development of social capital. This theory gave our congregation a bigger picture that moved us outside our individualistic selves, as we began to understand why we needed to examine our organizational system and our communal connections with our surrounding environment. This theory gave us the foundational study of other congregations, as we considered how to adapt and make necessary changes to initiate and influence revitalization in our community.

Open Systems Theory

Organizations, such as religious institutions, have not always considered their connections with their environments. Organizations, prior to 1960, functioned as closed systems that did not take in account their context or environment. Examples of these closed systems include: bureaucracy, scientific management, and administrative management. Bureaucracy emphasized a clear division of labor, top-down management,

⁵⁸ Ibid., 370.

job performance, and formal channels of communication. Scientific management included de-skilling tasks to be performed by individuals that could easily be swapped. Administrative management shifted analysis from the worker's performance to the administrative process that the manager employed.⁵⁹ These, as well as other closed-system theories that followed, functioned until the 1960s when major societal events reshaped organizations' relationships with their environments. The Vietnam War, the Civil Rights movement, and the assassinations of Kennedy and King caused organizations to recognize their relationship with their contexts and changing communities. They realized their original, closed-system fit had changed, as they could no longer remain closed off to the surrounding environment.

Several organizational responses were attempted in order to recognize their relationships and adapt. Ammerman names these attempts as a survival of the fittest, a survival of the savvy, and a survival of the similar. Survival of the fittest meant that organizations competed for scarce resources, which eliminated the weakest competitors. Survival of the savvy focused upon the leadership, which mobilized power and built coalitions or internal politics. Survival of the similar organizations, "coupled with legitimated patterns of interaction with other similarly constructed organizations."⁶⁰ These attempts finally gave way to a development of the open system theory.

Van Gelder traces this development through a progression of six movements.⁶¹ Initially, organizations became open for means of survival, but something was

⁵⁹ Van Gelder, *The Ministry of the Missional Church*, 127-130.

⁶⁰ Ammerman and Farnsley, *Congregation & Community*, 44-47.

⁶¹ Van Gelder, *The Ministry of the Missional Church*, 136-139.

diminished or lost when survival was the only focus. Goal attainment in the 1970s moved organizations away from only survival to clarify purpose and strategies. This later developed into a reengineering or continuous improvement where all levels were called together for a sense of promoting excellence. Further development brought forth transforming organizational culture where leadership was a primary means of sense making. In the 1990s, organizations became known as learning organizations as they built in feedback mechanisms that created flexibility and adaptive behaviors. Finally, the basic conceptualization of open systems theory was framed “around the components of inputs, transformation, and outputs.”⁶²

Open systems theory has become a modern-based management theory designed to create healthy, innovative, and robust organizations relating to their communities’ environment. Mary Jo Hatch and Ann L. Cunliffe, modern organizational theorists, define and analyze these types of organization-environment relations at three levels: stakeholders and their inter-organizational networks, the conditions and trends of environmental sectors surrounding an organization, and the global environment that emerges from the interactions of the environment.⁶³ The first level of analysis studies the organization’s immediate environment of the stakeholders, the vital players who form the inter-networks of the organization. Characteristics of the network and its members are revealed in this analysis, which promotes sensitivity to variables that can be measured.

The second level of analysis studies the conditions and trends in the environment surrounding the organization. Hatch and Cunliffe subdivide the environment into the

⁶² Ibid., 135.

⁶³ Hatch, *Organization Theory*, 58.

following sectors of influence: social, cultural, legal, political, economic, technology, physical, as well as many more examples. These sectors illustrate their interdependence and how they shape the environment of an organization. The analysis of these sectors gives rise to considerations for study as environmental conditions or trends change and develop. The third level of analysis is globalization, which “refers to the exchanges and relationships between organizations and their networks that render existing borders and boundaries between them permeable or irrelevant.”⁶⁴ An organization remains open when its networks have permeable borders or boundaries with the surrounding environment. This third level of analysis allows an organization to analyze its permeability, so that it may engage in adaptive activities. “Adaptive changes are responsible for attending to changes in the environment and for interpreting the meaning of the changes for the rest of the organization.”⁶⁵ Analysis at these three levels allows an organization to remain open, so that it may adapt to the changing environment. Van Gelder further expands these three levels as he adapts them for spirit-led congregations.

Van Gelder captures the essence of a Spirit-led congregation as an organization, which encompasses every dimension of a congregation’s life.⁶⁶ Biblical and theological viewpoints can be integrated with the congregation’s organizational behavior. This approach allows for the church to function in its purpose particular to its environment. It also allows for a congregation to function in the disequilibrium that comes with today’s postmodern world.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 65.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 110.

⁶⁶ Van Gelder, *The Ministry of the Missional Church*, 54-67.

Disequilibrium has become a norm for organizations, such as congregations, in the midst of the fast-paced changing society of the postmodern era. “The scope and pace of change being experienced today, enhanced by the rapid expansion of informational technology, is requiring dramatic changes in how organizations are conceived and how they function.”⁶⁷ However, this postmodern era has created an awakening in our organizations that they are living, open systems capable of renewal. Margaret Wheatley argues, “These open systems have the ability to continuously import energy from the environment and to export entropy.”⁶⁸ In other words, these are organizations are able to make adaptive changes, while drawing upon their environment’s helpful energy.

Adaptive changes are not technical, quick fixes, such as Tree of Life Lutheran tried when they hired more staff or gained bigger programs. Robert Bellah challenges us to move beyond these technical fixes as he states, “The problems of our society that it faces today require that we expand our repertory far beyond these familiar examples, that we think hard and critically about what has too long been taken for granted.”⁶⁹ Heifetz and Linsky explain that these adaptive changes require, “experiments, new discoveries, and adjustments from numerous places in the organization or community. Without learning new ways—changing attitudes, values, and behaviors—people cannot make the adaptive leap necessary to thrive in the new environment.”⁷⁰ Authorities do the work for a technical change, but the people with the challenge of adaptive change do the work. They behave their way into a new way of thinking as they adapt in small steps. The

⁶⁷ Ibid., 139.

⁶⁸ Wheatley, *Leadership and the New Science*, 78.

⁶⁹ Bellah, *The Good Society*, 42.

⁷⁰ Heifetz and Linsky, *Leadership on the Line*, 13.

adaptive change is formed from “each small step to capture a quality of aliveness and the need for it to evolve in an organic way.”⁷¹

Open systems theory teaches us an important lesson about how adaptive change happens. “When a system is far from equilibrium, singular or small influences can have enormous impact.”⁷² Disequilibrium might make a system seem unpredictable, but this is not the case. Wheatley argues that for an organization to stay viable it maintains a system of non-equilibrium, so that the system can adapt and grow through these small influences. Large numbers or critical masses do not create change, but “the presence of a small disturbance that gets into the system and then amplified through the networks” is what creates adaptive change.⁷³ Peter Block reinforces Wheatley’s argument for the small disturbances. “Sustainable changes in community occur locally on a small scale, happen slowly and are initiated at a grassroots level.”⁷⁴

Such a small influence is needed in organizations, like Tree of Life Lutheran, in order to make adaptive changes that are necessary in this postmodern world with its loss of community or decreased social capital. Our communities have experienced a fear-based, shallow, stuck, or no community. As a result, we have looked for answers outside ourselves and systems. We have looked for the big-quick, technical fixes that have failed. Open systems theory changes our perspective that our undiscovered answers are within our system and are actually small.

⁷¹ Block, *Community*, 11.

⁷² Wheatley, *Leadership and the New Science*, 87.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Block, *Community*, 26.

This theory was crucial to this research in order to define and live into the type of environment necessary for adaptive change. Exploration of the open systems theory gave opportunity to evaluate the current system of Tree of Life Lutheran and determine its operating system. This theory also provided the opportunity to explore what kind of leadership is needed in order to cultivate an open system necessary for the adaptive changes that are necessary at Tree of Life Lutheran.

Transformational Leadership

Leadership functioned differently when organizations did not need to take in account their context or environment prior to the 1960s. This type of leadership training has unfortunately been carried into the twenty-first century, when it has become essential for organizations to take into account these outside influences. Necessary, adaptive changes cannot be made unless a new leadership becomes proficient in the skills needed to effect such change. These proficiencies can be taught through a proper course of leadership training. First, I examine in this section the differences between *transactional* and *transformational* leadership. Second, discontinuous change is explored as it names the needed leadership that is essential for organizations to adapt. Third, *transformational* leadership is described as this necessary leadership needed for adaptive change in organizations. Specific behaviors, factors, and common behaviors further illustrate this needed leadership. Fourth, *transformational* leadership is expanded upon in order to include cultivating the environment necessary for such change. Last, *transformational* leadership is explored in the context of small-town America, where particular leaderships are traced for small-town organizational leaders.

Leadership, prior to the 1960s, resembled a top-down, hierarchical management that functioned within the organization in order to maintain the personnel necessary for manufacturing a finished product. This particular style of leadership, which still functions as the bulk of leadership models in the twenty-first century, resembles *transactional* leadership, which political sociologist James MacGregor Burns named.⁷⁵ This model focuses on exchanges between leaders and their followers. The followers' efforts are exchanged for specific rewards. This leadership style also involves "corrective criticism, negative feedback, and negative reinforcement."⁷⁶ Examples of this leadership include a teacher with a student or a politician with his/her voters. Followers avoid mistakes, risks, or behaviors out of the norm so that they will be rewarded and not corrected. This *transactional* leadership happens within closed systems that do not need to take into account the context or environment of the workers or those for whom the finished product is produced.

Discontinuous change, however, forced and continues to force many leaders to realize that the skills and capacities in which they were trained in this *transactional* style are of little use in today's context. Continuous change, which went on before and could be expected and managed, gave way to the beginning of discontinuous change in the 1960s. Prior assumptions about how organizational systems worked and the environment functioned were changed in the 1960s due to historical events previously discussed. North American churches continue to experience this discontinuous change, for example, as they are no longer the center for their social contexts, but now on the margins of their

⁷⁵ Northouse, *Leadership*, 162.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 171.

communities. Prior to discontinuous change, “leadership skills and capacities were developed around how to most effectively engage people when they came into the church.”⁷⁷ Leadership skills and capacities were no longer sufficient after the effects of the discontinuous change. A different kind of leadership was and continues to be needed.

Burns names this needed leadership as *transformational* leadership, which is a process that changes and transforms people in the midst of discontinuous change. *Transformational* leadership “involves an exceptional form of influence that moves followers to accomplish more than what is usually expected of them.”⁷⁸ This type of leadership is not a prescribed set of assumptions or steps for one to follow in order to be successful in a particular context. Northouse argues instead that, “It provides a general way of thinking about leadership that emphasizes ideals, inspiration, innovations, and individual concerns. It requires that leaders be aware of how their own behavior relates to the needs of their followers and the changing dynamics within their organizations.”⁷⁹ I would also argue that it involves an awareness of their changing dynamics in the environment outside their organization. *Transformational* leadership is socialized, which means it is concerned with the collective good of the environment or context. These leaders particularly transcend their own interests for the sake of others and the collective good. Heifetz and Linsky articulate this transcendence of the leader, as “the initial challenge, and risk, of exercising leadership,” as one goes “beyond your authority—to

⁷⁷ Roxburgh and Romanuk, *The Missional Leader*, 8.

⁷⁸ Northouse, *Leadership*, 161.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 180.

put your credibility and position on the line in order to get people to take the problems at hand.”⁸⁰

Northouse expands upon this primary way of thinking about leadership as he includes specific types of behaviors, factors, and common strategies. Specific types of behavior in *transformational* leaders include: lives as strong role models; appears competent; articulates ideological goals; communicates high expectations and confidence in followers to meet these; and, arouses task-relevant motives to meet the expectations.⁸¹ These behaviors draw specifically from the charismatic leadership model, but Northouse argues this model is not sufficient on its own.

These leadership behaviors must be expanded into four leadership factors, which include idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration.⁸² Idealized influence is the emotional component that draws deep respect from followers and develops trust, as leaders act as strong role models with whom followers identify. Inspirational motivation includes the capacity to communicate high expectations, while inspiring and motivating followers to be committed to and part of the shared vision. Intellectual stimulation kindles followers to be creative and innovative in order to face challenges. Individualized consideration provides a supportive climate in which leaders listen to individual needs of followers. This particular factor underscores Roxburgh and Romanuk’s call for leadership to have a “willingness to listen to stories that were shaping and determining [the followers’] lives.”⁸³

⁸⁰ Heifetz and Linsky, *Leadership on the Line*, 20.

⁸¹ Northouse, *Leadership*, 164.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 167-170.

⁸³ Roxburgh and Romanuk, *The Missional Leader*, 25.

These leadership behaviors and factors come together in four common strategies, which Bennis and Nanus identified through a study in 1985, when they asked ninety leaders basic questions of leadership.⁸⁴ These common strategies included: having a clear vision of the future state of the organization, which was attractive, realistic and believable; being a social architect who communicated a direction for transformation; creating trust by being predictable and reliable, but also moving beyond protection and stability; and using a creative deployment of self, as one knows his/her strengths and weaknesses. I would argue an additional strategy, as I would also include Roxburgh and Romanuk's leadership strategy of cultivating an environment that releases a missional imagination. This missional imagination keeps the organization's vision as the center of the conversation, as the leader is a cultivator. A cultivating leader is aware of and understands the real issues confronting the followers' lives, is a co-learner creating space to experiment and test out actions, and reminds followers that the resources they need are already within them. Sociologist Block describes this cultivating leader as one that creates conditions where context shifts from fear and fault and from problems to possibility.⁸⁵

All these listed behaviors, factors, and common strategies are not reserved for those who have a special ability in leadership; rather, they are for those leaders who will practice. They are for those leaders who will be humble and realistic about their need to practice their way into new behaviors and skills in order to develop a *transformational* leadership in themselves. These leadership behaviors, factors, and common strategies are

⁸⁴ Warren G. Bennis and Burt Nanus, *Leaders: Strategies for Taking Charge*, 2nd ed. (New York, NY: HarperBusiness, 1997), 89-91.

⁸⁵ Block, *Community*, 85.

not for just the bigger organizations of larger areas, but also for smaller organizations of small towns.

Small towns in America are also undergoing tremendous change and are in need of *transformational* leadership as well. Robert Wuthnow in *Small-Town America* devoted much research to small towns because very little research had been given to small towns since the 1950s. Wuthnow conducted his research through in-depth semi-structured qualitative interviews with people currently living in small towns. He and his researchers interviewed more than seven hundred people in three hundred towns scattered among forty-three states.⁸⁶ Wuthnow adds, through the findings of this study, to the behaviors, factors, and strategies of *transformational* leadership. He lists three specific criteria central to small-town leadership. These three are being known, networking, and being respected. Being known happens as leadership revolves around community activities that are either formal or informal roles of the leader. Networking occurs as a leader becomes a member of other community organizations such as the Chamber, Rotary, a local church, etc. Respect is especially important in small communities, as civic involvement of the leader gives way to respect. “She is just a member of the community like everyone else.”⁸⁷ Respect is given to small-town leaders as they are prominent leaders of their community who serve in a variety of capacities. Much respect goes to the leaders who are very generous toward the community, especially in the small things they do. “You see those small things that people do, every day.”⁸⁸ Wuthnow’s research revealed that it is

⁸⁶ Wuthnow, *Small-Town America*, 7.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 187.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 185.

necessary for a leader to do little things, such as showing up at a fund-raiser or helping an elderly neighbor. These small actions move through the rumor mill and respect is given. These small actions also move through the leader to the followers as the leader models the way in *transformational* leadership.

Transformational leadership was a necessary theory for Tree of Life's research project because adaptive change was needed in order to build bonding social capital through the inter-relationships. Particular aspects of this model of leadership were utilized as I modeled the way in utilizing small actions, cultivated and provided a clear vision of a future state of connectedness of the congregation, communicated a direction for transformation, and created trust through *intentional small acts of conversation and listening*. This theory was also an important gauge in comparing it to *transactional* leadership that would only give us the previously expected results of attendance without intentional connection. *Transformative* leadership moved us to embrace Wuthnow's research in *Small-Town America* that our *intentional small acts of conversation and listening* could and did create the necessary adaptive change for the bigger purpose of community.

Intentional Small Acts of Conversation and Listening

Intentional small acts of conversation and listening are the small influence needed for inter-relationships to be strengthened and connections rebuilt. This small influence of *intentional small acts of conversation and listening* uses the primary modes of relating and belonging in community. "Speech is the primary mode of relating and being listened to, as it is the primary means of being understood and appreciated."⁸⁹ Being understood

⁸⁹ Nichols, *The Lost Art of Listening*, 38.

and appreciated leads to acceptance and connections in building community with one another. The old proverb asks and answers, “How do you eat an elephant? One bite at a time.” How do we strengthen our inter-relationships and increase our social capital for the sake of community? One *intentional small act of conversation and listening* at a time is our answer.

Meaningful Conversation

“Change begins when a few people start talking with one another about something they care about.”⁹⁰ The shifts for change occur as people face each other in conversations of ownership and possibility. Margaret Wheatley argues that, “Human conversation is the most ancient and easiest way to cultivate the conditions for change.”⁹¹ We have the tools needed to adapt already within us to make the necessary change. The loss of social capital and weakness of inter-relationships may indicate that we have forgotten how to tell our own story or listen to others, but these are the things that will help us now as we rediscover the joy of thinking together for change. Initially, a vital shift from *meaningless* to *meaningful* conversations is explored. The origin and psychological underpinning is then explained in order to recapture the core of *meaningful* conversation. This recapturing includes a definition of simplicity for *meaningful* conversation and a simple process for relationship building. Two necessities, context and questions that matter, further lay foundation for *meaningful* conversations that brings adaptive change. Lastly, conversational tools for organizations, such as a congregation, are explored.

⁹⁰ Wheatley, *Turning to One Another*, 8.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 7.

We have forgotten how to tell our own story and share what we care about, as our community has shifted toward *meaningless* conversations. These *meaningless* conversations are filled with our polarities, sense of being overwhelmed, impatience, and easy disappointment. Brown articulates this disappointment, as she states, “No sane person wants to participate in yet another meeting or get involved with yet another problem-solving process, because these will only increase our frustration and impotence.”⁹² People do not want to participate in such *meaningless* conversations because of a growing belief that people are self-serving and difficult. They also lack trust in others. Participants in organizations are weary of meetings that are ill-planned and consumed by *meaningless* conversations, the number of unnecessary e-mails received, and the pointless texts or calls that they receive without courses of action. People do not want to participate as well because they have never been invited to share their ideas and opinions, others are dominating the conversation, or we have been trained from childhood to be quiet so that others can tell us what to think. *Meaningless* conversation contributes to our loose connections and lack of commitment. Our inter-relationships are weakened because we have forgotten that human conversation is the easiest way to cultivate change. We yearn for conversation that is different from our current state because we as humans desire learning, freedom, meaning, and love.

We yearn for *meaningful* conversation that strengthens inter-relationships and builds a sense of community. *Meaningful* conversation is a “lived experience of how we naturally self-organize to think together, strengthen community, and ignite innovation.”⁹³

⁹² Brown, *The World Cafe*, viii.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 5.

Its core process is a fundamental means through which groups organize or adapt to changing circumstances and co-create. These are conversations that matter, in which there is a deeper understanding and a forward movement in relation to others. These conversations have aided us in social organizing from the beginning.

Our ancestors were awakened to the need for social organization when they began to use fire. The fire circled them into dialogue of information, needs, care, and relationships. “The embers of warmth and cooking and light from site to site brought a new experience into being ... awakening our connections.”⁹⁴ In addition to our human origin, author Christina Baldwin also draws upon the psychological impulses of our collective unconsciousness. She believes that our collective unconsciousness is “filled with recurring and universal mythic symbols called archetypes.”⁹⁵ These archetypes, such as the circle, shape us into the type of conversation we will have.

To understand the power of circle as a collaborative conversation model and the kinds of insights that can pour into this group process, it is helpful to understand that when we circle up in a ring of chairs, we are activating an archetype. Archetypal energy tends to make our experiences seem bigger, brighter or darker; our words become imbued with shades of meaning, and our dialogue, decisions, and acts take on a sense of significance. The archetypal energy can magnify issues among the group and help transform them.⁹⁶

Our human origin and the psychological underpinning of archetypes illustrate how *meaningful* conversation is an innate tool through which ordinary people can rediscover their abilities to connect and make change. *Meaningful* conversation enables us to restore

⁹⁴ Baldwin and Linnea, *The Circle Way*, 4-5.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

a sense of belonging and to find meaningful ways to connect, which in actuality are quite simple.

Meaningful conversation is a simple process that should not be made into a technique. If meaningful conversation were to become a technique, then it becomes a specialized skill of a few experts on which we become dependent. It becomes more complex and difficult once a simple process, such as meaningful conversation, becomes a technique. It removes conversation away from the innate, psychologically grounded skill already within us. Meaningful conversation must remain a natural process in order to be utilized by ordinary people in common communities for making adaptive changes, which Wheatley articulates.

To advocate human conversation as the means to restore hope to the future is as simple as I can get. But I've seen that there is no more powerful way to initiate significant change than to convene a conversation. When a community of people discovers that they share a concern, change begins. There is no power equal to a community discovering what it cares about.⁹⁷

Conversation shifts from meaningless to meaningful when a community has discovered about what it cares. The solution for this vital shift from meaningless to meaningful is really quite a simple process of first noticing what is going on, clarifying to one another thoughts and experiences, and beginning to speak with those around you. Simple conversations that originate deep in our caring “give birth to powerful actions that change lives and restore hope for the future.”⁹⁸

Two core necessities are desired in order to cultivate such altering conversations. A restorative context and questions that matter are imperative to meaningful

⁹⁷ Wheatley, *Turning to One Another*, 26.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 27.

conversations. Sociologist Peter Block discusses the need for a restorative context that opens spaces for living into conversations that are collaborative and meaningful. He argues that the context needs to be hospitable and welcoming, while the pace is slowed down. All participants are to be equals with all treated as if they belong regardless of past situations. A restorative context, or environment as previously discussed in the leadership lens, also calls for participants to be attentive without judgment.⁹⁹ This context is opposite of a retribution context in which members fear that they will say or do something wrong. Brown also gives name to this restorative context through her descriptions of a common courtyard or a conversational greenhouse.¹⁰⁰

The second core necessity needed to cultivate *meaningful* conversations is the use of questions that matter. Questions count as they lead us towards action and behavior about which we ask. “Human systems grow toward what they persistently ask about.”¹⁰¹ Poor questions based on problem-solving or guilt lead us to more problems. Examples of poor questions include:

- How do we get people to show up and be committed?
- How do we get those people to change?
- What new policy or legislation will move our interests forward?
- How do we hold those people accountable?

Questions that matter instead empower and energize the conversation to shift to creative possibilities over problem solving. “Simply shifting the focus from problem to

⁹⁹ Block, *Community*, 114.

¹⁰⁰ Brown, *The World Cafe*, 4, 39.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 91.

evocative inquiry helps people get unstuck and opens doors.”¹⁰² These questions include: more positive framing, elements of personal connection, and collective possibility. They are often simple and open-ended, rather than a closed-ended question of yes or no. These energizing questions also create a certain tension or dissonance that pulls participants forward as the gap between participants’ current knowledge and needed learning is discovered. Block names these types of questions as questions with great power.

“Questions that have the power to make a difference are the ones that engage people in an intimate way, confront them with their freedom, and invite them to co-create a future possibility.”¹⁰³ He argues that a great question has three qualities as it is ambiguous, personal, and evokes anxiety. These powerful, energetic questions create *meaningful* conversations that focus upon passion and care, but they also move us away from certainty and the familiar.

Questions that evoke inquiry and creative passion move *meaningful* conversations into what seems to be messy. “*Meaningful* conversations depend on our willingness to forget about neat thoughts, clear categories, and narrow roles.”¹⁰⁴ We must be willing to let go of certainty in order to embrace the curiosity that can develop. Such conversations call us to find a new comfortableness in differences, surprises, and disturbances in order to learn what new possibilities are being shaped. However, this uncertainty and messiness can still be held together within a process that brings direction for the *meaningful* conversations.

¹⁰² Ibid., 82.

¹⁰³ Block, *Community*, 104-107.

¹⁰⁴ Wheatley, *Turning to One Another*, 37.

Several conversational modalities have emerged in recent years bringing such processes to organizations and congregations. Some of these modalities include: The Circle Way, World Café, Open Space technology, Appreciative Inquiry, Art of Hosting, restorative justice circles, and Conversation Cafés.¹⁰⁵ The components of each of these modalities carry similar principles of setting the context, encouraging everyone's participations, focusing on the positive or the possibilities, exploring questions that matter, sharing collective discoveries, and listening together for patterns, insights, and deeper questions. These processes, as well as a few people beginning to talk about that which they care, co-creates the possibilities for change. They create our future for community. "Our community well-being is defined by the nature, structure, and power of our conversation."¹⁰⁶ *Meaningful* conversations shift us away from *meaningless* and give us opportunity to co-create our communities' future.

This theory of *meaningful* conversations was essential for participants in this research project. Too many conversations in our daily lives are found to be *meaningless* and participants long for more than another meeting at church. *Meaningless* conversations overtook so much of our functional life together, but *meaningful* conversations gave us an opportunity to define what conversation we needed for growing our sense of community. However, *meaningful* conversations were only as powerful as the combined listening with them.

¹⁰⁵ Christina and Ann Linnea Baldwin, *The Circle Way: A Leader in Every Chair* (San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc., 2010); Branson, *Memories, Hopes, and Conversations: Appreciative Inquiry and Congregational Change*; Brown, *The World Cafe: Shaping Our Futures through Conversations That Matter*; Harrison Owen, *Open Space Technology*, 3rd ed. (San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc., 2008).

¹⁰⁶ Block, *Community*, 53.

Listening

Listening must be coupled with *meaningful* conversations in order to strengthen our interpersonal relations. “Listening is understood as having such an intense impact on the interpersonal relationship, the most common unit of analysis in interpersonal communication.”¹⁰⁷ Hence, our inter-relationships increase when our interpersonal relations improve through listening. The reason why listening has such an impact is explored as listening is defined, its purpose explained, and benefits discussed. An exploration of the difficulty of listening and its results is argued as a reason why relationships have not grown and inter-relationships have weakened. Lastly, effective listening and its results is named as a means to strengthen inter-relationships.

To listen is “to pay attention, take an interest, care about, take to heart, validate, acknowledge, be moved ... appreciate.”¹⁰⁸ Basically, listening is “to pay attention to sound” as the ear receives the vibrations through the ear drum and the brain cognitively processes the sound.¹⁰⁹ Listening has multiple purposes. Nichols describes two basic purposes to take in information and bear witness to another’s experience.¹¹⁰ Cline further describes other purposes as he adds: learning new information, understanding how to do things, advancing one’s career, receiving esthetic pleasure, and building relationships.¹¹¹ Intense impact is made upon relationships as all these purposes are utilized.

¹⁰⁷ Benjamin J. Cline, “The Science and Sanity of Listening,” *ETC: A Review of General Semantics* 70, no. 3 (2013): 248.

¹⁰⁸ Nichols, *The Lost Art of Listening*, 14.

¹⁰⁹ “Listen,” <http://merriam-webster.com/dictionary/listen> (accessed July 7, 2015).

¹¹⁰ Nichols, *The Lost Art of Listening*, 15.

¹¹¹ Cline, “The Science and Sanity of Listening,” 247.

Listening has such an intense impact because of the development of self through others' listening and its benefits to each person. Nichols thoroughly explores this development while utilizing four stages that occur from birth-to-eighteen months: emergent-self, sense of core-self, sense of subjective-self, and sense of verbal-self.¹¹² Healthy development of self occurs because others are listening even from our birth. The emergent-self develops from birth to two months, as a newborn's cries are imperative and caretakers or parents respond to his/her needs. The sense of core-self develops from two-to-seven months as listening parents respond to the child's feelings. The child conveys the listening of others as acceptance, which the child transforms into self-respect. The sense of the subjective-self develops from seven to fifteen months when the child realizes his/her inner self of feelings, thoughts, etc. The child's desire to be in relationship is experienced and affirmed when caretakers attune themselves as they listen to the child's verbalization of the inner-self that is often formed without words at this age. The verbal-self develops from fifteen-to-eighteen months as the child's communication is appreciated and the child feels a sense of confidence in his/her ability to turn outward in interactions. At this stage, a child who is ignored will give up and turn inward, lacking the confidence to communicate. The listening of others to us from birth is imperative to our development of self, so that we may experience the benefits of listening in our relationships.

Listening carries many benefits that strengthen our interpersonal relationships and establish stronger connections as we relate to one another. The listening of others continues to nourish our sense of worth beyond our initial self-development. It gives us a

¹¹² Nichols, *The Lost Art of Listening*, 28-36.

sense of being taken seriously, which then becomes the medium through which, “we discover ourselves as understandable.”¹¹³ We understand ourselves through the context of our relationships, which in turn shapes our self-respect. Our need for self-expression is also satisfied through others’ listening as we then feel connected to them. The listening of others creates the opportunity for us to integrate deeper layers of ourselves as we feel a continued sense of confidence. These benefits occur because of the mutuality and empathy experienced from the listener.

These benefits cannot be experienced often due to how difficult listening can become. Listening is often difficult because of these reasons: different goals and styles between the listener and the speaker, mindless listening, and ambiguity of the listening process. Both the listener and the speaker may be focused on different goals such as: listening for appreciation, emphatic listening, informational listening, or critical listening.¹¹⁴ Different styles of listening can also prevent effective listening as the listener may have one expectation of style and the speaker has another. An action-oriented listener will see their role as problem solver. A time-oriented listener will let the speaker know in advance how much time they have available for the conversation. People-oriented listeners see their role as a means for connection. Content-oriented listeners are looking for an intellectual challenge by listening to what the speaker has to say.¹¹⁵ Different styles and goals can also be affected by mindless listening. “Mindless listening allows for quick reactions and very little consideration of what the speaker is saying.”¹¹⁶

¹¹³ Ibid., 18.

¹¹⁴ Cline, “The Science and Sanity of Listening,” 251.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 252.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 250.

The process of listening itself also contributes to the difficulty. “Listening is a complex process that is performed cognitively but perceived behaviorally.”¹¹⁷ To complicate matters further, listening scholars do not agree upon the listening process itself.

“Listening is a slippery term and one who wishes to become a good listener is inevitably prone to failure.”¹¹⁸ Poor listening results because of these difficulties.

Poor listening is the term used in this study to describe when the listener operates through destructive listening habits that do not build interpersonal relationships and strengthen inter-relationships. Poor listening happens as a result of the listener operating with his/her filter filled with their own agenda, preconceived notions or expectations, or defensive emotional reactions. These filter-filling operations come from both transference and countertransference. Transference is “the way in which a speaker’s experience of a listener is unconsciously organized according to preestablished expectations.”¹¹⁹ For example, a listener asks a clarifying question and the speaker feels attacked because it reminds him of his competitive sister and her style of communication.

Countertransference is the complexity that the listener projects into a conversation, as the listener projects a similar experience unto the speaker and distorts the speaker’s particular experience. Poor listening can also occur because of the distraction of our personal mobile devices, which compete for our attention even in group settings. Poor listening, which occurs for all these various reasons, breaks down our relationships and weakens

¹¹⁷ Laura Ann Janusik, “Building Listening Theory: The Validation of the Conversational Listening Span,” *Communication Studies* 58, no. 2 (2007): 139.

¹¹⁸ Cline, “The Science and Sanity of Listening,” 247.

¹¹⁹ Nichols, *The Lost Art of Listening*, 46.

our inter-relationships because the communication needed to establish connections is blocked.

Effective listening, as a result, is needed from both the listener and speaker, as they are inextricably intertwined. “Listening is codetermined.”¹²⁰ Both the listener and the speaker shape their relationship with one another through their response in listening. Effective listening is the term used in this study to describe when the listener and speaker operate together through beneficial listening habits that build interpersonal relationships and hence, strengthen inter-relationships. Both parties must engage in effective listening for the listening to be beneficial to both. “The good listener appreciates us as we are, accepting the feelings and ideas that we express they are. In the process we feel understood, acknowledged, and accepted.”¹²¹ Effective listening occurs when *mindless* listening transforms into *mindful* listening, as careful and thoughtful attention is given through the listener’s responses. It also occurs when the speaker asks for what they want: their opinion, a shoulder to cry on, or simply to be there as one rants. Effective listening occurs when the intended impact of connection happens.

Effective listening is not a technique to master, but rather an action to continually practice as one pays attention, appreciates the other, and affirms his/her understanding of the speaker’s sharing. Paying attention means that we empty our filled-filters of their agendas and preconceived notions. We let go of our own needs or what is on our mind so that we may concentrate on the speaker. Appreciating the speaker is inviting him/her to say what is on his/her mind and to elicit his/her thoughts. “Most people aren’t really

¹²⁰ Ibid., 62.

¹²¹ Ibid., 39.

interested in your point of view until they become convinced that you've heard and appreciated theirs."¹²² Listening is in one sense an imagining of one's self into the other's experience. Affirming the listener's understanding then occurs as the listener takes in what the speaker says, lets him/her know what they heard, and then is opened to correction or further explanation. Effective listening occurs as a result of this practice.

This theory of effective listening is complementary to the necessity of *meaningful* conversations. One must be strengthened with the other, as this research project sought to accomplish. This theory was a necessary addition, as it informed participants about the action to practice during the interventions. It also taught participants the importance of letting go of one's own needs for the sake of other as we sought to build our social inter-relationships.

Summary

Community, social capital, open systems theory, transformational leadership, and *intentional small acts of meaningful conversation and listening* provided lenses through which the data of this study were viewed. They provided an interpretive means for understanding where Tree of Life Lutheran began in this study and further enhanced language to describe the change that came through the modified PAR. These theoretical lenses are, however, further cast into a theological light as they give way to several biblical and theological lenses that were also considered in this study. Chapter three explores these lenses.

¹²² Ibid., 141.

CHAPTER THREE

BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL THEMES

Several biblical and theological themes frame and support this research. Biblical themes anchor this study in the midst of God's action in building and deepening community. Theological themes provide lenses through which to interpret and give meaning to the results of the study. These themes relate and build upon the sociological, theoretical lenses described in the previous chapter, as they strengthen this study's argument with the biblical witness and theological interpretation. Correlation between these themes with the social-science theories is important, as our lives as people of faith are inseparable from our lives as social beings. The biblical themes of hearing and a gospel of the small are first explored in this study to develop how *intentional small acts of conversation and listening* can create great increases in community through the kingdom of God. The theological themes of incarnation, perichoresis, and sense of belonging are then explored as lenses of interpretation. These themes explain how God's incarnational presence brings God's perichoretic community into our communities, where we are given a sense of belonging.

Biblical Themes

Hearing

Hearing is enabled through the practice of listening. Hearing moves beyond the

auditory process of listening, as it brings understanding. We long to deepen our inter-relationships with one another through understanding that comes through hearing.

Nichols explains, “As speakers we want to be heard—not merely listened to—we want to be understood, heard for what we think we’re saying, for what we know we meant.”¹

Hearing, used biblically, also brings understanding in our relationship with God and one another. God hears us and opens us to hear God and one another in understanding, as we are brought into a dialogical co-presence with God and one another. The ways in which God has heard God’s people are initially traced through this lens, as well as the ways in which God’s people responded in obedience. The people’s failure to hear and respond in obedience is secondly explored as a need for God to send God’s Word, Jesus Christ.

Jesus Christ is the means through which God opens the ears and hearts of God’s people, which is explored in the story of *The Road to Emmaus*, as found in Luke 24. Thirdly, biblical outcomes of hearing are examined in the story of the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, as found in Acts 2. Finally, hearing is argued to be a formative practice of discipleship in relationship to one another and community, as it is a vocational call of the church living in the dialogical co-presence with God and one another.

God enacted the formative practice of hearing in relationship with God’s people. The Hebrew word *shamà*, to hear, means to “hear with attention or interest, to understand, and to give heed.”² God gave heed and heard God’s people’s groaning in pain as they were enslaved in Egypt. “God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God looked upon the Israelites, and God took

¹ Ibid., 55.

² “Shama,” <http://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/hebrew/nas/shama.html> (accessed December 10, 2015).

notice of them” (Exodus 2:24-26). God acted when God heard their cry and called out to Moses in the fiery bush.

Then the LORD said [to Moses], “I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have *heard* their cry on account of their task master’s. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey ... The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.” (Exodus 3:7-10)

God heard their cry, as God understood their misery in their oppression. God responded in calling forth Moses to deliver God’s people. God also continued to hear the cries of the Israelites during their journey in the wilderness when God heard their complaining. “So Moses and Aaron said to all the Israelites, ‘In the evening you shall know that it was the LORD who brought you out of the land of Egypt, and in the morning you shall see the glory of the LORD, because he has *heard* your complaining against the LORD’” (Exodus 6:6-7).

God’s hearing continued throughout the Hebrew biblical narrative as God heard the cries of the needy and the groans of the prisoners (Psalm 69:33 and 102:20). God especially heard the prayers of God’s people as God delivered them again in the Babylonian exile. “See, the Lord’s hand is not too short to save, nor his ear too dull to *hear*” (Isaiah 59:1). God’s acts of *shamà* moved God in understanding to deliver God’s people.

This act of deliverance through God’s *shamà* enabled God’s people to respond in hearing God in return. Moses called upon God’s people to hear. “*Hear* therefore, O Israel, and observe them diligently, so that it may go well with you, and so that you may multiply greatly in a land flowing with milk and honey, as the LORD, the God of your ancestors, has promised you. *Hear*, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone”

(Deuteronomy 6:3-5). This ancient Jewish, biblical prayer was a call to obedience, specifically “on knowledge and instruction received through the revelation of Yahweh.”³ The people’s hearing led to obedience, which promised great multiplying. “The prevalence of hearing points to an essential feature of biblical religion. It is a religion of the Word, because it is a religion of action, of obedience to the Word.”⁴

The people unfortunately did not always obey when they heard God. Prophets in later Hebrew Scriptures heard the word and tried to warn God’s people. Pagans could even hear God’s warning to the people, but they did not obey (Joshua 2:10-11, 2 Chronicles 9:1-8). Their failure and disobedience shut them off from hearing God and ultimately from their relationship with God.

God did not, however, abandon God’s people. God continued to act decisively for God’s people through the ultimate Word sent for the world. “And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a Father’s only son, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). God sent the Word of grace and truth that would open the ears and hearts of God’s people. This Word brought forth true significance in what was heard during his life and ministry. The message of the nativity as the shepherds heard the angels’ message, the voice at Jesus’ baptism, and the voice at the transfiguration revealed God’s intention to open the ears of God’s people. Jesus even proclaimed the scripture of his mission, which was from Isaiah 61, was fulfilled through God’s people’s hearing. “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (Luke 4:18-21). Confusion did

³ Sheri L. Klouda, “The Dialectical Interplay of Seeing and Hearing in Psalm 19 and Its Connection to Wisdom,” *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 10, no. 2 (2000): 182.

⁴ Kittel, Bromiley, and Friedrich, “Alpha-Gamma,” 218.

not even stop this Word from opening what was previously shut off in the people's hearing.

The biblical narrative of hearing (*akouo*) continued through this Word as the two disciples walked on the road to Emmaus where they listened, heard, and then were opened to understand (Luke 24:13-35). The unrecognized, risen Jesus traveled with the two disciples, who were talking about everything that recently happened in the betrayal and crucifixion of their Messiah. The disciples' discussion was downcast as they did not believe what they had heard from the prophets. They heard the promise of the prophets, but unfortunately understanding did not come because their hearts were not opened. Jesus who was unrecognized by the two disciples, explained what was in the scripture concerning him while they were still traveling. It was not until Jesus broke the bread and disappeared, however, that understanding came for the two disciples. They realized that Jesus opened their hearts to hear and understand all that had happened. "Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the scriptures to us" (Luke 24:32)? Jesus' presence and speaking opened the scriptures to them to understand. Jesus later opened the minds of the rest of the disciples so that they too would come to hear and understand (Luke 24:45).

Jesus' act of opening the ears and hearts of the disciples continued as the awaited Holy Spirit arrived on Pentecost. The sound occurred first bringing them bewilderment "because each one *heard* them speaking in the native language of each" (Acts 2:6). Each ethnicity heard in their native language. "Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and

proselytes, Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we *hear* them speaking about God’s deeds of power” (Acts 2:9-11). The message of God’s deeds of power continued to spread, as a new response occurred. “But many of those who *heard* the word believed; and they numbered about five thousand” (Acts 4:4).

The Hebrew Scriptures’ use of hearing, *shamà*, evoked obedience; however, the New Testament’s use of hearing, *akouo*, evoked belief or faith. Kittel defines hearing as the reception of both grace and the call to repentance. “This means that the only marks to distinguish true hearing from purely physical hearing are faith and action.”⁵ The Word, Jesus Christ, transformed our listening into hearing, so that we may hear, understand, and believe. The Apostle Paul articulated our transformed hearing in Romans. “So faith comes from what is *heard*, and what is *heard* comes through the word of Christ” (Romans 10:17).

Our hearing brings forth faith through Christ, who restored our relationship with God and one another. Our relationships are no longer shut off, but opened. Our ears and hearts are opened as we are drawn into a dialogical co-presence with God and one another. This dialogical co-presence is described by Anne Wimberly, as she states, “As people enter into a vital dialogical co-presence with God, their experience of this relationship provides an openness to persons in dialogue—who are the image of God.”⁶ The Father and the Son entered into this dialogical co-presence whenever Jesus called upon God to hear. Jesus called upon God when he was about to raise Lazarus. “I knew that you always *hear* me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so

⁵ Ibid., 220.

⁶ Anne Streaty Wimberly, “Called to Listen: The Imperative Vocation of Listening in Twenty-First Century Faith Communities,” *International Review of Mission* 87, no. 346 (1998): 334.

that they may believe that you sent me” (John 11:42). This dialogical co-presence invites us into *intentional small acts of conversation and listening* with one another. This dialogical co-presence is needed in the midst of decreased social capital and loss of social inter-relationships, especially in the era of our cyberspace technologies as Wimberly explains:

While cyberspace technologies do offer a sense of connectedness that “fills the void” for many, people still have an urgent need to belong in a vital community. The unique role of 21st century Christian faith communities is to help families consider and reflect on this pressing need. Moreover, their role is to provide opportunities for focusing on the importance of reaching out to others by paying attention, taking an interest, acknowledging the presence of others, validating them, showing appreciation for them, all of which are part of radical openness to one another.⁷

Today’s faith communities are called in this radical openness with a vocation of hearing. We are to embody a communal presence that is reflective of God’s realm through our *intentional small acts of conversation and listening*. Van Gelder and Zscheile argue, “The key is for ordinary church members to develop their capacity to listen to God in community, to listen to the Spirit, and to listen to their neighbors in love.”⁸ The vocation of hearing, through the formative practice of *intentional small acts of conversation and listening*, moves us to live together in radical openness. Gadamar states, “In human relations the important thing is, as we have seen, to experience the Thou truly as a Thou—i.e., not to overlook his claim but to let him really say something to us. Here is where openness belongs.”⁹ This radical openness draws us into a missional environment, where “cultivating the habit of listening with the desire to hear the other” is

⁷ Ibid., 336.

⁸ Van Gelder and Zscheile, *The Missional Church in Perspective*, 165.

⁹ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 355.

a regular practice.¹⁰ This regular practice extends the dialogical co-presence with God into a dialogical co-presence with one another as community is deepened through one *intentional small act of conversation and listening* at a time.

This lens of hearing was imperative to use for this project, as it cast the lens of listening into a biblical understanding of God's initiative act and our response of hearing God and one another. Our response of hearing was exercised together through interventions, which allowed us to practice the biblical sense of hearing for the sake of growing God's kingdom. Community was deepened through this small means that grows in God's present kingdom.

A Gospel of the Small

God apparently prefers using small means for the greatness of God's kingdom. Small traits were typical in the Hebrew Scriptures of those elected and called to do God's work, such as King David first being introduced as a small shepherd boy. Smallness was also the means through which God revealed God's self in human form, born as a small baby. Small metaphorical characteristics were also commonly used as Jesus taught about the Kingdom of God. The biblical theme, small, is further explored in order to determine why God so often preferred the small. The Greek is first explored in the biblical use of small. Reasons why God so often used small means are secondly examined in order to underline the contrast between God's kingdom and human greatness. Kingdom parables in the gospels are thirdly explored as examples of this contrast. The mustard seed parable is particularly highlighted to emphasize God's continued promise to God's people. The

¹⁰ Roxburgh and Romanuk, *The Missional Leader*, 115.

biblical theme of small is finally explored as a challenge to modern day disciples and congregations, as we consider the size of our faith practices and growth patterns.

The two most common Greek words used in the New Testament to describe God's preferred small means are: *oligos* and *mikros*. *Oligos* is defined as "little, small, relatively small quantity on any dimension."¹¹ Biblical translations often use the English word few for *oligos*, such as when Jesus asked the disciples in the feeding of the five thousand, "How many loaves have you?" They said, "Seven, and a *few* small fish" (Matthew 15:34). Jesus took these seven loaves and a *few*, small fish and multiplied them for the feeding of the crowd. Each of these biblical statements that use *oligos* most often are under the influence of "an eschatologically oriented piety ... [which] can take on a new radical sense."¹² The feeding of the five-thousand is an example of God's extraordinary message encountering our ordinary world. This is a story of ordinary, actual food, which Jesus took and fed the crowd. There was so much bread and fish left over in abundance.

A sign of God's kingdom came forth through Jesus, bringing forth the abundance of God's extraordinary means. Matthew spoke earlier, "But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well" (Matthew 6:33). Jesus demonstrated God's kingdom through the *oligos*, bringing forth a foretaste of what is to come and the *promised things* that Jesus said would be given to us. Our ordinary means (a *few* loaves and five fish) will continue to be used to bring forth the abundance of God's kingdom to come, as we strive first for God's kingdom. Kittel calls

¹¹ Kittel, Bromiley, and Friedrich, "Alpha-Gamma," 171.

¹² Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey William Bromiley, and Gerhard Friedrich, "Xsi-Pi," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 10 vols., vol. V (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964), 171.

this the transvaluation of all values before God and in God's kingdom, which is "to evaluate by a principle that varies from the accepted standards."¹³

God not only uses small amounts of few, but God also uses small objects in this transvaluation. *Mikros* is the Greek word used to describe those things which are "small in outward or physical size."¹⁴ This trait was used for many Hebrew words as Saul was called from a little family and Solomon was called as a little child to be king (I Samuel 9:21, 1 Kings 3:7). This trait continued to be used in its Greek form, as Jesus described this active and visible mark of God's activity in the kingdom coming through him.

Jesus continually spoke of God's mystery of littleness for reasons of combatting the human ideal of greatness. "For Jesus the kingdom is not a towering empire."¹⁵ Jesus combatted a culture of numbers and a hypnotism of size. God's people expected the Messiah to come as a majestic, powerful king restoring the glory days of Israel with the magnificent temple. They expected their nation to become big in size and powerful in numbers against the oppressing nations surrounding them. However, the reality in which Jesus came was in contrast to these expectations. Jesus came in a "birth of littleness, in self-humiliation, and self-abasement, the way to win the kingdom of heaven and to be great in the new aeon."¹⁶ Jesus increasingly spoke about the *mikros* growing into the kingdom's greatness as encouragement to the disciples in the face of what others believed

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey William Bromiley, and Gerhard Friedrich, "Lambda-Nu," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 10 vols., vol. IV (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964), 649.

¹⁵ Bailey, "The Parable of the Mustard Seed," 456.

¹⁶ Kittel, Bromiley, and Friedrich, "Xsi-Pi," 655.

to be insignificant and too small during his ministry on earth. Jesus chose, as a result, to speak of *mikros* in kingdom parables.

Jesus said in his parables that the kingdom of God is: something small that grows big, like one who seeks the small and seemingly insignificant, and is given to the littlest of all. The kingdom of God is described as a mustard seed that grows into a great bush or tree (Matthew 13:31-32, Mark 4:30-32, and Luke 13:18-19). The kingdom of God is also like yeast that when mixed in dough greatly multiplies (Luke 13:21, Matthew 13:33). These biblical metaphors describe the kingdom as it comes in small beginnings, but turns into great blessings. They also describe that God's small beginnings can be hidden as the yeast's work cannot be seen within the bread dough.

Jesus also described the kingdom of God as one who seeks the small and insignificant. God is like a shepherd who left God's fold of ninety-nine in order to find the one lost, small sheep (Luke 15:7). God is also like a woman who looked exhaustedly until she found the one lost coin (Luke 15:10). God is like a merchant who gave away all just for one pearl. "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it" (Matthew 13:45-46). The kingdom of God is not hypnotized by size or numbers, but rather holds greatly the value of one.

The kingdom of God also values the gift of the little ones, the children. Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs" (Matthew 19:14). Jesus also taught the disciples that if anyone wants to enter the kingdom of God, they must enter as a little child. "Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it"

(Mark 10:15). God works with the small, the value of one, and the little children for bringing the greatness of God's kingdom. Each of these takes on a new and radical sense when God uses them, especially the mustard seed.

The mustard seed parable is perhaps the most important as it is the "only parable that all three synoptic gospel writers call a parable of the kingdom."¹⁷ This parable brings an important emphasis on the smallness of the seed through the use of a chiasm.

When [it is] sown
 upon the ground
 it is smaller than all the seeds
 upon the ground
 when it is sown (Mark 4:31-32a).¹⁸

The chiasm's central section underscores Mark's emphasis upon the use of *mikros*, the small, which is then contrasted to its disproportionately large end. Mark calls the seed's large end a bush, whereas Matthew and Luke both use tree to suggest that these miraculous results are that which only God can produce.¹⁹ The actual size of the seed and tree underscore these miraculous results, as it takes 750 mustard seeds to weigh one gram and today a mustard tree grows to be eight-to-twelve feet.²⁰

The mustard seed parable is also perhaps most important as it is the closest parallel to the tree spoken of in Ezekiel.

Thus says the Lord GOD: I myself will take a sprig from the lofty top of a cedar; I will set it out. I will break off a tender one from the topmost of its young twigs; I myself will plant it on a high and lofty mountain. On the mountain height of Israel I will plant it, in order that it may produce boughs and bear fruit, and become a

¹⁷ Bailey, "The Parable of the Mustard Seed," 449.

¹⁸ Ibid., 450.

¹⁹ Ibid., 453.

²⁰ Ibid., 454.

noble cedar. Under it every kind of bird will live; in the shade of its branches will nest winged creatures of every kind. (Ezekiel 17:22-23)

The tree represented the people of God and God's purpose for them. Correlating this parallel to Jesus' parable indicates that what Jesus did was consistent with what God promised Israel. God's actions remain consistent before, during, and after Jesus' life, ministry, and resurrection.

God also remains consistent in God's actions into the present day. The purpose of this parable was "to inform the multitudes and the disciples that despite a small beginning, the kingdom in its present phase will result in glorious, great proportions—growth in which people of all races from all over the world will experience the blessings of the kingdom of heaven."²¹ This purpose issues a challenge to our present day congregations, who have struggled with smaller numbers in decreased attendance and participation. Our plans for growth must always follow God's kingdom way, which challenges us to live in "yeasty patterns of growth."²² We cannot be driven by corporate-style goal setting and the hypnotism of numbers; rather, we are to be content to be part of the small things that God does in us as God's people.

Tree of Life Lutheran was confronted with this challenge as we took upon *intentional small acts of conversation and listening* in this research project. We needed to learn to be content with God's small means and trust that God would enlarge our vision, so that we could grow in our inter-relationships and deepen our sense of community. "We must always let the largeness be God's. His grand story makes our individual stories

²¹ Ibid., 458.

²² David Neff, "Small Is Huge: Why Jesus Favors Mustard Seed-Sized Ministry," *Christianity Today* (2006): 44.

bigger as they take on meaning in his kingdom.”²³ Our individual stories, which were shared through our *meaningful* conversations, carried with them the promise of Jesus’ kingdom parables, particularly of the mustard seed. God used our smallness to help bring forth the greatness of God’s kingdom so that our community deepened and inter-relationships grew. This mustard seed of our *intentional small acts of conversation and listening* carried the promise that they would grow into a great tree for the purpose of reaching out to others.

This lens was central to our congregation’s learning that God uses our small acts and brings God’s greatness through them. Our *intentional small acts of conversation and listening* were an exercise for us to discover and reinforce that we do not need to jump to the big, quick-fix answers of program and staff; rather, God has already planted small seeds of possibility within ourselves, which will grow for the sake of God’s purpose for us. This discovered and revealed promise was possible because of the incarnation of Jesus Christ present within the small seed that began in conversation and listening.

Theological Themes

Incarnation

The incarnation of God in Jesus Christ is what grows the new seed of God’s presence in our *intentional small acts of conversation and listening*. Martin Luther said, “[God] is a supernatural, inscrutable being who exists at the same time in every little seed, whole and entire, and yet also in all and above all and outside all created things.”²⁴

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Martin Luther et al., “Word and Sacrament,” in *Luther's Works*, American ed., 55 vols., vol. 37 (Saint Louis, MO: Concordia Pub. House, 1955), 228.

Jesus Christ is the incarnational presence, who begins small as a little seed and brings great redemption for the sake of God's beloved community. The incarnation is first explored in order to define why it is not only necessary, but also fortuitous in deepening our relationship with God. This relationship with God also establishes our fellowship with Christ and one another, which is secondly examined. An examination of the synoptic gospels is thirdly explored, as evidence of the incarnation being deeply rooted in culture. The incarnation is also rooted in today's culture, as is finally explored, through the call of incarnational discipleship, which creates an incarnational community of deepened relationships.

Jesus said, "For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them" (Matthew 18:20). Jesus promised the disciples his presence in their gathering to build community. Jesus did not simply promise a spiritual insurance plan for each individual to gain his/her salvation; instead, Jesus promised that his incarnation would be present where two or three are gathered, as Moltmann describes, the "new bond between God and humans and through the community of brothers and sisters."²⁵

God sent God's son to redeem the world through his life, death, and resurrection, but God also sent God's son to build relationships in love with God and one another. Moltmann articulates that the incarnation was not only necessary, but it was fortuitous. "Love cannot be content simply to overcome sin. Love does not merely want to vanquish the death of the beloved; it wants to overcome the beloved's mortality too, so that he may be eternally beside the beloved and so that the beloved may be eternally beside

²⁵ Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, 114.

himself.”²⁶ The incarnation of Jesus is present where two-or-three gather in his name because the beloved longs to sit beside his loved ones, God’s people. *God beside us* is promised to us as fellowship with Jesus and one another through the incarnation.

Jesus became the first-born of many brothers and sisters, who find the Father through Christ’s incarnation. Jesus opens the door to us, his brothers and sisters, to enter into his relationship with the Father. “In fellowship with the only begotten Son, people become co-opted sons and daughters of the Father.”²⁷ Jesus also made it possible for God to receive the responses of love from God’s son and beloved sons and daughters. The responses of the beloved ones are made possible as they are delivered and freed to respond in God’s image. Thus, God’s bliss increases as we are drawn into fellowship through the incarnation of Christ. These responses to God from the beloved become present in our world’s culture.

The gospel of Christ was and is always rooted in cultural forms as the incarnation. The incarnation is, as Zscheile describes, “God’s definitive revelation to humanity in person—through a particular human life, lived in a particular culture, in deep continuity with God’s revelation to Israel. Jesus embodies God’s presence as the one in whom humanity is reborn.”²⁸ God revealed God’s self, as embedded in an ordinary culture of an ordinary community. “God does not merely enter into the finitude of men and women; he enters into the situation of their sin and god forsakenness as well. He does not merely

²⁶ Ibid., 116.

²⁷ Ibid., 121.

²⁸ Zscheile, *The Agile Church*, 8.

enter into this situation; he also accepts and adopts it himself, making it part of his own eternal life.”²⁹

Stassen traces the incarnation of Christ through the biblical stories of Mark, as he explores Christ’s entering presence of compassion and confrontation. Particular focus is placed upon the Capernaum section (Mark 1:21-3:12), as “Jesus *enters* into the lives of people in dramatic ways, especially those who have been closed out by the domination system.”³⁰ Emphasis is placed upon Mark’s use of *erchomai*, which means to enter in, to come into presence, or to be present.³¹ A total of twenty-nine uses of *erchomai* stresses the incarnational presence of Christ entering into the lives of outcasts or those persons in need of healing or forgiving, so that Christ may welcome them into community. Jesus also entered into Jerusalem and the presence of authorities and powers, where he ultimately faced death on the cross.

Roxburgh also retraces the incarnation of Christ. However, he does so through the biblical stories of Luke and Acts. He underscores the ordinary birth of Christ into “the concreteness of place at a specific time to particular people with names and addresses.”³² This revealed self of God went on to tell stories with neighbors and ordinary people, but the way he did would turn their “expected ways upside down.”³³ Jesus continued to turn expected ways upside down as he chose not force or power, but weakness and

²⁹ Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, 119.

³⁰ Glen Stassen, “Incarnational Discipleship and Recovery of a Historically Realistic Jesus: An Incarnational Theory of the Cross as Compassion, Confrontation, and Deliverance,” *Baptistic Theologies* 4, no. 2 (2012): 69.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Roxburgh, *Missional*, 72.

³³ Ibid., 73.

vulnerability. He suffered and died a human death on the cross so that the power of sin and death would be once and for all turned upside down and defeated forever. The incarnation of God in Jesus Christ was born, lived, suffered, and died so that we may never be separated from the indwelling of God in the ordinary of our lives again. The Holy Spirit blew into our communities bringing the incarnation of God to continue to dwell amongst us even as we await Christ's return.

The gospel continues to be rooted in our culture today, as it continues to turn our expected ways upside down. The fullness of the incarnational promise is revealed even as we live in the "now and the not yet" and await Christ's return. We live in the tension, as a result, between fragments of individual lives caused by sin and reconciled community through the indwelling of the incarnation of God. There will always be our predictable, human ways for the incarnation to turn upside down again and again; we live, however, in a new hope of a new creation, which moves us from disconnected communities with a weakened social fabric into a forgiven, beloved people with the possibility of restored relationships in our ordinary communities. The incarnation uproots our cherished assumptions, including our small-town assumptions, and ways of living. It replants us so that we may grow deep roots together as a new, transformed community, as we answer the call to branch out as disciples with the promised indwelling of Christ.

The incarnation of Jesus Christ calls for a response from Christ's brothers and sisters, his disciples. The incarnation calls us to follow him into discipleship, where we mingle, tend to others in love, and foster social attachments through trusting relationships.³⁴ We follow Christ as we enter into the circumstances, joys, pain, and

³⁴ Stassen, "Incarnational Discipleship and Recovery of a Historically Realistic Jesus," 71-72.

challenges of those with whom we come into contact. We enter into the perspective of the other and bring them into community as we partner with God for the sake of living as an incarnational community with one another. “The church sees mission to the community as a partnership. It incarnates God in that community, discovers from the community the burning issues, brings the ministry of the church out into the community, and nurtures personal relationships with individuals in the community.”³⁵ The incarnation is the promised gift of Christ with us, which empowers us to live as Christ’s body as we partner with God in restoring others into community.

This theological lens, the incarnation, was important for this project because it centered our church’s response to follow Christ through *intentional small acts of conversation and listening* in the very presence of Christ itself. We are called to hear and respond in faith that indeed where two or three are present in Jesus’ name, the incarnation of Jesus Christ is there in each conversation. The incarnation is what made it possible for these conversations to move beyond the surface to deepened relationships, where God grew the small into the greatness of community with one another. The incarnation made it possible that the greatness of community was also experienced in the perichoretic nature of God.

Perichoresis

Volf says, “In the incarnation of the Son the Trinity throws itself open.”³⁶ God’s children enter into the open perichoretic community of the Triune God through their

³⁵ Gaspar F. Colon, “Incarnational Community-Based Ministry: A Leadership Model for Community Transformation,” *The Journal of Applied Christian Leadership* 6, no. 2 (2012): 12.

³⁶ Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 121.

fellowship with Christ. “Perichoresis refers to the reciprocal interiority of the Trinitarian persons.”³⁷ Moltmann also describes perichoresis in noun form as a “Whirl, rotation, circulation around the neighborhood,” or in verb form, “going from one to another, encircling, and embracing.”³⁸ This definition, as well as the ways in which we are drawn into this perichoresis, is first explored. Perichoretic characteristics such as mutual giving and receiving, kenosis, and communication, are secondly discussed. The implications of perichoresis upon Christ’s church are finally explored as an opened space for all to find a sense of belonging.

The perichoretic nature of God includes three persons who are personally distinguished, yet unified and indwelling of one another. Each person of the Trinity works his or her own way for the sake of grace, love, and community. They work together, however, in a unified movement that frees and unites God’s creation that is separated from God and one another. Jesus prays to the Father, “As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me” (John 17:21). Jesus’ incarnation opens the Trinity through the Father’s gracious, overflowing love that is for all of creation. We are drawn into a mutual indwelling where the human community is in the divine community and the divine community is in the human community. We are drawn into the unity of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, which is the exclusive prerogative of God. God’s act of drawing us into the perichoretic community underscores the character of this unity. Moltmann states, “The perichoretic unity of the triune God should therefore be understood as a social, inviting,

³⁷ Ibid., 209.

³⁸ Moltmann, “Perichoresis,” 113.

integrating, unifying, and thus, world-open community. The perichoretic unity of the divine persons is so wide open that the whole world can find room and rest and eternal life within it.”³⁹

The three persons indwell human beings in a different way than they indwell one another. The Holy Spirit indwells human beings, whereas “human beings by contrast indwell the life-giving ambience of the Spirit.”⁴⁰ The Holy Spirit dwells in our bodies and our community, as God dwells in Christ (I Corinthians 6.19). We live with all creation with, from, and in one another in this perichoretic community of God. “We live in the Trinity; our lives are Trinitarian lives.”⁴¹

Zizioulas argues that our lives are Trinitarian because we can have no being without communion just as God cannot. “The substance of God, ‘God,’ has no ontological content, no true being apart from communion,” and “it is communion which makes being ‘be’; nothing exists without it, not even God.”⁴² Zizioulas’ main argument is that the church is in the image of the triune personhood of God, which lies in the concept of this communion. The relationality of the three equal, divine persons of the Trinity lies in communion with one another.⁴³ The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit could not *be* or exist without their communion with one another. The church, in the same way, cannot *be* or

³⁹ Ibid., 117.

⁴⁰ Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 211.

⁴¹ Moltmann, “Perichoresis,” 120.

⁴² Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, 17.

⁴³ Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 77-80. Volf argues that Zizioulas’ argument of *equal persons in communion* cannot be if he argues that the Father constitutes the divine substance of the Son and Holy Spirit. Zizioulas’ emphasis on a hierarchical model of monarchy, therefore, makes communion impossible. Volf instead asks why we need “to restrict the monarchy to one person, as the nature of *monarchia* is constituted by the communion of love between three persons?”

exist without our communion with the triune God and one another. Zizioulas especially draws from Cappadocians' Trinitarian ontology, where a person is defined as relationship. To *be* and *to be* in relation becomes one and the same thing.⁴⁴ This reflects his relational understanding of hypostasis, where the human's essence is not found in individual existence, but in interaction with God and creation. Salvation, therefore, comes through the relationality of God.

Salvation is, in Zizioulas' argument, "being in the image of God by participating in God's relational personality."⁴⁵ This salvation through Christ also brings a person's particularity as *imago Dei*. The personal, communal nature of being does not negate one's particularity, but instead negates the self-centered sin of individualistic desire. This personhood with particularity moves us to living in unified communion in the image of the triune God's perichoretic nature.

We live unified, yet still as particular persons with various gifts. This is particularly argued by Volf. "The various gifts, services, and activities that all Christians have correspond to the divine multiplicity. Just as the one deity exists as the Father, Son, and Spirit, so also do these different divine persons distribute different gifts to all Christians ... these gifts are distributed for the benefit of all."⁴⁶

We therefore live in mutual giving and receiving, the first of listed characteristics of a perichoretic community. This mutual giving and receiving presupposes the existing connection made through the perichoretic nature of God. The human community

⁴⁴ Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, 88.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 50.

⁴⁶ Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 219.

becomes one heart and soul through the divine, as walls and fences are torn down and the struggle of competition gives way to mutual giving and receiving. “In this mutual giving and receiving, we give to others not only something, but also a piece of ourselves, something of that which we have made of ourselves in communion with others; and from others we take not only something, but also a piece of them.”⁴⁷ A sense of God’s new creation is lived out in, with, and for one another. Individuals no longer function from subject to object, but rather become subject to subject of “giving and taking, hearing and responding, touching and experiencing.”⁴⁸ This builds upon Gadamar’s argument that hearing is finding “thou in me and me in thou.”⁴⁹ We indwell with one another through the perichoretic characteristic of kenosis, where we are emptied for the sake of one another.

This second, listed characteristic is kenosis, which is the self-emptying, self-giving characteristic of how the three distinct persons of the Trinity live for one another. Jesus described living in such a way to his disciples in denying or losing one’s life for the sake of the other. Jesus said, “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me” (Matthew 16:24). He also said, “Whoever finds their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life for my sake will find it” (Matthew 10:38). These biblical foundations for kenosis are the basis for Desmond Tutu’s belief that God restores community in such “a way that persons no longer own themselves” (Matthew 16:24). Tutu’s Ubuntu theology is centered upon Jesus as the mediator of

⁴⁷ Ibid., 211.

⁴⁸ Moltmann, “Perichoresis,” 124.

⁴⁹ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 355.

giving a new identity which reorders our distorted ways of self-satisfaction. We self-empty ourselves in becoming servants to one another just as Christ emptied himself. “This kenosis, this self-emptying, this self-giving is an abiding characteristic of our God ... who takes the form of a servant being born in the likeness of a human being.”⁵⁰ It is in this losing of our lives that we find life. It is in the losing of our lives that we discover community for the sake of one another. “Caught up in kenosis, human turning to God enables even fragmented identities to be made whole” and be brought together in a deep sense of joy that lives even in the midst of sorrow and struggling.⁵¹ Jesus taught and lived these concepts of self-emptying and losing one’s life so that we may live freed of living for self and living as Christ did by self-emptying. Living in this community of kenosis is where our unsatisfying satisfaction and our restlessness find rest and satisfaction. We discover the true relational, mutual living of the perichoretic nature of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. We discover a community of abundant life given to us in kenosis, as we become a connected community in communication.

The last characteristic of the perichoretic community to be discussed is communication. We are drawn together as a perichoretic community cast in the image of God for the sake of being a community in communication. Our mutual giving and receiving and kenosis lead us to live as community that is in constant communication with one another. Jesus spoke of this constant communication as he did the works of his Father. “If I am not doing the works of my Father, then do not believe me. But if I do them, even though you do not believe me, believe the works, so that you may know and

⁵⁰ Michael Battle, *Reconciliation: The Ubuntu Theology of Desmond Tutu* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2009), 77.

⁵¹ Ibid.

understand that the Father is in me and I am in the Father” (John 1037-38). Each person of the perichoretic community acts within the unity of one another. Their reciprocity moves them in constant communication, which is reflected through the church. “The symmetrical reciprocity of the relations of the Trinitarian persons finds its correspondence in the image of the church in which all members serve one another with their specific gifts of the Spirit in imitation of the Lord and through the power of the Father.”⁵²

This perichoretic lens was central to this research project as it gave an image of the community of which we are already made part and called to extend through our *intentional small acts of conversation and listening*. This lens answered the fundamental question of what reality we are given of God’s greatness of the kingdom of God. We longed to deepen our sense of community and build our inter-relationships for the sake of experiencing the God-given reality already present. We longed for this so that people in our congregation and community may find a sense of belonging in God’s realm. “If we are an indwelling of the perichoretic nature of God, then we are a ‘home’ in which one can find a sense of belonging.”⁵³ We are bonded through the indwelling of the perichoretic nature of God and therefore, are bridged together with others in community where they too may find a sense of belonging.

⁵² Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 219.

⁵³ Moltmann, “Perichoresis,” 118.

Sense of Belonging

Belonging is defined as “close or intimate relationships” and “acceptance as a natural member or part.”⁵⁴ An exploration of what belonging has been reduced to in today’s society is first defined. The fluidity of the individual is secondly explored as the reason for this reduction of belonging. An uprooting and transformation of belonging is thirdly examined. The incarnation and perichoresis of God is finally explored to explain how our sense of belonging is made new for God’s kingdom.

This sense of belonging has been reduced to individualistic choices and beliefs according to authors Diana Butler Bass and Dwight Zscheile. Butler Bass articulates that we defined belonging as memberships in clubs, organizations, and churches. We reduced a sense of belonging from interconnected relationships to memberships where you believe in the particular information or “the what” of the group, which in turn leads to particular patterns of behaving.⁵⁵ One belongs once one is established in the beliefs and the behaving. Butler Bass articulates that this theme of belonging was evident in the election of George W. Bush in 2004 when the religious Right won with a campaign that mixed faith and politics as they focused upon moral beliefs and behaviors.⁵⁶ If you believed as this party did, then you behaved and belonged with them.

The reduction of belonging from relationships to memberships is also evident in the fluidity of the individual. Zscheile argues that individuals no longer create their identity through community and relationships, but now through consumer lifestyle

⁵⁴ “Belonging,” <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/belonging> (accessed December 16, 2015).

⁵⁵ Bass, *Christianity after Religion*, 79-80.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 113.

choices. “The individual self has become the ultimate reference point for human life, and if the self is a fluid and shifting construct that we are responsible for creating and remaking, life is a tenuous, fraught, and ultimately a lonely journey.”⁵⁷ Belonging reduced to the individual self of membership and living as consumer leads to isolation. Such a reduced, consumeristic sense of belonging led us to living in weakened social capital and fewer social inter-relationships.

This isolation and weakened social capital is not the intent, however, for God’s people created for community. The perichoretic nature of God made manifest in the incarnation of Christ radically uproots the self as center and reroots it into relationships of mutual belonging. We become persons rerooted in the perichoretic community of God through the incarnation. Our sense of belonging, as Gadamar articulates, therefore, becomes,

... the risk to move beyond the world we know, to venture out on pilgrimage, to accept exile. And it is the risk of being with companions on that journey, God, a spouse, friends, children, mentors, teachers, people who came from the same place we did, people who came from entirely different places, saints and sinners of all sorts, those known to us and those unknown, our secret longing, questions, and fears. Whose am I? O God, I am thine!⁵⁸

This sense of belonging is transformed from individualistic preferences and beliefs to consideration of who we are because of God and one another. Our sense of identity is formed not in our loose connections or contrived belonging due to first believing and behaving in a particular way; rather, our sense of identity is formed because “to be human is to belong. To be a person is to be in relationship—with our

⁵⁷ Zscheile, *The Agile Church*, 18.

⁵⁸ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 355.

creator, with one another, and with the wider created order.”⁵⁹ To be human is to first belong because this new creation is in God through the incarnation with one another.

This inverts our sense of belonging to come first in the triad of belonging, behaving, and believing. Our sense of belonging shifts as it comes from being in the perichoresis of our relational God of belonging. We, as Christ’s church, are given “tremendous opportunity to rehear the gospel, to deepen the church’s identity and practice, and to learn how to form community with new neighbors.”⁶⁰ Rerooted hope in our sense of belonging with God gives us a reoriented freedom to risk, experience, and learn so that we may embrace this opportunity toward a new shared communion through the Spirit.

Living together in community becomes a holy communion where we belong to God and one another, practice our faith in following Jesus’ way, and believe and trust God. Butler Bass describes this as the “Great Reversal of the great returning of Christianity ... that eagerly anticipates God’s reign of mercy and justice.”⁶¹ Our communities are transformed into a holy communion as we receive and attend to the incarnation of God’s presence with us and discover a new identity that rehearses Jesus’ kingdom ways. These ways call us to listen and learn. Forming this new community with a rerooted sense of belonging to God and each other is not up to us. We are freed from individual impulses through the incarnation of Christ for the sake of God’s kingdom breaking in community where each person is offered a sense of belonging. We are

⁵⁹ Zscheile, *The Agile Church*, 50.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 55.

⁶¹ Bass, *Christianity after Religion*, 214.

empowered in our listening and learning so that we may connect meaningfully with others and be open to the ways in which God's story shapes ours together as a holy communion of God's incarnation.

A sense of belonging was a pivotal lens for this project in order for our congregation to deepen its sense of community with God and one another. Our former sense of individualistic, consumer preferences and membership entitlements needed to give way to a rerooted sense of belonging, where we claimed anew our identity and purpose. We had not, perhaps, taken intentionality in building community because we were focused on our individual selves and what we could do. This unfortunately led to others in our congregation and community feeling isolated. Our *intentional small acts of conversation and listening* gave opportunity to trust that God would create us as an opened system for God to bring a sense of belonging to one another and the others of our community.

Summary

These biblical and theological lenses created the critical underpinning of why our *intentional small acts of conversation and listening* were foundational to deepening community. The interventions of this thesis project engaged participants in these intentional acts in order to deepen their sense of belonging as God's kingdom grew from our small acts to a greater sense of connection with God and one another. The biblical and theological foundations of these *intentional small acts of conversation and listening* provided the basis for the interventions and guided the process of the study. Chapter four describes the methodology more fully and the interventions that were a part of the modified PAR.

CHAPTER FOUR

METHODOLOGY

This research study engaged the members of Tree of Life Lutheran in order to deepen their sense of community by increasing their social inter-relationships and awareness of them. The specific question studied is:

How might a Participatory Action Research intervention utilizing small acts of conversation and listening increase the social inter-relationships within Tree of Life Lutheran and our awareness of them?

The research method utilized and the instruments implemented in this study were intentionally chosen to develop an answer to this question.

Social Science Research Methodology

This research study sought to bring an increase in the inter-relationships of Tree of Life's members and hence, increase our sense of connectedness with one another and our community. Therefore, the primary social science method that I used was a modified participatory action research (PAR). PAR is "a research strategy that generates knowledge claims for the express purpose of taking action to promote social analysis and democratic social change."¹ The researcher and participants, together, "define the problem to be examined, cogenerate relevant knowledge about them, learn and execute social research techniques, take actions, and interpret the results of actions based on what

¹ Greenwood and Levin, *Introduction to Action Research*, 5.

they have learned.”² Community participation is vital in a PAR, as the community seeks to “transform some aspects of its situation or structures.”³ A PAR particularly combines action, research, and participation using participants’ own constructed or gained knowledge through the process. This, in turn, empowers participants to bring about change as they “control their destinies more effectively and keep improving their capacity to do so within a more sustainable and just environment.”⁴

This particular PAR was modified along the course of the project as a partial PAR and partial AR. The majority of the project remained as a PAR in that the PAR team both created and participated in the interventions and research cycle. This project was modified, however, with aspects of a partial AR as many participants of the interventions did not participate in the planning, taking action, and evaluation of the action research cycle. “*Action research* (AR) is social research carried out by a team that encompasses a professional action researcher and the members of an organization, community, or network (‘stakeholders’) who are seeking to improve the participants’ situation.”⁵ The PAR team functioned as the stakeholders and I as the researcher, which is consistent with an AR, but not a PAR methodology. However, we did choose to function in the PAR research cycle because we were also participants throughout the interventions. This project therefore, utilized a modified PAR methodology with a four-step action cycle.

Participatory action research engages a four-step action research cycle, involving

² Ibid., 3.

³ David Coghlan and Teresa Brannick, *Doing Action Research in Your Own Organization*, 3rd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2009), 44-45.

⁴ Greenwood and Levin, *Introduction to Action Research*, 5.

⁵ Ibid., 3.

a pre-step and four basic steps, which include: constructing, planning action, taking action, and evaluating action.⁶ The pre-step focuses the need and identifies the “desired future state.”⁷ It also builds the necessary, collaborative relationships, which bring a sense of ownership to the project. The researcher and participants then name the issues surrounding the focus, develop a plan of action to address these issues, enact that plan of action, and lastly, reflect upon it. This four-step process can lead into another four-step cycle.

This modified PAR for Tree of Life Lutheran was a mixed methods transformative process utilizing both qualitative and quantitative tools for collecting and analyzing data. Baseline and end-line quantitative surveys, as well as six baseline and end-line qualitative interviews, were used to measure change. A series of planned interventions were also utilized between measurements, in order to produce change within the social system of our congregation. I chose this mixed methods approach because it provided us a means for measuring our sense of connectedness and social inter-relationships with one another and our community. It also provided, after the series of five interventions and additional event, a means of measuring change that did occur when the participants completed the end-line questionnaire and/or interviews at the end of the study process.

A modified PAR with this type of process was appropriate, because I, as pastor of the congregation, was able to serve as leader and engage in the process alongside the participants. This process created an on-going dialogue, which became a generative

⁶ Coghlan and Brannick, *Doing Action Research in Your Own Organization*, 8.

⁷ Ibid.

learning process for many participants and me. The PAR team was invited to take a role in leadership and shaping the study throughout this on-going dialogue. The goal of this study was to increase our social inter-relationships and our awareness of them. The modified PAR engaged us in a process, which resulted in this desired increase.

Biblical and Theological Grounding of the Methodology

One only needs to read social media and the newspaper or watch the nightly news to experience two particular aspects of today's reality: a continued, perceived sense of chaos and an increased, dividing sense of polarization. Our society feels as if it is becoming more and more chaotic with each passing year. We live in the chaos of unrest and war in the Middle East, Israel and Palestine, Korea, and national violence with public shootings. We live in the midst of chaos, as we continue to respond in fear and lose our sense of connectedness and social capital. Polarization adds to this perceived sense of chaos, as society drives us to choose the extreme opposites from one another of right or wrong, left or right wing, Republican or Democrat, etc. Today's society of perceived chaos and polarization separate us from one another, bringing forth a deficit in community. However, a hermeneutical turn interacts with this emergence of chaos and polarization, as a shift occurred.

The phrase *hermeneutical turn*, as defined by Van Gelder, is used "to explain the shift that occurred in human knowing during the 20th Century."⁸ This shift occurred as it was no longer possible to find one right common answer, such as right or wrong, as now

⁸ Craig Van Gelder, "The Hermeneutics of Leading in Mission," *Journal of Religious Leadership* 3, no. 1 & 2 (Spring 2004 & Fall 2004): 141.

our society is working with the “multiperspectival character of what we know.”⁹ This is perhaps a reason why we continue to perceive chaos in our discernment with one another. This hermeneutical turn, instead, draws us from polarities or one method in order “to engage diverse perceptions of reality by drawing on a variety of methods.”¹⁰ Hermeneutics, which reshapes our human knowing of our world around us, focuses upon interpretation. Context, experience, past, etc. is taken into account in this process of interpretation as it does not allow one universal truth based on objective, scientific knowledge; rather, it takes into account the context that influences one’s interpretation and honors the diversity that comes forth from multiple experiences and perspectives.

This hermeneutical turn also brings forth a richness and depth in the relationship between theology and social science. The diversity of methods, multiple perspectives, and further complexities of the postmodern era created a turn in theology. Christian purpose and discernment moved from a closed system of interpretation to an opened system of dialogue with the social sciences. This dialogue between theology and social science continues to reveal “a more redemptive approach,” which engages diversity and differences through a process of mutual discernment for a congregation.¹¹ This approach opens a creative dialogue of discernment that actively invites the Holy Spirit, while drawing upon biblical, theological, and theoretical insights. The creative dialogue is not, however, only amongst participants, but also with God. Van Gelder reminds congregations that “an essential dimension that Christian leaders must attend to in the

⁹ Craig Van Gelder, “Method in Light of Scriptures and in Relation to Hermeneutics,” *Journal of Religious Leadership* 3, no. 1 and 2 (Spring 2004 & Fall 2004): 45.

¹⁰ Van Gelder, “The Hermeneutics of Leading in Mission,” 141.

¹¹ Ibid.

midst of a discernment and decision-making process is how to keep God in the conversation.”¹² God is the acting subject inviting us to participate with God in co-creation, especially in light of the deficit we are experiencing in community.

God invited Adam to participate in co-creation, when God saw that there was a deficit in community. God created alone in the first creation story as one who brings order out of chaos, but God created with another in the second creation story (Genesis 1 and 2). God created the animals and the birds and “brought them forth to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name” (Genesis 2.19). God saw a deficit in community and asked Adam to participate in this creation by naming the animals. Dennis Olson explains, “By naming the animals, the human participates with God in co-creation.”¹³ This act of naming animals “was a means of defining and shaping the character and essence of the one named.”¹⁴ God invited Adam to co-create together. This co-creation is poetically illustrated by Ellen Hinsey:

*Etymology. Trancelike fish floated in the ether
Of air, while below, battalions of ants awaited
Their collective calling. Beast, fish, fowl, they
Filed past, on webbed foot or woolly haunch,
Each name pulled from the surest source like
The plume-tail of smoke from a volcanic heart.*

*By evening Adam lay finally tired: each utterance
Had been of such consequence. He lay still
At the base of the glorious oak, precious clover
Sewn tightly beneath his head. And closed*

¹² Ibid., 143.

¹³ Dennis Olson, “Commentary on Genesis 2:18-24,” *Working Preacher* (2009) (accessed September 3, 2015).

¹⁴ Ibid.

*His eyes to all pleasures, so great had been his
Labors. For he was human—in the Garden.*¹⁵

Adam pulled each name from the surest source known to him, which was God. God, hence, enabled Adam with language. Adam “actualizes and specifies some of the possibilities” through the use of language in naming the animals.¹⁶ Harris argues that we relate any text or utterance to a set of contexts, including “one of which is our knowledge of what is generally regarded as true.”¹⁷ One could safely guess that in relation to God, Adam uttered such language in regards to the truth of God’s relationship with him. This co-creation brought forth a dialogue of conversation and listening, which was backed up by the “unuttered words of relation.”¹⁸ God and Adam shared through their relationship of truth a “contextual interaction,” which brought forth a linguistic creativity in naming the animals.¹⁹ God and Adam co-created utilizing several sources of information of context, experience, and source. Adam shifted from his relationship with God (knowing truth) to linguistic interpretation in this shared, co-creation process. In essence, Adam shifted from “epistemology—how we know something, to an emphasis on hermeneutics—how do we interpret both how we encounter and what we encounter.”²⁰

¹⁵ Ellen Hinsey, “On a Panel of Adam Naming the Animals,” *Southern Review* 37, no. 2 (2001): Sections III and IV.

¹⁶ Wendell V. Harris, “Adam Naming the Animals: Language, Contexts, and Meaning,” *Kenyon Review* 8, no. 1 (1986): 8.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 2.

²⁰ Van Gelder, “Method in Light of Scriptures and in Relation to Hermeneutics,” 45.

We are called to shift as Adam did in the naming of the animals, as we too are called to co-create in response to the deficit in community. We are called through this hermeneutical turn to embrace multiple methods of theology and social science, where we “incorporate an understanding of God’s purposes as revealed in scripture and how to understand the active leading of God’s Spirit in the life of a Christian community.”²¹ Our discernment and decision processes as Christian communities must lead us into a contextual, theological interaction with God and the multiple, diverse methods of the social sciences. This interaction leads us into a discovered language that names our reality, as our “language divides preconceptual chaos.”²² This discovered language transforms us in co-creation with God as we move from chaos to community.

This naming, the use of our discovered language, brings forth conversation between theology and science that informs one another as our community is defined and shaped. Hence, more creative approaches are used, issues are reframed, thicker descriptions are created, and diversity is embraced as we partner with God in creating community from our previous deficit. This conversation brings forth what Van Gelder calls a “critically-informed faith” that goes back and forth in looking for deeper structures of meaning as we deepen our sense of community with one another.²³ This hermeneutical turn in human understanding opens opportunities for us to answer God’s call, as Adam first did, and co-create with God.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Harris, “Adam Naming the Animals: Language, Contexts, and Meaning.”

²³ Van Gelder, “Method in Light of Scriptures and in Relation to Hermeneutics,” 60.

This proposed social science research method, which is biblically and theologically framed and theoretically informed, allowed my congregation and me to discern how God called us to name, define, and shape community as we engaged in *intentional small acts of conversation and listening*. My hope was that ultimately this transformative study revealed a gospel of the small, where God transformed seemingly small acts for the greater purpose of strengthening our inter-relationships and increasing our social capital with one another and our community. These strengthened inter-relationships, our awareness of them, and our increased social capital reflected a sense of God's kingdom to come as we partnered with God in co-creating a deepened and reshaped community.

Research Design

Research Team

A PAR team was established at the beginning of this study. The team consisted of me and three active participants of the study. The role of the research team was to actively reflect upon shared concepts that informed the project, provide guidance and feedback, brainstorm participants and components of the interventions, and generate and maintain shared support throughout the congregation. They were integral people in the reflective and evaluative process, as they helped to create and interpret the experiences of the interventions and data received from the quantitative and qualitative measurements.

Population and Sample

A census of members of the congregation over eighteen was the population that was surveyed. These members volunteered as they responded to an e-mail invitation

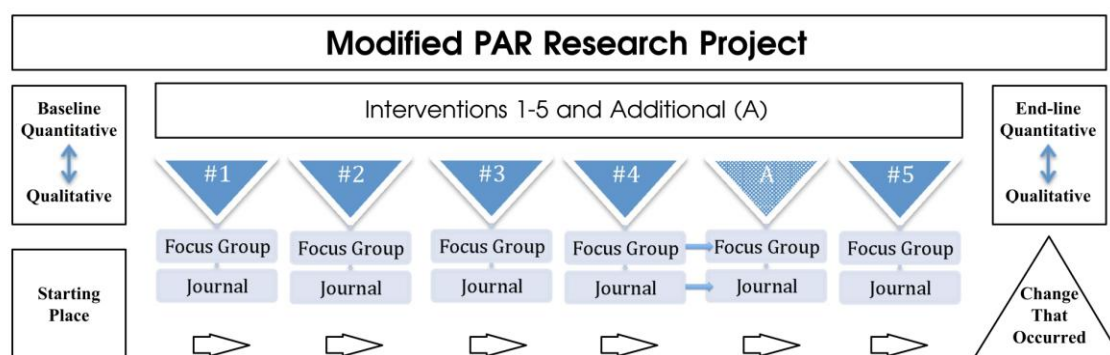
through SurveyMonkey and paper copies of the survey provided in the congregation's narthex. The baseline and end-line surveys were supplemented by six baseline and end-line qualitative interviews. The population for these interviews was a nonprobability purposive and quota sample with each person representing a decade within the range of age twenty to seventy-nine. These persons also represented various levels of participation in the congregation from core to inactive members. Some of the participants of each of the five interventions, including the additional event, were a nonprobability convenience sample of those who volunteered through sign-ups. The participants, recruited by the PAR team, were a nonprobability, partially purposive sample. The focus groups were also a nonprobability convenience sample of those who volunteered to participate from each of the five interventions, as well as the additional event of the carnival fund-raiser.

Research Plan

This transformative mixed methods study included: a baseline survey supplemented by six interviews; a series of five interventions with an additional event included, each followed by focus groups; and, an end-line survey supplemented by six interviews. The baseline survey provided a data set that identified the participants' perceptions of Tree of Life Lutheran's sense of connectedness in their inter-relationships with one another and the community. The six supplemental interviews created a thicker description of this perceived sense of connectedness. The interventions, along with the additional event, sought to transform those perceptions and deepen the congregational connections of those who participated. Focus groups, those who volunteered to participate, were utilized to reflect upon the experience of each intervention. I, as the researcher, also maintained a journal to record initial insights and interpretations of data

shared from the focus groups. The end-line survey and six supplemental interviews, which were almost identical to the baseline, provided a data set which illustrated the participants' sense of connectedness at the end of the research period. It also provided a means for measuring change when compared with the baseline results.

Figure 4.2. Modified PAR for Tree of Life



Intervention #1: New Member/Mentor; Intervention #2: God's Work, Our Hands Project; Intervention #3: Half-Time Conversations; Intervention #4: Monthly 100th Anniversary Celebrations; Additional (A): Carnival Fund raiser for Vertical Lift; Intervention #5: Home Visits with Younger Families

Pre-step Process

The pre-step process initially began in creative conversations with the 2014 congregational council of Tree of Life. They were asked to brainstorm so called, "God-sized dreams" of what God could possibly be dreaming for us as Tree of Life Lutheran. Three dreams were discerned and decided upon: being a congregation outside of our building, living in a contagious sense of joy, and building our sense of community with each other and our town. These *God-sized dreams* continued to shape other D.Min. course assignments, as well as on-going council conversations of 2014-2016 to creatively practice our way into living these dreams.

Invitation to the Population

An article was written in the congregational newsletter of December 2015 inviting all members to participate in this study (see appendix B). A sign-up sheet was also passed around during worship services for three Sundays asking interested participants to indicate their preference and provide updated e-mail addresses. A letter of invitation was electronically sent, alongside the baseline survey, to all who provided e-mails (see appendix A). A total of 218 electronic invitations were sent, in addition to fifty paper copies made available in the narthex. Personal invitations were also given through one-on-one conversations in recruitment for the interventions.

Baseline Survey

I began the project with a baseline survey of the participants using a questionnaire (see appendix C). The baseline survey questionnaire was field tested by eleven ELCA Lutheran members of our neighboring congregation. Both Tree of Life Lutheran and this neighboring congregation have members from our community and school district, so the field test was similar to the population of Tree of Life. These field testers reflected upon the flow of the questionnaire, its mechanics, and understanding the questions. The D.Min. cohort and advising professor also commented on the questionnaire. The PAR team revised the survey after the field testing and comments. The final survey questionnaire was sent to the study population as noted above.

The questionnaire was distributed to each member that volunteered through the sign-up or taking of paper copies. The questions asked were designed to operationalize the variables of the study. Operationalization is the process of “describing the operations

or procedures it will take to assign values to the variables.”²⁴ Completion of the survey implied the consent of all respondents. The questionnaire initially included biographical and demographic questions, which gathered data related to age, length of membership at Tree of Life, marital status, number of children, location of home and work, area of shopping preferences, time length of electronic device or television use, etc. The questionnaire gathered data to learn the participants’ sense of connectedness with others at Tree of Life and the community. These data determined the level of connectedness they experienced in the congregation and community in relation their use of time, location of work and shopping, and level of involvement. The questionnaire also asked for further comments based on this perceived sense of connectedness. The questions were representative of what we hoped to ask with a few minor corrections needed to prepare for the end-line survey. For example, the option of *retired* needed to be added for location of work in question eight.

A total of 119 people from the population returned the baseline survey questionnaire. These 119 people represented 44.4% of the population, which numbered 268. This was the sum total of 218 e-mail invitations sent and fifty paper copies made available. Not all who completed the baseline questionnaire participated in the interventions of the modified PAR. These 119 people provided the population’s starting point of measuring their sense of connectedness and their awareness of it at the beginning of the modified PAR. I also coded the baseline questionnaires for later use in matching up each participant in a paired t-test analysis.

²⁴ Peter M. Nardi, *Doing Survey Research: A Guide to Quantitative Methods*, Third Edition. ed. (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2014), 53.

Baseline Interviews

Six baseline interviews were conducted in order to create a thicker description of the sense of connectedness measured in the baseline survey. The PAR team and I identified and invited these particular participants because they represented six different decades from twenty years to seventy-nine years old. We also selected three men and three women. All six were given pseudonyms for their names to ensure confidentiality.

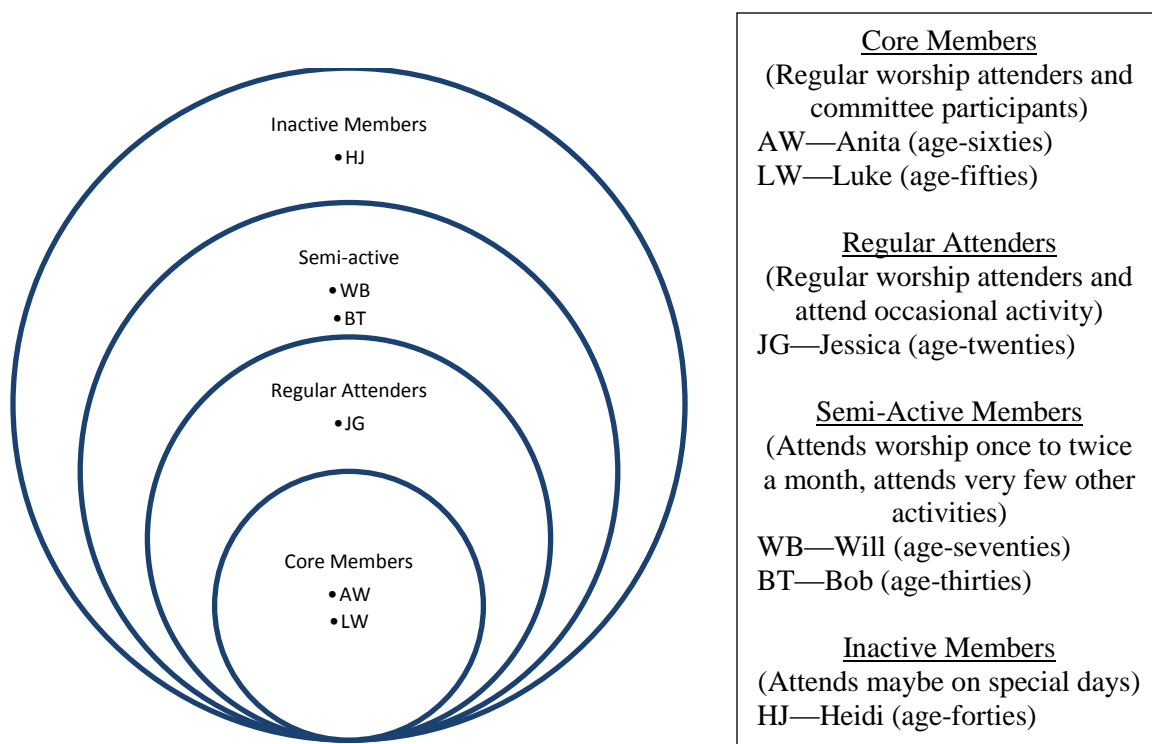


Figure 4.3. Baseline Interview Participants

The interview protocol was field tested with a non-member volunteer, who serves with me in another community group (see appendix E). Following the field testing, each of the six interviewees was first asked to sign an implied consent form and then asked questions from the interview protocol (see appendix A). They were asked questions regarding their particular experiences of becoming members and what connected or did not connect them within the congregation. They were also asked what hindered their

sense of connectedness. The interventions of the modified PAR were also described during the interview. Questions were asked regarding their opinion of how they or other groups would benefit from these interventions. Finally, questions regarding the congregation's connection with the community were asked. These interviews provided much depth to the baseline survey results, as it named particular experiences and shared stories that both positively and negatively impacted their sense of connectedness. These interviews, which were conducted in my pastor's study, ranged from twenty to fifty-four minutes long.

Planned Interventions

The PAR team and I planned five interventions, which followed the baseline survey and interviews. These five interventions were: a Mentor Program for recent new members within the last two years, a community service project (God's Work, Our Hands-Part Two), Sunday morning Half-Time conversations from pairs of one person from the 8 a.m. and one from the 10:15 a.m. services, monthly 100th Anniversary celebrations, and home visits to our less involved Sunday school and confirmation parents. A brief orientation was conducted at the beginning of each intervention, which taught about the theoretical lenses of listening and *meaningful* conversations. The development of their inter-relationships happened with one another whether they met in pairs, during visits, or during the project. Prayer and an opening devotion were also incorporated into the gatherings. Each of these planned interventions included conversation starters and questions that focused upon the following topics: noticing one another, noticing the world around us, noticing our part in God's work, and noticing why we need the church and God needs the church. An additional event was added and treated

as an intervention due to its involvement of younger congregational families. It was also listed multiple times in the end-line survey as having an effect upon the participants' sense of connectedness.

Eighty-one members participated in the New Member/Mentor Program, which was intervention one. Ninety-four members participated in God's Work, Our Hands, which was intervention two. Fifteen members participated in the Half-Time conversations, which was intervention three. Three hundred and thirty-five members participated in the monthly 100th Anniversary celebrations, which was intervention four. Eighteen members participated in the home visits to younger less active families, which was intervention five. A sum total of 543 participated in these interventions, which is 81% of the population of the congregation. This sum total also includes participants that were counted more than once, as they participated in more than one intervention. The congregation itself has 671 active baptized members, of which 481 were eighteen years or older at this time.

Intervention One: New Member/Mentor Program

The first intervention was the New Member/Mentor Program. This intervention began with the PAR team recruiting mentors for nineteen families that joined Tree of Life in the last two years. New members and mentors were notified and invited through e-mails and letters. Mentors were recruited by the PAR team. The initial gathering and conversation happened in January 2016, as a meal was shared in fellowship to break the ice. I led a short orientation explaining the change we were seeking, *meaningless* and *meaningful* conversation, and listening. Twenty questions were provided as conversation one, which focused upon the topic of noticing one another (see appendix H).

Mentors and new members continued to meet on their own through the months of February through July 2016 with a goal of meeting together at least four times. They utilized the provided, remaining conversation starters, which focused upon noticing the world around us, noticing our part in God's work, and noticing why we need the church and God needs the church (see appendix H). Participants gathered at each other's homes and/or fellowship between services on Sunday to complete these conversations. Finding a time to meet with one another became difficult for many of the pairings, but most was able to meet another one to two times in each other's homes. Some of the new member and mentor pairings also doubled up with other pairings, so as to create a larger group. This intervention was completed at the end of June 2016. Those who participated in the focus group asked that their also be a reunion in the fall of October 2016 to provide closure.

Intervention Two: God's Work, Our Hands-Part Two

Intervention two was a continued project from September of 2014 and 2015. Tree of Life Lutheran has participated in the ELCA's "God's Work, Our Hands" day set aside for the Sunday after Labor Day. Our congregation in previous years cleaned downtown business' windows and sidewalks, made and delivered breakfast to our shut-ins, gathered food for our local food pantry, cleaned yards of abandoned houses, made fleece blankets and prayer pillows, and cleaned out our neighborhood park's creek. Tree of Life received the 2015 Volunteer of the Year award from the Chamber of Commerce for this work.

These two experiences drove our congregation to carry the work into a second day in order to continue the momentum and sense of connectedness it brought to our congregation and community. God's Work, Our Hands-Part Two was held in late January

2016 with ninety-four participating. We partnered with *Harvest Pack* to package over 7,200 meals to be distributed to food pantries, two of which were local, several of which were located in Nebraska, and some of which were located overseas. This intervention was also one of our monthly celebrations of our 100th Anniversary of our congregation, for which we strove to gather at least one hundred people in honor of the coming event which took in place in July of 2016.

Participants volunteered by signing up on a clipboard provided in the narthex. They gathered in teams working to package the meals and tie fleece blankets for refugees in a nearby city. While participating in the activity, participants were also provided a table tent with conversation starters (see appendix I). These conversations focused on noticing one another, noticing the world around us, and noticing our part in God's Work. Some participants needed to maintain concentration on their task before them, but were able to later engage in conversation after working groups rotated.

Intervention Three: Half-Time Conversations between Services

Tree of Life Lutheran currently has three different, weekly worship services: Wednesday *Come as You Are* evening service, Sunday morning eight o'clock traditional service, and ten-fifteen contemporary service. We regularly worship 225 to 250 people each week, but truthfully we have three separate congregations because of these three different services. We do, however, have only one worship service on Sunday mornings in the summer months. I often hear during these summer months, "I didn't know they came to this church. I had no idea we had this many young people here." Whereas the three worship styles allow us to meet many different worship needs, they have unfortunately separated our congregation, leaving us disconnected from one another.

Intervention three was shaped out of this reality in order to connect various members across worship services. Participants volunteered as they either signed up on a clipboard or were recruited by the PAR team. The PAR team matched all volunteers together, putting one person from the eight o'clock with one from the ten-fifteen service.

This intervention was kicked off in April 2016 and continued for four weeks, as each assigned pair met weekly. Fifteen people participated in this intervention. The kick-off was held in between Sunday worship services and consisted of a similar orientation to intervention one. Conversation starters were provided for the kick-off and following weeks focused upon the thematic topics, similar to the New Member/Mentor Program intervention (see appendix H). Several pairings chose to meet in a larger group in order to welcome others. This group did mostly know one another, but enjoyed getting to learn more about each other. Four other pairs chose to meet in their original assigned pairs. Meeting weekly was difficult for some, but they used questions from previous weeks to catch up.

Intervention Four: Monthly 100th Anniversary Celebrations

Tree of Life celebrated its 100th Anniversary in July of 2016. The anniversary task force, in collaboration with the PAR team, planned monthly celebrations for eight months prior to the actual anniversary. These included: sending of 100 balloons as a kick-off, gathering over 100 nativity scenes to display during worship in December, 100 Christmas carolers for the neighborhood and nursing homes, drawing together 100 volunteers for the God's Work, Our Hands- Part Two (intervention one), celebrating our two eldest members of our congregation, receiving 100 crosses during Lent for a wall display, having 100 people serving 100 minutes each, collecting and planting 100 annual flowers,

and drawing together a 100 person choir for the July celebration. Several of these celebrations included a conversation starter or encouragement to tell the story behind their offering or sharing.

These activities were initially planned to celebrate Tree of Life's 100th Anniversary, but our PAR team sensed that these monthly celebrations were also having an impact on our sense of connectedness with one another. Each of these monthly events built upon previous ones drawing others to be involved. We chose, as a result, to build these monthly 100th Anniversary celebrations into this research project as intervention four. It had the largest participation of all the interventions because it had so many opportunities to involve families, all ages, and various talents. The actual anniversary itself was a culmination of nine months of these celebrations alongside various conversations. Many indicated after the anniversary that they would like to continue these types of fellowship and goal-oriented projects together on a quarterly basis.

Additional Intervention: Carnival Fund-Raiser for Vertical Lift

An additional congregational event was added to the interventions due to its involvement of younger families and its impact on their sense of connectedness. A 2016 goal of Tree of Life Lutheran was to make their north wing of Sunday school rooms handicap accessible. A task force was initially formed to consider options, receive bids, and then bring the plans forward to the congregation for a vote of approval. This task force, after the approved vote, began to create ways in which the funds could be raised for the vertical lift. Four mothers of Sunday school-aged children served as the team, who made it a priority to have an event that would be family-oriented and bring in others from the community. They chose a carnival that occurred on July 8, 2016. The carnival drew

community members from all denominations and received much local business support for raffle prizes and donations. Each Sunday school grade-group planned a carnival game. Local teachers, coaches, and even a state senator were invited to participate in the dunk tank. No attendance was recorded, but all ages attended as over \$9,000 was raised. Even elderly congregational members came to the outside dinner and bought raffle tickets. Many commented on the number of younger families involved and in attendance, as well as the leadership of these families for the event.

The PAR team decided to treat this event as an intervention with a focus group to follow. They chose, however, to include these participants with the anniversary focus group, so that this conversation would intersect multiple generations and gender. It was the PAR team's hope that through conversation and listening, an awareness and appreciation of the strengthening of the inter-relationships could occur. This goal was achieved, as evident in the data provided from the combined focus group. This is why intervention four and the additional intervention have arrows drawn between the focus groups (see figure 2).

Intervention Five: Home Visits to Less Involved, Younger Families

A previous D.Min. project led me to survey parents of children who were participants in Tree of Life's Sunday school and confirmation ministries. These parents, however, were less involved, attending worship whenever their children had a program, special music, or faith milestone to celebrate. The survey revealed that our assumptions about these parents were wrong. We assumed that they were at sporting events and/or did not care about their faith. We were wrong as this survey revealed that these families placed greater importance in their faith than in sports, cared deeply about community,

and felt somewhat forgotten by the congregation. One person who completed the survey responded, “Thank you for listening. No one ever asked us before what we thought.”

This was too important of a conversation to forget, hence, intervention five was created to continue it. The surveys which these parents completed were confidential, which meant I contacted each family asking for permission for them to receive a home visit. The families that consented were divided amongst the PAR team and me to visit. We visited ten families during July of 2016. Each interviewer led the conversation of questions, which focused upon reasons they became a member of Tree of Life, ministries that are important to them, frustrations they have experienced, ways they believe that the congregation can grow, and how Tree of Life Lutheran can help them grow in their sense of identity and purpose as a family (see appendix J). Visiting with all ten families revealed reasons why they do not attend often, but how important the congregation still is to them. Many of the families indicated no fault of the church, but took personal responsibility in how they disconnected, but also look to reconnect. These interviews continued to dispel our assumptions of where these families are during worship and why they are not coming. Such an example is that we assumed that church is not meaningful and they would rather be at sporting events. These interviews revealed that church is meaningful and they feel stuck between demanding schedules and the priorities they long to have for their families.

Qualitative Data Gathering from the Interventions

I gathered six-to-nine participants who volunteered from each intervention as focus groups in order to provide feedback. A focus group protocol, which was previously field tested with two non-members, was utilized asking reflective questions on what they

experienced, learned, and appreciated about the intervention (see appendix G). These volunteer participants were also asked how the event strengthened their future relationships and interactions in the congregation and community. These focus groups were conducted in our Adult Education room and my dining room. The duration of the conversations ranged from twenty eight to forty minutes long. I recorded and transcribed these conversations. I also journaled during the Focus Group time.

End-line Survey

Following the five interventions, I conducted an end-line survey, which asked the same questions as the baseline questionnaire. Ninety participants completed the survey between the dates of July 18-31, 2016. The end-line questionnaire also included twelve additional questions (see appendix C). The participants and questionnaires provided the same number code through listing their gender, birth month, and year. This was needed so that I could note any changes from the beginning of the modified PAR to the end. One of these questions included which modified PAR intervention the participants attended. Participants also indicated what they learned through the intervention(s). This question was coded by looking for common themes from the participants. Another question was asked regarding the participants' awareness of the congregation's level of connectedness improving or not. I regret making this a close-ended question with a yes or no response. Using a Likert scale would have brought participants a range that could measure their sense of connectedness more effectively. The final question asked if they wanted to continue similar activities as the interventions.

End-line Interviews

Four of the original six people from the baseline interviews were interviewed again for the end-line. The PAR team selected two others to replace two from the baseline interviews due to their lack of interest or involvement. The two not interested or involved represented the forties and sixties decades. The two new people were selected to represent the same age decade and gender as the original two. I, as researcher, decided to include these two new interviewees into the combined data of focused codes as they brought forth similar points of connecting and disconnecting that the original two expressed in the baseline interviews. These two are italicized.

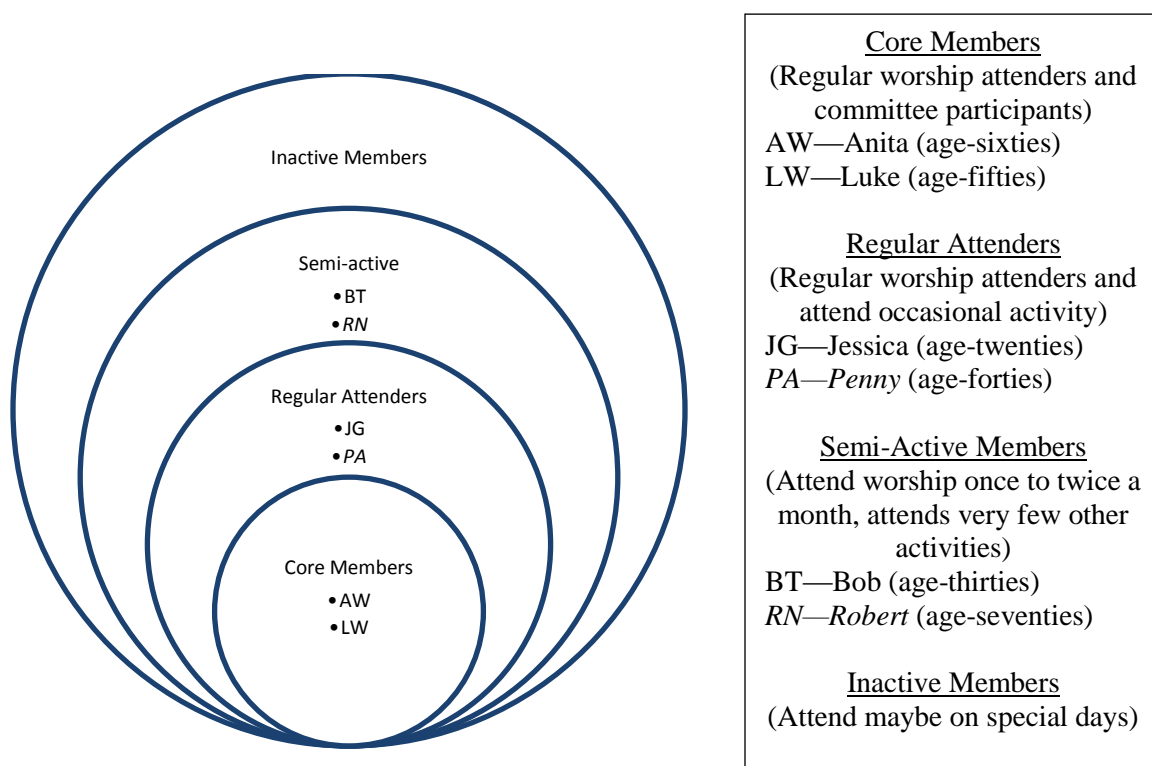


Figure 4.4. End-line Interview Participants

The end-line interviewees were asked similar questions regarding their sense of connectedness, how they may or may not have benefitted by participating in the interventions, and what change occurred, if any, for Tree of Life Lutheran (see appendix

F). These interviews were conducted in the pastor's study and lasted from sixteen to forty-two minutes. I recorded and transcribed each of these interviews.

Analyzing the Data

The quantitative data from the baseline and end-line surveys were taken from SurveyMonkey and entered into SPSS Statistics.²⁵ I transcribed the qualitative data from the interviews and focus groups. The notes from the conversations, which I took in my journal, were also included as part of the data.

Quantitative Data

The baseline survey data were analyzed to learn about the congregation's sense of connectedness with one another and the community. The data gave a fuller picture of their demographic information, their past church participation, their current involvement, their use of time, and levels of agreement in connectedness. These data created descriptive statistics, which included finding frequencies and the mean. The data, from 119 people who took the survey, provided information and shaped the interventions and future ministry opportunities.

The end-line survey data were gathered from ninety participants who completed the survey. Two hundred-thirteen e-mail invitations were sent and twelve paper copies were made available in the fellowship hall. The ninety-completed surveys accounted for a 40% return rate. The data from their end-line questionnaires were compared with their baseline questionnaires as part of inferential statistics to document what kind of change,

²⁵ "SurveyMonkey," Palo Alto, CA: SurveyMonkey Inc., www.surveymonkey.com.

if any, occurred in the participant's sense of connectedness with the congregation and community. I also used two kinds of t-tests, independent and paired, to compare the data received from the baseline and end-line surveys, since participants coded their questionnaires with birth month, year, and gender. An independent t-test was first conducted comparing all responses received. A paired t-test was secondly conducted comparing sixty-seven paired responses of those who completed both baseline and end-line questionnaires. Data from the independent t-test and the paired t-test allowed me to determine what difference between the groups existed. The comparison of the data enabled me to learn what change, if any, occurred in the participants' sense of belonging and connectedness.

Qualitative Data

The qualitative data came from the six baseline and end-line interviews, focus groups from the five interventions and additional intervention of the carnival, recordings of PAR team meetings, and additional notes taken through journaling. Two phases of coding for the qualitative data were completed. The initial coding, as explained by Charmaz, included word-by-word, line-by-line, and incident-by-incident to generate *in vivo* codes.²⁶ The goal of this phase was “to remain open to the data and to see nuances in them.”²⁷ The second phase included focused coding, which was identifying categories by clustering *in vivo* codes and then creating axial codes by clustering focused codes. My final level of coding was identifying theoretical relationships among the axial codes.

²⁶ Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*, 124-127.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 125.

Summary

The components of the PAR provided much rich data about the participant's life, sense of belonging, and sense of connectedness with congregation and community. The quantitative and qualitative data showed that the components of the study brought change to the level of connectedness of our social inter-relationships that is experienced in and through Tree of Life. Chapter five explores the results of the study and provides interpretation of them.

CHAPTER FIVE

RESULTS AND INTERPRETATION

Introduction

The primary way to measure the impact of this modified participatory action research project with Tree of Life Lutheran was to thoroughly explore the multiplicity of data gathered through this process. The data help to explain if and how Tree of Life Lutheran grew in its sense of connectedness with their inter-relationships. The statistical analysis and coded conversations highlighted what happened and the effects upon individual members, as well as the congregation as a whole. The primary sources of data were baseline interviews and questionnaire, focus groups, and end-line interviews and questionnaire. My journal entries and memo writings also contributed, as they reflected upon my initial responses and processing during the project.

These data collected and presented illustrate the change that occurred for Tree of Life Lutheran, as we explored the research question:

How might a Participatory Action Research intervention utilizing small acts of conversation and listening increase the social inter-relationships within Tree of Life Lutheran and our awareness of them?

In order to explain the change that occurred, this results chapter describes the following: first, illustrating the timeline utilized throughout the project with an overview; second, describing the PAR team who worked with me as researcher; third, sharing participant profiles of quantitative data of baseline and end-line questionnaires; fourth, sharing the

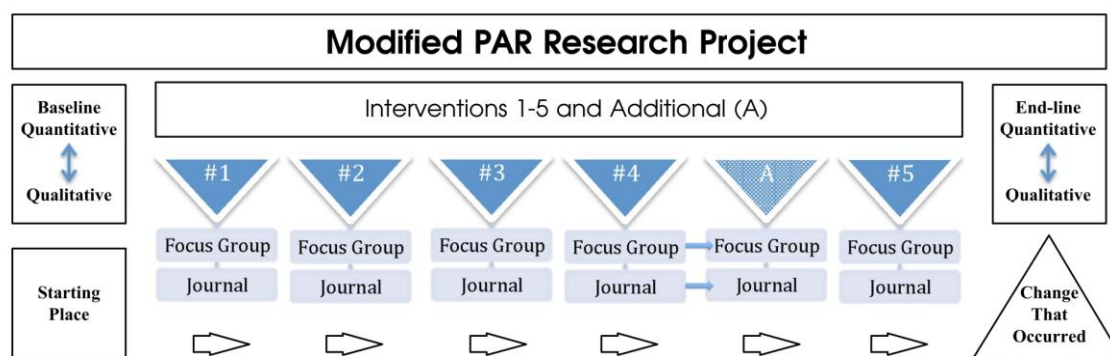
participant profiles of the qualitative data of baseline and end-line interviews, as well as focus groups; fifth, exploring results of quantitative data utilizing ANOVA, independent t-tests, and paired t-tests for the baseline and end-line questionnaires; sixth, investigating results of qualitative data for baseline and end-line interviews with the use of *in vivo* coding; and lastly, returning to the qualitative data of the focus groups in order to discover when and how the change occurred.

PAR Team Description and Timeline

A PAR team was utilized in order to assist me in the planning and implementation of the modified PAR. This team included one member, who is a young woman in her twenties and serves as Tree of Life's youth minister, and two other members, who are a middle-aged male and middle-aged female and who are both highly involved in the life of the congregation. The PAR team and I worked together to create and revise the quantitative questionnaires and the interview and focus group protocols from September-October 2015. They helped me plan and implement the interventions, with the exception of the additional intervention of the carnival, and gather data throughout the project.

The entire research project took place from November 2015 to July 2016. The baseline questionnaires were e-mailed or given in paper copy during the last three weeks of November 2015. Baseline interviews were conducted the first week of January 2016. Interventions began January 17 and concluded July 17, 2016. Focus groups occurred after each intervention ranging from January 31 to July 24, 2016. The focus groups for intervention four for the 100th Anniversary and the additional intervention of the carnival were held together for the sake of richer conversation combining gender and generations.

The end-line questionnaires were emailed or given in paper copy form from July 18 to July 31, 2016. End-line interviews were conducted the final week of July.



Intervention #1: New Member/Mentor; Intervention #2: God's Work, Our Hands Project; Intervention #3: Half-Time Conversations; Intervention #4: Monthly 100th Anniversary Celebrations; Additional (A): Carnival Fund raiser for Vertical Lift; Intervention #5: Home Visits with Younger Families

Figure 5.5. Overview of Modified PAR

Description of Participants

Quantitative Data Participant Profile

Data collection began with e-mailing the baseline questionnaire using SurveyMonkey to the 218 members that provided e-mail addresses. Fifty paper copies were made available at the church. Those responding totaled 119 persons, who were all eighteen or over in age. Seventeen hard copies and 102 electronic copies were completed. These 119 people represented 44.4% of the population, which numbered 268. Not all who completed the baseline questionnaire participated in the interventions of the modified PAR.

The end-line questionnaire using SurveyMonkey was also e-mailed to the 218 members. Twelve paper copies were made available at the church. Those responding totaled ninety, who were all eighteen or over in age. Eight hard copies and eight-two

electronic copies were completed. The ninety-completed surveys accounted for a 40% return rate. All who completed the end-line survey participated in at least one intervention of the modified PAR. Data from sixty-seven of these end-line participants were also able to be matched to their baseline questionnaire responses for paired t-tests.

The tables below provide a profile of all participants in the baseline and end-line questionnaires. This profile includes the background information variables of: age, gender, income level, educational level, church background, congregational membership, frequency of worship attendance, use of media and technology, location of one's work, location of one's shopping preference, and community involvement. These background information variables are used to assess possible intervening effects upon the congregation's sense of connectedness and their awareness of it. They are therefore studied as intervening variables.

The first variable of age was grouped together in three categories of younger, middle-age, and older adults in order to create a measurable number between each group. Generational groups were also tried, but failed to have a sufficient number for measurement for the millennial generation. A profile of all baseline and end-line participants illustrating age groups is shown in table 5.1.

Table 5.1. Participant Profile with Age Groups

Q3 Age Groups	Baseline Frequency N=119	Baseline Percentage	End-line Frequency N=90	End-line Percentage
Younger Adults 19-39	23	19.5	21	23.3
Middle-Aged Adults 40-64	68	57.6	45	50.0
Older Adults 65-93	27	22.9	24	26.7
Total (n)	118	100.0	90	100.0

The gender of all participants is shown below in table 5.2. The higher percentage of female participation was consistent between both questionnaires, however with a significant decrease of twenty-six participants between the baseline and end-line. The lower percentage of male participation remained consistent with only a three person decrease from the baseline to the end-line.

Table 5.2. Participant Profile with Gender

Q1 Gender	Baseline Frequency N=119	Baseline Percentage	End-line Frequency N=90	End-line Percentage
Female	89	74.8	63	70.0
Male	30	25.2	27	30.0
Total (n)	119	100.0	90	100.0

The next variable of participants' annual income levels were categorized into three groups as well, which is shown in table 5.3. These categories were: \$40,000 or less, \$40,001 to \$80,000, and \$80,001 or more.

Table 5.3. Participant Profile of Income Levels

Q7 Income Level	Baseline Frequency N=119	Baseline Percentage	End-line Frequency N=90	End-line Percentage
\$40,000 or less	13	11.2	11	12.8
\$40,001 to \$80,000	43	36.8	25	29.1
\$80,001 or more	41	35.0	34	39.5
Prefer not to answer	20	17.0	16	18.6
Total (n)	117	100.0	86	100.0

Several participants chose to not disclose their income level. This is indicated with consistent percentages of 17.0 in the baseline and 18.6 in the end-line.

Educational levels were also measured as a variable, as they were categorized into three groups: high school graduate or less; technical, associates, or college degree; and, master's degree or higher. These levels are illustrated in table 5.4.

Table 5.4. Participant Profile of Educational Levels

Q6 Educational Level	Baseline Frequency N=119	Baseline Percentage	End-line Frequency N=90	End-line Percentage
High School or Less	27	25.2	12	14.5
Technical, Associates or College	51	47.7	43	51.8
Master's or Doctorate	29	27.1	28	33.7
Total (n)	107	100.0	83	100.0

A correction was made from the baseline to the end-line questionnaire, as the educational level of doctorate was added as a choice to question six. Doctorate levels were still accounted for through question 6A in the baseline, where participants listed this level in the option of *other*. Six doctorates from the baseline questionnaire were added into the third educational level category, as well as the total (n).

Childhood church background was considered as a variable as well. Participants were asked to mark in what denominational church they grew up. Unchurched and *other* were also options for marking. Measurement for testing was utilized through the use of two categories: Lutheran and Other-Than-Lutheran. All options marked or listed as *other than Lutheran* were placed into the Other-Than-Lutheran group. These categories are illustrated below in table 5.5.

Table 5.5. Participant Profile of Childhood Church Background

Q11 Childhood Church Background	Baseline Frequency N=119	Baseline Percentage	End-line Frequency N=90	End-line Percentage
Lutheran	69	58.5	56	63.6
Other-Than-Lutheran	49	41.5	32	36.4
Total (n)	118	100.0	88	100.0

United Church of Christ (UCC) was an omitted option in the baseline questionnaire, but was added to the end-line questionnaire. This change did not affect the two final categories of measurement as baseline participants indicated UCC as *other*.

Length of congregational membership also illustrates the participants' profile. Three categories were created to illustrate the length of their membership: twenty years or less, twenty-one to forty years, and forty-one plus years. The frequencies and percentages of the length of congregational membership are shown below in table 5.6.

Table 5.6. Participant Profile of Length of Congregational Membership

Q12 Length of Congregational Membership	Baseline Frequency N=119	Baseline Percentage	End-line Frequency N=90	End-line Percentage
New Member to 20 years	47	40.9	38	43.1
21 to 40 years	37	32.1	30	34.1
41 Plus years	31	27.0	20	22.8
Total (n)	115	100.0	88	100.0

Those who indicated that they have not become members yet were not included in the measurement as they accounted only for three in the baseline and one in the end-line questionnaire.

Average worship attendance also describes the participants' profile in the baseline and end-line questionnaires. Three categories were created to describe attendance patterns: almost every week, two to three times per month, and once a month or less. No participants indicated *other* worship patterns, so were not considered in the measurement. This descriptive statistic of worship attendance is shown in table 5.7.

Table 5.7. Participant Profile of Average Worship Attendance

Q13 Average Worship Attendance	Baseline Frequency N=119	Baseline Percentage	End-line Frequency N=90	End-line Percentage
Almost Every Week	57	51.4	50	58.1
Two to Three Times per Month	35	31.5	28	32.6
Once a Month or Less	19	17.1	8	9.3
Total (n)	111	100.0	86	100.0

The use of media, television, and technology is considered as an intervening variable as well, as it also describes baseline and end-line participants. This use is relevant as it is believed to impact one's ability to interact with his/her community and connect. Three categories were created to indicate the amount of time each participant is in use of television, radio, or technological devices. These categories are: less than two hours per day, two to five hours per day, and six or more hours per day. These amounts of time are shown in table 5.8.

Table 5.8. Participants Profile-Use of Television, Radio, and Technological Devices

Q10 Use of TV, Radio, and Devices	Baseline Frequency N=119	Baseline Percentage	End-line Frequency N=90	End-line Percentage
Less Than Two Hours per Day	41	34.8	25	28.4
Two to Five Hours per Day	60	50.8	58	65.7
Six or More Hours Per Day	17	14.4	5	5.7
Total (n)	118	100.0	88	100.0

The location of participants' work is an intervening variable that impacts one's sense of connectedness as well. Three categories were created to describe these work locations of the baseline and end-line participants: work in hometown, at-home, or retired; work in closer area city; and work in farther area city. The option of retired was omitted in both the baseline and end-line questionnaires. They were, however, counted and placed within the first category for the measurement of frequencies and percentages. These work locations are shown in table 5.9.

Table 5.9. Participant Profile of Work Location

Q8 Location of Work	Baseline Frequency N=119	Baseline Percentage	End-line Frequency N=90	End-line Percentage
In Hometown, At- Home, or Retired	86	80.3	67	82.7
In Closer Area City	20	18.7	12	14.8
In Farther area City	1	1.0	2	2.5
Total (n)	107	100.0	81	100.0

Many members of Tree of Life Lutheran utilize local shopping options and/or the increased shopping options of nearby cities. This was considered as an intervening variable seeking to discover if it impacts participants' sense of connectedness with others in the congregation. These shopping locations were categorized in the following groups: local and surrounding area, nearby city, and farther area city. *Other* was given as another option, but none of the participants indicated *other* areas of shopping. The participants' profile of their shopping area preferences are shown in table 5.10.

Table 5.10. Participant Profile of Location of Shopping Preferences

Q9 Shopping Location Preference	Baseline Frequency N=119	Baseline Percentage	End-line Frequency N=90	End-line Percentage
Local and Surrounding Area	54	47.0	40	45.5
Nearby City	60	52.1	47	54.4
Farther City	1	0.9	1	1.1
Total (n)	115	100.0	88	100.0

A possible option, which was omitted for this question, would have been to add an option for shopping local and nearby city. This option seems to be the reality for many Tree of Life Lutheran members.

Community involvement was the final intervening variable considered for this research project. Two categories were used to group participants together as those who *do* participate in community service projects and those who *do not* participate in such projects. This variable was important to consider in order for measuring its impact on participants' sense of connectedness in the congregation and community. The indication of participants' community involvement is presented in table 5.11.

Table 5.11. Participants' Profile of Community Involvement

Q29 Community Involvement	Baseline Frequency N=119	Baseline Percentage	End-line Frequency N=90	End-line Percentage
Yes	104	92.0	79	91.8
No	9	8.0	7	8.2
Table (n)	113	100.0	86	100.0

Qualitative Data Participant Profile

Baseline and End-line Interviews

Six baseline and end-line interviews were conducted to thicken and highlight various aspects brought forth from the quantitative data. They were also conducted in order to create a more robust description of Tree of Life Lutheran's sense of connectedness before and after the interventions. The PAR team selected and recruited these interview participants in order to represent various ages according to decades from the twenties to the seventies. Various levels of congregational involvement were also represented from core to non-active members. Four of the original six participants participated in both the baseline and end-line interviews. Two were replaced, due to lack of interest or participation. The two substitute participants selected for the end-line

interviews represented the same age decade, gender, and level of congregational involvement as the original two baseline interviewees. The data from these two were compiled with the original four, as it also represented similar experiences and responses. Italicized initials and names indicate the two who were substituted in the end-line interviews. Figure 5.6 illustrates the profiles of baseline interview participants.

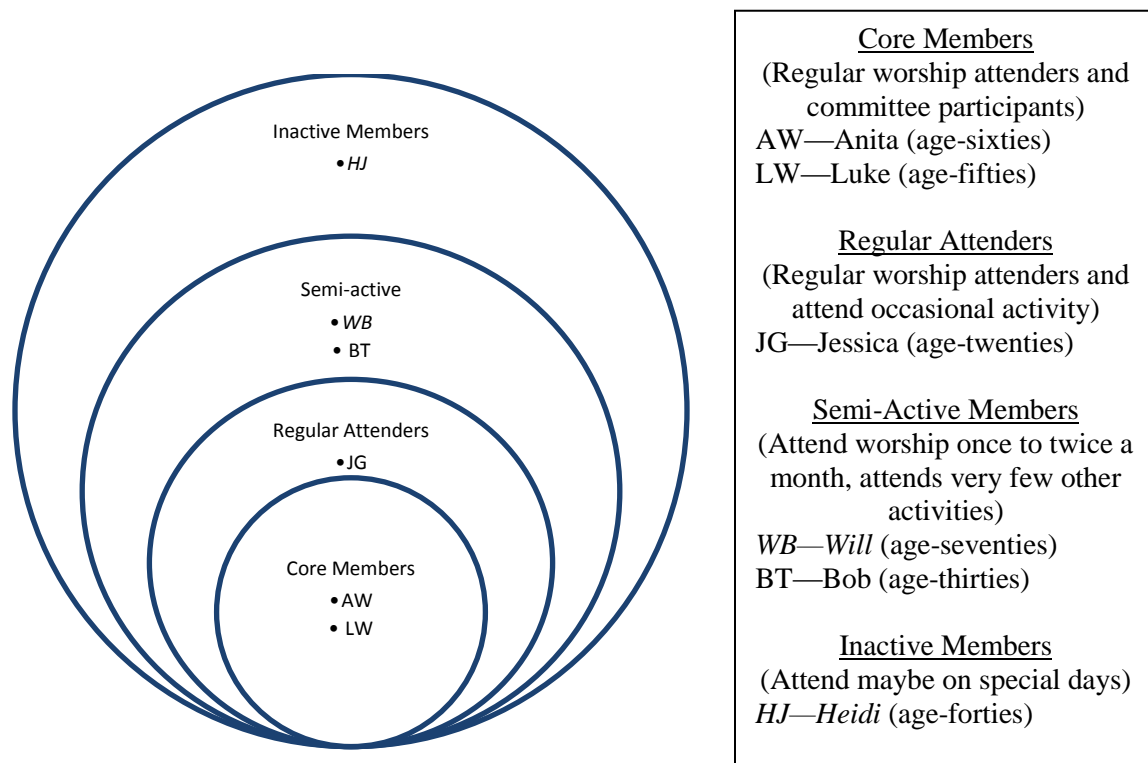


Figure 5.6. Participant Profile of Baseline Interviews

Heidi participated in the baseline interview and was hopeful to participate in the interventions, as well as attend worship more often. She and her family, however, did not attend worship during this time or participate in any of the activities. Will participated in the baseline interview, but indicated that he was not interested in participating in any interventions. Therefore these two were substituted for the end-line interviews. Figure 5.7 illustrates the participants' profile of the end-line interviews. Italicized initials and names represent those who were substituted.

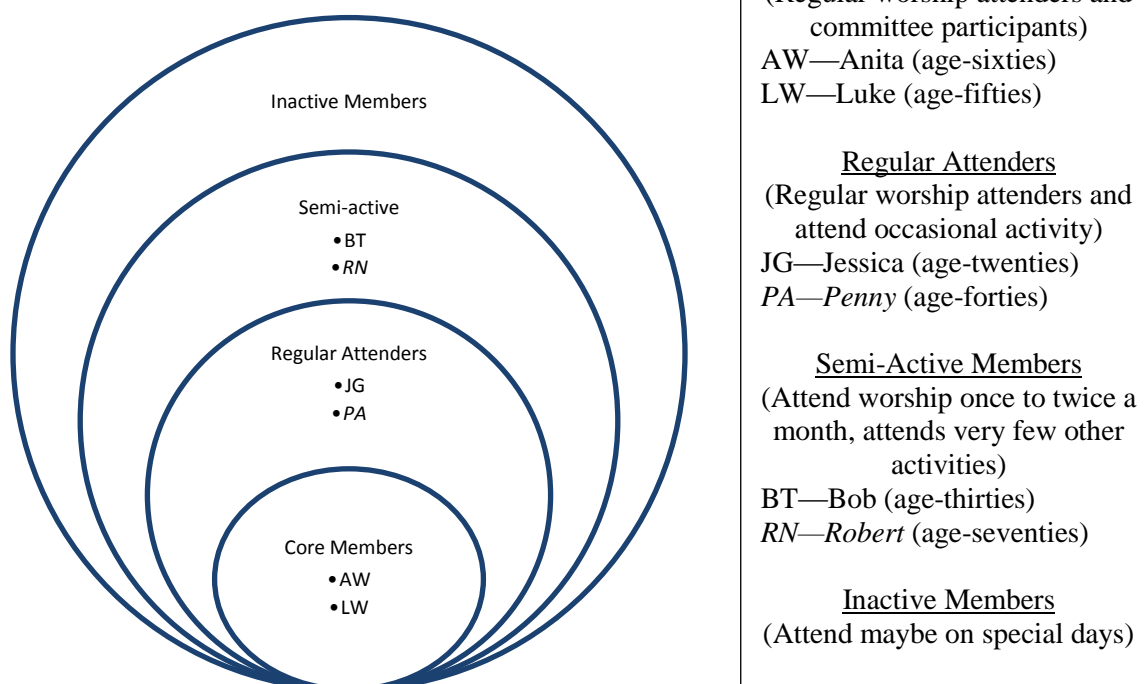


Figure 5.7. Participant Profile of End-line Interviews

Focus Group Participants

Five focus groups were conducted after each intervention with the exception of intervention four: monthly 100th Anniversary celebrations and the additional intervention: carnival fund-raiser for the vertical lift being held together for the sake of richer conversation with multiple generations and ages. These five focus groups and their participants are presented in table 5.12.

Table 5.12. Participant Profile of Focus Groups

Intervention One: New Member/Mentor Program

FG1-1 Bob—male, in twenties
 FG1-2 Lori—female, in twenties
 FG1-3 Greg—male, in forties
 FG1-4 Tina—female, in twenties
 FG1-5 JoAnn—female, in fifties
 FG1-6 Sue—female, in forties
 FG1-7 Kristi—female, in sixties

Intervention Two: God’s Work, Our Hands-Part Two

FG2-1 Ralph—male, in fifties
 FG2-2 Hank—male, in fifties
 FG2-3 Sharon—female, in fifties
 FG2-4 Cheryl—female, in thirties
 FG2-5 Gary—male, in seventies
 FG2-6 Madeline—female, in forties

Intervention Three: Half-Time Conversations between Services

FG3-1 Carmen—female, in thirties
 FG3-2 Rachel—female, in twenties
 FG3-3 Linda—female, in fifties
 FG3-4 Kathryn—female, in seventies
 FG3-5 Julie—female, in forties
 FG3-6 Roger—male, in seventies

**Intervention Four: Monthly 100th Anniversary Celebrations and
Additional: Carnival Fund Raiser for Vertical Lift**

FG4/A-1 Trisha—female, in twenties
 FG4/A-2 Grace—female, in forties
 FG4/A-3 Chris—male, in sixties
 FG4/A-4 Lynette—female, in twenties
 FG4/A-5 Beth—female, in seventies
 FG4/A-6 Robin—female, in eighties
 FG4/A-7 Amy—female, in seventies
 FG4/A-8 Harriet—female, in forties
 FG4/A-9 Dawson—male, in seventies

Table 5.12. Participant Profile of Focus Groups (Cont.)

Intervention Five: Home Visits to Younger, Less Involved Families

FG5-1 Shirley—female, in thirties

FG5-2 Deb—female, in forties

FG5-3 Amy—female, in forties

FG5-4 Cindy—female, in thirties

FG5-5 Hope—female, in forties

FG5-6 Ted—male, in forties

FG5-7 Emma—female, in thirties

FG5-8 Marie—female, in thirties

FG5-9 Kelsey—female, in thirties

FG5-10 Gerald—male, in thirties

FG5-11 Claire—female, in thirties

FG5-12 Matt—male, in thirties

FG5-13 Hilary—female, in thirties

Forty-one people participated in the five focus groups. Thirty-two participants are female and eleven are male. All age decades from twenties through eighties were represented as follows: five in their twenties, twelve in the thirties, eleven in the forties, four in their fifties, two in their sixties, six in their seventies, and one in her eighties. These participant profiles, added with the quantitative profiles, provided total data received from 182 Tree of Life Lutheran members. Data from 119 participants in the baseline and end-line questionnaires are now examined.

Quantitative Data

Introduction

The quantitative data in this modified PAR research project were gathered from the baseline and end-line questionnaires. The 119 baseline questionnaire responses were coded with the calendar birthday of the month and birth year, which provided the opportunity for potential matches with the ninety end-line questionnaires. It became apparent that the calendar birthday of the month was confused with the month in which

one was born. Corrected adjustments were made with careful analysis using both data from baseline and end-line questionnaires. A comparison of these data provided the appropriate month and year in order for the coding to be corrected. Sixty-seven pairs were matched as a result. Therefore, both independent t-tests and paired t-tests were used to compare the overall means of the two data samples.

These independent t-tests and paired t-tests utilized particular questions from the questionnaires in order to measure if Tree of Life Lutheran's sense of connectedness in their inter-relationships and their awareness of them grew (see appendix C). Both bonding (within the congregation) and bridging capital (reaching out into the community) were sought to measure these inter-relationships. Question twenty-five (Q25), along with questions forty through forty-four (Q40-Q44), were primarily utilized as standard measurements for a sense of connectedness of inter-relationships in the congregation in order to measure bonding capital. Q44 does indicate relationships with community and world, however I chose to group this question with its preceding questions, as it indicates focus on self or community.

First, an overall sense of connectedness of inter-relationships, utilizing the standard questions of Q25 and Q40-Q44, was measured with independent t-tests and paired t-tests. Second, an overall perception of connectedness of the congregation's inter-relationships was measured in questions eighteen through twenty-two (Q18-Q22). Third, Q25 and Q40-Q44 were measured in combination with various intervening variables, such as: age, gender, income level, educational level, church background, frequency of worship attendance, use of media and technology, location of one's work, location of one's shopping preference, and community involvement. This section utilized the

questionnaire's demographic questions of one through thirteen (Q1-Q13). An ANOVA test was additionally used to compare the three age groups (19-39, 40-64, and 65-93) in order to determine if there was a difference. Fourth, bonding capital was further measured through questions twenty-three (Q23), twenty-four (Q24), and twenty-six (Q26), as individuals reflected upon friends, reasons for coming, and the level of trust. Fifth, bridging capital, a sense of the congregation's connection in the community, was also measured through questions twenty-seven through thirty-one (Q27-Q31) in order to further understand individual responses. Finally, additional end-line responses of Q46-Q56 were analyzed as a measurement of the research project and future implications of it. The results of tests and tables are illustrated and described in the tables that follow.

Overall Sense of Connectedness

Independent t-tests utilizing all participants of the baseline and end-line were conducted to measure the overall sense of connectedness of Tree of Life Lutheran. Q25 and Q40-Q44 were utilized as a standard base of measurement for the bonding capital, which illuminates the inter-relationships within those who participate in the congregation.

Table 5.13. Independent t-test Results for Overall Sense of Connectedness¹

Q25, Q40-Q44 Overall Sense of Connectedness	\bar{x}_b (N _b)	\bar{x}_e (N _e)	df	t-value	p
Q25 I feel connected to others in this church.	4.14 (114)	4.22 (87)	199	-.749	.455
Q40 Integrated Family or Group Made Up of Several Cliques	4.86 (113)	5.08 (85)	196	-1.027	.306
Q41 Very Closely Connected or Very Disconnected	5.11 (113)	5.35 (85)	196	-1.546	.124
Q42 Open-minded People Who Listen or Close-minded People Who Do Not Listen	5.12 (113)	5.38 (85)	196	-1.477	.141
Q43 Practice What They Believe or Tend to Say One Thing and Do Opposite	5.29 (113)	5.67 (85)	196	-2.402	.017
Q44 Care Deeply About Community/World or Care Only About Themselves	5.61 (113)	5.89 (85)	196	-1.990	.048

Q25 Circle the number that best describes your strength of agreement from (5) Strongly Agree to (1) Strongly Disagree.

Q40-Q44 Color in the circle of agreement that best represents your evaluation of Tree of Life from (7) High Community, (4) Neutral), to (1) Low Community.

The independent t-test's results, as shown in table 5.13, did not indicate differences that were statistically significant in Q25 and Q40-Q42. These did, however, all illustrate a consistent increase in mean from the baseline to end-line. There were differences that were statistically significant in Q43 and Q44. A higher sense of community in Q43 (practice what they believe) was indicated from the baseline (mean = 5.29) to the

¹ Interpretive Key for independent t-test results:

N is the total number of responses.

\bar{x} is the mean.

Df is the degrees of freedom.

b and e subscripts: baseline and end-line data, respectively.

p is the probability ($T \leq t$) one tail. With bold font: statistically significant change ($p < .05$).

end-line (mean = 5.67); $t_{(196)} = -2.402$, $p = .017$. A higher sense of community in Q44 (care deeply about community/world) was also indicated from the baseline (mean = 5.61) to the end-line (mean = 5.89); $t_{(196)} = -1.990$, $p = .048$.

Paired t-tests were also conducted utilizing sixty-seven participants from the baseline and end-line questionnaires. The difference that was statistically significant is shown in table 5.14.

Table 5.14. Paired t-test Results for Overall Sense of Connectedness

	Q44 Sense of Connectedness	$\bar{x}_b (N_b)$	$\bar{x}_e (N_e)$	df	t-value	p
	Q44 Care Deeply About Community/World or Care Only About Themselves	5.59 (63)	5.90 (63)	62	-2.281	.026

Q44 Color in the circle of agreement that best represents your evaluation of Tree of Life from (7) High Community, (4) Neutral), to (1) Low Community.

The difference that was statistically significant was found in Q44 (care deeply about community/world) with a higher sense of community from the baseline (mean = 5.59) to the end-line (mean = 5.90); $t_{(62)} = -2.281$, $p = .026$.

The paired t-tests did not indicate differences that were statistically significant in Q25 and Q40-Q43. Q25 (feel connected to others in church) did illustrate a slight decrease from baseline (mean = 4.23) to end-line (mean = 4.19). Q40-Q42 did, however, illustrate a consistent increase in mean from the baseline to end-line questionnaires (see appendix K, table K.1). Despite one slight decrease in mean in the paired t-test, the overall sense of connectedness showed consistent growth in connectedness for Tree of Life Lutheran. I feel that if the project would have lasted for a longer duration more differences that were statistically significant would have occurred.

Perception/Awareness of Connectedness

Not only was an increase in overall connectedness sought in this research project, but also an increase in participants' awareness of their inter-relationships. This awareness or perception was measured in both independent and paired t-tests through Q18-Q22. No differences that were statistically significant occurred in Tree of Life's perception of their connectedness (see appendix L, table L.1). There was, however, a consistent increase in mean from baseline to end-line in four of these questions (Q18, Q20-Q22). Q19 (people greet and know me by name) had a slight decrease from baseline (mean = 3.38) to end-line (mean=3.37).

The paired t-tests, which were also utilized to measure the congregation's perception of connectedness, did reveal a difference that was statistically significant in Q20 (there are people who help me cope) as shown in table 5.15.

Table 5.15. Paired t-test Results for Overall Perception of Congregational Connectedness for Q20

Perception of Connectedness	$\bar{x}_b (N_b)$	$\bar{x}_e (N_e)$	df	t-value	p
Q20 People help me cope with daily struggles or difficult times in my life.	2.30 (63)	2.81 (63)	62	-2.395	.020

Circle the number that best describes your strength of agreement: Almost Always (4), Regularly (3), Sometimes (2), Seldom/Never (1), Don't Know (8)

Participants indicated a difference that was statistically significant in strength of agreement in Q20 finding congregational people help them cope with daily struggles or difficult times in life. This increase was indicated from the baseline (mean = 2.30) to the end-line (mean = 2.81); $t_{(62)} = -2.395$, $p = .020$. Q18 (people are welcoming) and Q19 (people greet and know me by name) both indicated a slight decrease in mean, whereas

Q21 (feel comfortable approaching others and having conversation) had a slight increase (see appendix L, table L.2).

Tree of Life Lutheran's perception (awareness) of their connectedness did not change as much as their measured sense of connectedness. Their perception indicates to me as their pastor that where the growth in their overall sense of connectedness occurred, there is still a deepening of the inter-relationships occurring. The difference that was statistically significant in Q20 of the paired t-test indicates we are beginning to deepen our inter-relationships, but still are in the midst of more to come. The congregation's sense of connectedness was also measured with the use of intervening variables.

Intervening Variables Affecting Sense of Connectedness

An intervening variable is one which, "refers to a characteristic or attribute of an individual or an organization that can be measured or observed and that varies among the people or organization being studied."² Age, gender, income level, educational level, church background, frequency of worship attendance, congregational involvement, use of media and technology, location of one's work, location of one's shopping preference, and community involvement were the intervening variables utilized in this research project. These variables were utilized to compare the sense of connectedness first within the congregational inter-relationships and second with the community.

² Creswell, *Research Design*, 250.

Intervening Variable #1: Age Groups

Three age groups (19-39, 40-64, and 65-93) were first measured with an ANOVA utilizing Q25 (I feel connected to others in this church) to measure if there was a difference in levels of connectedness between the groups.

Table 5.16. ANOVA Test Comparing Level of Connection between Age Groups for Q25 in Baseline Questionnaire

Q25 I feel connected to others in this church.	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p
Between Groups	4.807	2	2.404	4.639	.011
Within Groups	102.068	197	.518		
Total	106.875	199			

There was a difference that was statistically significant, as shown in table 5.16, in levels of connectedness between the three age groups, $F_{(199)} = 4.639$, $p = .011$. The *Games-Howell* test indicated a difference that was statistically significant in the baseline questionnaire between the two age groups of 19-39 (\bar{x}_b mean = 3.87) and 65-93 (\bar{x}_b mean = 4.37). There were no differences that were statistically significant between age groups in the end-line. The *middle-age* group did not have any differences that were statistically significant with either the younger or older age groups in the baseline or end-line. This group did have a difference worth noting in that they were less connected than the *older* group as well. This was indicated in the baseline questionnaire between the two age groups of 40-64 (\bar{x}_b mean = 4.14) and 65-93 (\bar{x}_b mean = 4.37). Independent and paired t-tests were also utilized to measure the effect of the intervening variable of age upon a sense of connectedness (Q25, Q40-Q44).

Table 5.17. Independent t-test Results of Connectedness Comparing Age Groups

Q25, Q40-Q44 Sense of Connectedness	$\bar{x}_b (N_b)$	$\bar{x}_e (N_e)$	df	t-value	p
Q25 I feel connected to others in this church.					
Younger (Ages 19-39)-	3.87 (23)	4.05 (20)	41	-1.127	.420
Middle-Age (Ages 40-64)-	4.14 (63)	4.18 (45)	106	-.233	.816
Older (Ages 65-93)-	4.37 (27)	4.45 (20)	47	-.477	.636
Q40 Integrated Family or Group Made Up of Several Cliques					
Younger (Ages 19-39)-	4.57 (23)	5.40 (20)	41	-1.838	.073
Middle-Age (Ages 40-64)-	4.87 (62)	4.78 (45)	106	.295	.769
Older (Ages 65-93)-	5.11 (27)	5.45 (20)	45	-.780	.440
Q41 Very Closely Connected or Very Disconnected					
Younger (Ages 19-39)-	5.13 (23)	5.65 (20)	41	-1.619	.113
Middle-Age (Ages 40-64)-	5.05 (62)	5.20 (45)	106	-.690	.492
Older (Ages 65-93)-	5.26 (27)	5.40 (20)	45	-.413	.681
Q42 Open-minded People Who Listen or Close-minded People Who Do Not Listen					
Younger (Ages 19-39)-	5.13 (23)	5.60 (20)	41	-1.216	.231
Middle-Age (Ages 40-64)-	5.18 (62)	5.27 (45)	106	-.387	.700
Older (Ages 65-93)-	5.04 (27)	5.40 (20)	45	-1.034	.307
Q43 Practice What They Believe or Tend to Say One Thing and Do Opposite					
Younger (Ages 19-39)-	5.04 (23)	5.50 (20)	41	-1.127	.266
Middle-Age (Ages 40-64)-	5.32 (62)	5.71 (45)	106	-1.881	.063
Older (Ages 65-93)-	5.41 (27)	5.75 (20)	45	-1.171	.248

Table 5.17 Independent t-test Results of Connectedness Comparing Age Groups (cont.)

Q44 Care Deeply About Community/World or Care Only About Themselves					
Younger (Ages 19-39)-	5.43 (23)	5.80 (20)	41	-1.227	.227
Middle-Age (Ages 40-64)-	5.53 (62)	5.91 (45)	106	-1.916	.058
Older (Ages 65-93)-	5.96 (27)	5.95 (20)	45	.046	.964

Q25 Circle the number that best describes your strength of agreement from (5) Strongly Agree to (1) Strongly Disagree.

Q40-Q44 Color in the circle of agreement that best represents your evaluation of Tree of Life from (7) High Community, (4) Neutral), to (1) Low Community.

No differences that were statistically significant were found in the independent t-tests that measured the mean of the three age groups, as shown in table 5.17. I still chose to present these data, nevertheless, due to the interesting patterns that emerged between the standard questions. Q25 (feel connected to others in this church), Q43 (practice what they believe), and Q44 (care deeply about community/world) showed a consistent pattern of increase from the baseline to the end-line mean from the *younger* (19-39), *middle-age* (40-65), and *older* (65-93). This indicated that the older one is the more connected one feels, as seen in this example of Q25 with the baseline of the *younger* group (mean = 3.87), *middle-age* group (mean = 4.14), and *older* age group (mean = 4.37). This was consistent with the end-line of the *younger* age group (mean = 4.05), *middle-age* group (mean = 4.18), and *older* age group (mean = 4.45). There was also a consistent increase in mean from the baseline to end-line measurements between the three age groups in these questions.

Q40 (integrated, woven together family), Q41 (very closely connected to one another), and Q42 (open-minded people willing to listen to others) indicated a different

pattern, where the end-line mean indicated more growth in the *younger* age group (19-39) than in the *middle-age* group (40-65). Q40 shows this pattern for the *younger* age group with an increase from the baseline (mean = 4.57) to end-line (mean = 5.40). The *middle-age* group, on the other hand, indicated a slight decrease from the baseline (mean = 4.87) to end-line (mean = 4.78). Paired t-tests further illustrate this pattern of growth in the *younger* age group with differences that were statistically significant, as shown in table 5.18.

Table 5.18. Paired t-test Results of Connectedness Comparing Age Groups

Q40, Q41, and Q44 Sense of Connectedness	\bar{x}_b (N _b)	\bar{x}_e (N _e)	df	t-value	p
Q40 Integrated Family or Group Made Up of Several Cliques					
Younger (Ages 19-39)-	4.50 (14)	5.36 (14)	13	-2.917	.012
Middle-Age (Ages 40-64)-	5.09 (35)	4.80 (35)	34	.913	.373
Older (Ages 65-93)-	4.86 (14)	5.29 (14)	13	-.945	.362
Q41 Very Closely Connected or Very Disconnected					
Younger (Ages 19-39)-	5.07 (14)	5.71 (14)	13	-3.798	.002
Middle-Age (Ages 40-64)-	4.97 (35)	5.20 (35)	34	-1.016	.317
Older (Ages 65-93)-	5.43 (14)	5.36 (14)	13	.268	.793
Q44 Care Deeply About Community/World or Care Only About Themselves					
Younger (Ages 19-39)-	5.57 (14)	5.79 (14)	13	-1.147	.272
Middle-Age (Ages 40-64)-	5.49 (35)	5.97 (35)	34	-2.115	.042
Older (Ages 65-93)-	5.86 (14)	5.86 (14)	13	.000	1.000

Q40-Q44 Color in the circle of agreement that best represents your evaluation of Tree of Life from (7) High Community, (4) Neutral), to (1) Low Community.

Q40 (integrated, woven together family) and Q41 (very closely connected) both indicated differences that were statistically significant in an indicated higher level of community.

Those who were in the *younger* age group (19-39) had a significantly higher mean in Q40 from the baseline (mean = 4.50) to the end-line (mean = 5.36); $t_{(13)} = -2.917$, $p = .012$.

Those who were in the *younger* age group (19-39) also had a significantly higher mean level in Q41 from the baseline (mean = 5.07) to the end-line (mean = 5.71); $t_{(13)} = -3.798$, $p = .002$. The *middle-age* group (40-64) indicated a difference that was statistically significant as well in Q44 (care deeply about community/world) with a higher mean from the baseline (mean = 5.49) to the end-line (mean = 5.97); $t_{(13)} = -2.115$, $p = .042$

(Complete table can be found in appendix M).

The growth of the *younger* and *middle-age* groups' sense of connectedness is of important value in this research project and the life of Tree of Life Lutheran. Nearly thirty-five percent of ELCA members nationally are over the age of sixty-five compared to about fifteen percent of the United States population.³ Although Tree of Life Lutheran is less than the ELCA's percentage of those over the age of sixty-five with twenty-two percent, we are still above the national percentage. A growth from the baseline to the end-line questionnaire indicates that we are moving in the right direction of functioning as a congregation of all ages. The baseline may have indicated that the older you are, the more connected you are; but, the end-line brought significant growth that a sense of connectedness was developing for the *younger* and *middle-age* groups.

³ Kenneth W. Inskeep, "Priorities in Context: Sustainability and Membership Growth: A Background Paper for the Future Directions Table," (Research and Evaluation, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, January 2016), 12.

Intervening Variable #2: Gender

A second intervening variable of gender was measured with independent t-tests and paired t-tests. The independent t-tests revealed that men and women are both more connected, depending on the particular question. All data are shown in table 5.19.

Table 5.19. Independent t-test Results of Connectedness Comparing Gender

Q25, Q40-Q44 Sense of Connectedness	$\bar{x}_b (N_b)$	$\bar{x}_e (N_e)$	df	t-value	p
Q25 I feel connected to others in this church.					
Male-	4.11 (28)	4.19 (26)	52	-.454	.652
Female-	4.15 (86)	4.23 (61)	145	-.623	.534
Q40 Integrated Family or Group Made Up of Several Cliques					
Male-	5.11 (28)	5.16 (25)	51	-.134	.894
Female-	4.78 (85)	5.05 (61)	143	.1043	.298
Q41 Very Closely Connected or Very Disconnected					
Male-	5.11 (28)	5.24 (25)	51	-.398	.693
Female-	5.11 (85)	5.40 (61)	143	-1.617	.108
Q42 Open-minded People Who Listen or Close-minded People Who Do Not Listen					
Male-	5.14 (28)	5.08 (25)	51	.177	.860
Female-	5.12 (85)	5.50 (61)	143	-1.968	.051
Q43 Practice What They Believe or Tend to Say One Thing and Do Opposite					
Male-	5.18 (28)	5.68 (25)	51	-1.583	.120
Female-	5.33 (85)	5.67 (61)	143	-1.845	.067
Q44 Care Deeply About Community/World or Care Only About Themselves					
Male-	5.68 (28)	5.80 (25)	51	-.464	.645
Female-	5.59 (85)	5.93 (61)	143	-2.023	.045

Q25 Circle the number that best describes your strength of agreement from (5) Strongly Agree to (1) Strongly Disagree.

Q40-Q44 Color in the circle of agreement that best represents your evaluation of Tree of Life from (7) High Community, (4) Neutral, to (1) Low Community.

The baseline mean for Q25 (feel connected to others) and Q43 (practice what they believe) showed that women feel more connected. Q40 (integrated, woven together family), Q 42 (open-minded people), and Q44 (care deeply about community/world) showed that men feel more connected according to the baseline. The end-line mean for Q41-Q44 indicated shifts in which the genders felt more connected. Q43 (practice what they believe) illustrated a shift from the women to the men feeling more connected, with an increase in men's baseline (mean = 5.33) to the end-line (mean = 5.67). The end-line mean for Q 41 (closely connected to one another), Q42 (open-minded people willing to listen) and Q44 (care deeply about community/world) illustrated, however, a shift from the men to the women feeling more connected. Q44 indicated a difference that was statistically significant for women with a higher mean level from the baseline (mean = 5.59) to the end-line (mean = 5.93); $t_{(143)} = -2.023$, $p = .045$.

The paired t-tests further illustrated the change in level of connectedness for women with differences that were statistically significant (see table 5.20).

Table 5.20. Paired t-test Results of Connectedness Comparing Gender

Q25, Q40-Q44 Sense of Connectedness		\bar{x}_b (N_b)	\bar{x}_e (N_e)	df	t-value	p
Q25 I feel connected to others in this church.						
Male-		4.19 (16)	4.13 (16)	15	.436	.669
Female-		4.25 (48)	4.21 (48)	47	.496	.622
Q40 Integrated Family or Group Made Up of Several Cliques						
Male-		5.19 (16)	4.75 (16)	15	.835	.417
Female-		4.81 (47)	5.13 (47)	46	-1.389	.172

Table 5.20. Paired t-test Results of Connectedness Comparing Gender (cont.)

Q41 Very Closely Connected or Very Disconnected						
Male-	5.19 (16)	4.88 (16)	15	.689	.502	
Female-	5.06 (47)	5.51 (47)	46	-4.105	.000	
Q42 Open-minded People Who Listen or Close-minded People Who Do Not Listen						
Male-	5.06 (16)	4.75 (16)	15	.675	.510	
Female-	5.15 (47)	5.64 (47)	46	-2.944	.005	
Q43 Practice What They Believe or Tend to Say One Thing and Do Opposite						
Male-	5.25 (16)	5.31 (16)	15	-.148	.884	
Female-	5.43 (47)	5.77 (47)	46	-2.864	.006	
Q44 Care Deeply About Community/World or Care Only About Themselves						
Male-	5.50 (16)	5.69 (16)	15	-.565	.580	
Female-	5.62 (47)	5.98 (47)	46	-2.406	.020	

Q25 Circle the number that best describes your strength of agreement from (5) Strongly Agree to (1) Strongly Disagree.

Q40-Q44 Color in the circle of agreement that best represents your evaluation of Tree of Life from (7) High Community, (4) Neutral), to (1) Low Community.

Differences that were statistically significant in Q41-Q44 indicated a higher level of connectedness for females. Q41 (closely connected to one another) indicated a difference that was statistically significant for women with a higher mean level from the baseline (mean = 5.06) to the end-line (mean = 5.51); $t_{(46)} = -4.105$, $p < .000$. Q42 (open-minded people willing to listen) also indicated a difference that was statistically significant for women with a higher mean level from the baseline (mean = 5.15) to the end-line (mean = 5.64); $t_{(46)} = -2.944$, $p = .005$. Q43 (people who practice what they believe) indicated a

difference that was statistically significant for women as well with a higher mean level from the baseline (mean = 5.43) to the end-line (mean = 5.77); $t_{(46)} = -2.964$, $p = .006$. Q44 (care deeply about community/world) indicated a difference that was statistically significant for women with a higher mean level from the baseline (mean = 5.62) to the end-line (mean = 5.98); $t_{(46)} = -2.406$, $p = .020$.

A decrease in the men's level of connectedness was worth noting in Q25 and Q40-Q42 (see table 5.20). A lower level of connectedness was indicated in: Q25 (feel connected with others in the church) from the baseline (mean = 4.19) to the end-line (mean = 4.13); Q40 (integrated, woven together family) from the baseline (mean = 5.19) to the end-line (4.75); Q41 (closely connected to one another) from the baseline (mean = 5.19) to the end-line (mean = 4.88); and, Q42 (open-minded people who are willing to listen) from the baseline (mean = 5.06) to the end-line (mean = 4.75). This was important to note with other qualitative data, which indicated a difference in how men connect, that will be discussed later.

I chose to show all data from both the independent t-tests and paired t-tests because of these patterns that developed, especially the men. Tree of Life Lutheran has a staff of three full-time positions and five part-time positions. Only two men are part of this staff in part-time positions. I am aware as researcher and pastor that we women often lead, preach, and teach in ways that are easier for females to connect. Discovering through this quantitative data that the men actually decreased in their sense of connectedness in the project indicates to our staff that we are in need of our men teaching us through what ways they come to the congregation and/or connect. The qualitative data

further illuminates this need, as the men teach why and how they come to others in the congregation.

Intervening Variable #3: Income Level

A third intervening variable of income level was measured with independent t-tests and paired t-tests in order to find if there was an effect upon the sense of connectedness individuals felt, as seen in table 5.21.

Table 5.21. Independent t-test Results of Connectedness Comparing Income Levels

Q25 and Q43 Sense of Connectedness	$\bar{x}_b (N_b)$	$\bar{x}_e (N_e)$	df	t- value	p
Q25 I feel connected to others in this church.					
\$40,000 or Less-	4.46 (13)	4.36 (11)	22	.327	.747
\$40,001-\$80,000-	4.00 (42)	4.00 (25)	65	.000	1.000
\$80,001 or More-	4.16 (38)	4.30 (33)	69	-.822	.414
Q43 Practice What They Believe or Tend to Say One Thing and Do Opposite					
\$40,000 or Less-	5.62 (13)	6.00 (11)	22	-.917	.369
\$40,001-\$80,000-	5.10 (41)	5.32 (25)	64	-.665	.508
\$80,001 or More-	5.32 (38)	6.03 (33)	69	-3.242	.002

Q25 Circle the number that best describes your strength of agreement from (5) Strongly Agree to (1) Strongly Disagree.

Q43 Color in the circle of agreement that best represents your evaluation of Tree of Life from (7) High Community, (4) Neutral), to (1) Low Community.

Three levels of annual income were grouped together for measurement: *\$40,000 or less*, *\$40,001-\$80,000*, and *\$80,001 or more*. Each income level indicated a consistent increase in mean from the baseline to the end-line with the exception of Q25 (feeling connected to others in church). The *\$40,000 or less* level indicated in Q25 a decrease in mean from the baseline (mean = 4.46) to end-line (mean = 4.36). The *\$40,001 to \$80,000* level indicated

no change at all in Q25 from the baseline (mean = 4.00) to the end-line (4.00). There was also not one dominant income level that indicated a higher level of connectedness throughout all five questions, as the highest level varied between each question (see appendix N). Q43 (practice what they believe) was the only indication of a difference that was statistically significant for the *\$80,001 or more* income level with a higher sense of community from the baseline (mean = 5.32) to the end-line (mean = 6.03); $t_{(69)} = -3.242$, $p = .002$.

Paired t-tests of comparing the intervening variable of income level did not indicate any differences that were statistically significant between the end-line and the baseline, as shown in table 5.22.

Table 5.22. Paired t-test Results of Connectedness Comparing Income Levels

Q25, Q40-Q44 Sense of Connectedness	$\bar{x}_b (N_b)$	$\bar{x}_e (N_e)$	df	t- value	p
Q25 I feel connected to others in this church.					
\$40,000 or Less-	4.57 (7)	4.43 (7)	6	1.000	.356
\$40,001-\$80,000-	4.12 (25)	4.04 (25)	24	.700	.491
\$80,001 or More-	4.28 (25)	4.28 (25)	24	.000	1.000
Q40 Integrated Family or Group Made Up of Several Cliques					
\$40,000 or Less-	5.43 (7)	5.57 (7)	6	-.132	.899
\$40,001-\$80,000-	4.58 (24)	4.92 (24)	23	-.848	.405
\$80,001 or More-	5.20 (25)	5.00 (25)	24	.795	.435
Q41 Very Closely Connected or Very Disconnected					
\$40,000 or Less-	5.57 (7)	5.57 (7)	6	.000	1.000
\$40,001-\$80,000-	5.00 (24)	5.46 (24)	23	-2.037	.053
\$80,001 or More-	5.12 (25)	5.24 (25)	24	-.647	.524

Table 5.22. Paired t-test Results of Connectedness Comparing Income Levels (cont.)

Q42 Open-minded People Who Listen or
Close-minded People Who Do Not Listen

\$40,000 or Less-	5.57 (7)	5.29 (7)	6	.281	.788
\$40,001-\$80,000-	4.88 (24)	5.42 (24)	23	-2.013	.056
\$80,001 or More-	5.40 (25)	5.56 (25)	24	-.811	.425

Q43 Practice What They Believe or
Tend to Say One Thing and Do Opposite

\$40,000 or Less-	5.71 (7)	5.71 (7)	6	.000	1.000
\$40,001-\$80,000-	5.38 (24)	5.58 (24)	23	-1.045	.307
\$80,001 or More-	5.40 (25)	5.84 (25)	24	-1.792	.086

Q44 Care Deeply About
Community/World or
Care Only About Themselves

\$40,000 or Less-	6.14 (7)	5.86 (7)	6	.603	.569
\$40,001-\$80,000-	5.63 (24)	6.04 (24)	23	-1.856	.076
\$80,001 or More-	5.48 (25)	5.92 (25)	24	-1.844	.078

Q25 Circle the number that best describes your strength of agreement from (5) Strongly Agree to (1) Strongly Disagree.

Q40-Q44 Color in the circle of agreement that best represents your evaluation of Tree of Life from (7) High Community, (4) Neutral), to (1) Low Community.

There may not have been differences that were statistically significant, but a pattern developed with the *\$40,000 or less* income level. This level indicated a lower or same mean between the baseline and end-line in five out of the six questions, as indicated in: Q25 (connected to others in the church) from the baseline (mean = 4.57) to the end-line (mean = 4.43); Q41 (closely connected to one another) from the baseline (mean = 5.57) to the end-line (mean = 5.57); Q42 (open-minded people who are willing to listen) from the baseline (mean = 5.57) to the end-line (mean = 5.29); Q43 (practice what they believe) from the baseline (mean = 5.71) to the end-line (mean = 5.71); and, Q44 (care deeply about community) from the baseline (mean = 6.14) to the end-line (mean = 5.86).

These patterns were important to note throughout the data of these paired t-tests in order to discover that we at Tree of Life Lutheran are functioning in a way that does not allow for those in the *\$40,000 or less* income level to connect well. There were no intentional questions in the baseline or end-line interviews to further explore this area, but we must begin exploring through conversation and further research to find out more why this pattern occurred. This further research could indicate to us ways in which we can alter our ways of behaving, so that more of lower incomes would feel connected.

Intervening Variable #4: Educational Level

A fourth intervening variable of educational level was measured next with independent t-tests and paired t-tests in order to find if there was an effect upon the sense of connectedness individuals felt within the congregation. Table 5.23 shows the results of the independent t-tests with differences that were statistically significant.

Table 5.23. Independent t-test Results of Connectedness Comparing Educational Levels

	Q42, Q43, and Q44 Sense of Connectedness	$\bar{x}_b (N_b)$	$\bar{x}_e (N_e)$	df	t-value	p
Q42 Open-minded People Who Listen or Close-minded People Who Do Not Listen						
High school Graduate or Less-		5.40 (25)	5.10 (10)	33	.633	.531
Tech., Assoc., or College Graduate-		5.10 (50)	5.32 (41)	89	-.875	.384
Master's or Doctorate-		4.82 (22)	5.64 (28)	48	-2.687	.010
Q43 Practice What They Believe or Tend to Say One Thing and Do Opposite						
High school Graduate or Less-		5.56 (25)	5.40 (10)	33	.406	.687
Tech., Assoc., or College Graduate-		5.28 (50)	5.66 (41)	89	-1.592	.115
Master's or Doctorate-		4.95 (22)	5.93 (28)	48	-3.462	.001

Table 5.23. Independent t-test Results of Connectedness Comparing Educational Levels (cont.)

Q44 Care Deeply About Community/World or Care Only About Themselves					
High school Graduate or Less-	5.88 (25)	5.70 (10)	33	.444	.660
Tech., Assoc., or College Graduate-	5.50 (50)	5.90 (41)	89	-1.898	.061
Master's or Doctorate-	5.36 (22)	6.00 (28)	48	-2.305	.026

Q40-Q44 Color in the circle of agreement that best represents your evaluation of Tree of Life from (7) High Community, (4) Neutral), to (1) Low Community.

Three educational levels were grouped together in order to measure its effect upon each group's sense of connectedness: *high school graduate or less*; *technical training, associates degree, or college graduate*; and, *master's or doctorate* (see appendix O for complete table). There were no differences that were statistically significant in the first two educational levels: *high school graduate or less* and *technical training, associates degree, or college graduate*. The educational level of *master's or doctorate* did indicate a difference that was statistically significant in Q42-Q44. All data of these tests are presented in order to see the patterns that developed. Q42 (open-minded people who are willing to listen) illustrated a higher mean from the baseline (mean = 4.82) to the end-line (mean = 5.64); $t_{(48)} = -2.687$, $p = .010$. Q43 (practice what they believe) illustrated a higher mean from the baseline (mean = 4.95) to the end-line (mean = 5.93); $t_{(48)} = -3.462$, $p = .001$. Q44 (care deeply about community/world) also illustrated a higher mean from the baseline (mean = 5.36) to the end-line (mean = 6.00); $t_{(48)} = -2.305$, $p = .026$.

A different pattern of response for the lowest educational level of *high school graduate or less* was found in contrast to the higher educational level. All six questions of Q25 and Q40-44 for the *high school graduate or less* group indicated a decrease, although not statistically significant, in the level of connectedness and community (see

appendix O): Q25 (connected to others in the church) from the baseline (mean = 4.23) to the end-line (mean = 4.08); Q40 (integrated, woven together family) from the baseline (mean = 5.20) to the end-line (mean = 5.00); Q41 (closely connected to one another) from the baseline (mean = 5.12) to the end-line (mean = 5.00); Q42 (open-minded people who are willing to listen) from the baseline (mean = 5.40) to the end-line (mean = 5.10); Q43 (practice what they believe) from the baseline (mean = 5.56) to the end-line (mean = 5.40); and, Q44 (care deeply about community/world) from the baseline (mean = 5.88) to the end-line (mean = 5.70). This pattern will be grouped together with the previous intervening variable of income level with its similar pattern in order to be discussed later.

Paired t-tests of comparing the intervening variable of educational level remained consistent with the independent t-tests, as it indicated the decrease of mean for the *high school graduate or less* level, as well as for the *master's or doctorate* level in Q25 and Q40. It did, however, indicate a difference that was statistically significant in measurement for the second level of education of *technical, associates, or college graduate*. These data are presented in table 5.24.

Table 5.24. Paired t-test Results of Connectedness Comparing Educational Levels

Q25, Q40-Q44 Sense of Connectedness	$\bar{x}_b (N_b)$	$\bar{x}_e (N_e)$	df	t-value	p
Q25 I feel connected to others in this church.					
High school Graduate or Less-	4.30 (10)	4.20 (10)	9	1.000	.343
Tech., Assoc., or College Graduate-	4.16 (31)	4.13 (31)	30	.273	.787
Master's or Doctorate-	4.33 (12)	4.25 (12)	11	.561	.586

Table 5.24. Paired t-test Results of Connectedness Comparing Educational Levels (cont.)

Q40 Integrated Family or Group Made Up of Several Cliques						
High school Graduate or Less-	5.33 (9)	5.11 (9)	8	.244	.813	
Tech., Assoc., or College Graduate-	4.83 (30)	4.90 (30)	29	-.223	.825	
Master's or Doctorate-	4.92 (13)	4.85 (13)	12	.192	.851	
Q41 Very Closely Connected or Very Disconnected						
High school Graduate or Less-	5.33 (9)	5.33 (9)	8	.000	1.000	
Tech., Assoc., or College Graduate-	5.03 (30)	5.33 (30)	29	-2.340	.026	
Master's or Doctorate-	4.92 (13)	5.23 (13)	12	-1.298	.219	
Q42 Open-minded People Who Listen or Close-minded People Who Do Not Listen						
High school Graduate or Less-	5.44 (9)	5.22 (9)	8	.268	.796	
Tech., Assoc., or College Graduate-	5.13 (30)	5.40 (30)	29	-1.610	.118	
Master's or Doctorate-	5.08 (13)	5.62 (13)	12	-1.849	.089	
Q43 Practice What They Believe or Tend to Say One Thing and Do Opposite						
High school Graduate or Less-	5.89 (9)	5.44 (9)	8	.936	.377	
Tech., Assoc., or College Graduate-	5.43 (30)	5.70 (30)	29	-1.490	.147	
Master's or Doctorate-	5.08 (13)	5.92 (13)	12	-2.668	.020	
Q44 Care Deeply About Community/World or Care Only About Themselves						
High school Graduate or Less-	5.78 (9)	5.67 (9)	8	.217	.834	
Tech., Assoc., or College Graduate-	5.60 (30)	5.93 (30)	29	-1.904	.067	
Master's or Doctorate-	5.38 (13)	6.08 (13)	12	-1.996	.069	

Q25 Circle the number that best describes your strength of agreement from (5) Strongly Agree to (1) Strongly Disagree.

Q40-Q44 Color in the circle of agreement that best represents your evaluation of Tree of Life from (7) High Community, (4) Neutral, to (1) Low Community.

A difference that was statistically significant was found in Q41 (closely connected to one another), as *technical*, *associate*, or *college graduate* level illustrated a higher sense of

community from the baseline (mean = 5.03) to the end-line (mean = 5.33); $t_{(29)} = -2.340$, $p = .026$. Another difference that was statistically significant was found in Q43 (practice what they believe), where the *master's or doctorate* education level illustrated a higher mean from the baseline (mean = 5.08) to the end-line (mean = 5.92); $t_{(12)} = -2.668$, $p = .020$.

A different pattern response with the lowest educational level of *high school graduate or less* was also consistent with the results of the independent t-tests of this intervening variable, hence the importance of viewing all data from these tests. All six questions of Q25 and Q40-44 indicated a decrease, although not statistically significant, in the level of connectedness and community for the *high school graduate or less* level.

This pattern, coupled with the results of the intervening variable of income level, underscore the importance of further research for our congregation in these areas. Something in our life together and the ways in which we behave are indicating an environment that is friendlier for those of higher income and education to connect. There were no questions, unfortunately, in the qualitative interviews to help us further discover reasons for this pattern.

Intervening Variable #5: Childhood Church Background

A fifth intervening variable of childhood church background was measured with independent t-tests and paired t-tests in order to measure if there was an effect upon the sense of connectedness with those who did not grow up Lutheran and those who did. Two groups were formed from the responses of Q11 asking in what childhood church, if any, one grew up. All who responded Lutheran were obviously placed in the *Lutheran* group. All other responses were placed in the *Other Than Lutheran* group.

There were no differences that were statistically significant; however, a consistent pattern was formed in the baseline, but this changed in the end-line (see appendix P, table P.1). All baseline responses indicated that if one grew up *Lutheran* then they felt a bigger sense of connection, whereas all who grew up *Other Than Lutheran* felt a smaller sense of connection. This pattern did not remain consistent with the end-line responses. Q25, Q42-44 did not follow the pattern of the baseline responses, as the mean of the *Other Than Lutheran* group was larger than the *Lutheran* group. Q25 (feel connected to others in this church) illustrated this as the *Other Than Lutheran* group had a higher level of strength of agreement (mean = 4.23) than the *Lutheran* group (mean = 4.22). This was also evident in Q42 (open-minded people who are willing to listen), as the *Other Than Lutheran* group had a higher level of strength of agreement (mean = 5.45) than the *Lutheran* group (mean = 4.31). This was evident in Q43 (practice what they believe), as the *Other Than Lutheran* group had a higher level of strength of agreement (mean = 5.72) than the *Lutheran* group (mean = 5.62). This was evident as well in Q44 (care deeply about community/world), as the *Other Than Lutheran* group had a higher level of strength of agreement (mean = 5.93) than the *Lutheran* group (mean = 5.85).

Paired t-tests illustrated this change in pattern from the baseline to the end-line as well, as they showed differences that were statistically significant for the *Other Than Lutheran* group in Q41, Q43, and Q44, as presented in table 5.25.

Table 5.25. Paired t-test Results of Connectedness Comparing Childhood Church Background

Q41, Q43, and Q44 Sense of Connectedness	$\bar{x}_b (N_b)$	$\bar{x}_e (N_e)$	df	t-value	p
Q41 Very Closely Connected or Very Disconnected					
Other Than Lutheran-	5.13 (24)	5.54 (24)	23	-2.095	.047
Lutheran-	5.08 (39)	5.23 (39)	38	-.771	.446
Q43 Practice What They Believe or Tend to Say One Thing and Do Opposite					
Other Than Lutheran-	5.38 (24)	5.83 (24)	23	-2.114	.046
Lutheran-	5.38 (39)	5.54 (39)	38	-.863	.393
Q44 Care Deeply About Community/World or Care Only About Themselves					
Other Than Lutheran-	5.58 (24)	6.04 (24)	23	-2.114	.046
Lutheran-	5.59 (39)	5.82 (39)	38	-1.270	.212

Q41-Q44 Color in the circle of agreement that best represents your evaluation of Tree of Life from (7) High Community, (4) Neutral), to (1) Low Community.

This difference that was statistically significant was found in Q41 (closely connected to one another), as the *Other Than Lutheran* group had a higher sense of community from the baseline (mean = 5.13) to the end-line (mean = 5.54); $t_{(23)} = -2.095$, $p = .047$. Another difference that was statistically significant was found in Q43 (practice what they believe), where the *Other Than Lutheran* group illustrated a higher mean from the baseline (mean = 5.38) to the end-line (mean = 5.83); $t_{(23)} = -2.114$, $p = .046$. The final difference that was statistically significant was found in Q44 (care about community/world), where the *Other Than Lutheran* group illustrated a higher mean from the baseline (mean = 5.58) to the end-line (mean = 6.04); $t_{(23)} = -2.114$, $p = .046$.

The *Other Than Lutheran* group benefitted in significant growth of connectedness through this research project (see appendix P, table P.2 for complete table). These data indicate that Tree of Life Lutheran creates an environment where multiple backgrounds of faith can find a sense of belonging. These also indicate that there is not an *old guard* of those who have always been Lutheran and a *new guard* of those who come from other backgrounds. Much qualitative data also highlights that Tree of Life is a very welcoming church. Perhaps these data are the result of that welcoming spirit.

Intervening Variable #6: Length of Congregational Membership

A sixth intervening variable of length of congregational membership was measured as well with independent t-tests and paired t-tests in order to find if the length of one's membership affected the sense of connectedness. The longer one has been a member of Tree of Life Lutheran, the more connected one feels according to the mean of the baseline questionnaire for Q25, Q40-Q44 (see appendix Q, table Q.1). This pattern, however, was broken with two differences that were statistically significant found in Q43 and Q44 with the *Member for 20 Years or Less* group, as presented in table 5.26.

Table 5.26. Independent t-test Results of Connectedness Comparing Length of Congregational Membership

Q43-Q44 Sense of Connectedness	$\bar{x}_b (N_b)$	$\bar{x}_e (N_e)$	df	t-value	p
Q43 Practice What They Believe or Tend to Say One Thing and Do Opposite					
Member for 20 Years or Less-	5.04 (45)	5.72 (36)	79	-2.762	.007
Member for 21 to 40 Years-	5.23 (35)	5.53 (30)	63	-1.063	.292
Member for 41 Plus Years-	5.73 (30)	5.72 (18)	46	.038	.970
Q44 Care Deeply About Community/World or Care Only About Themselves					
Member for 20 Years or Less-	5.33 (45)	5.89 (36)	79	-2.283	.025
Member for 21 to 40 Years-	5.51 (35)	5.87 (30)	63	-1.556	.125
Member for 41 Plus Years-	6.07 (30)	5.89 (18)	46	.626	.537

Q43-Q44 Color in the circle of agreement that best represents your evaluation of Tree of Life from (7) High Community, (4) Neutral, to (1) Low Community.

The first difference that was statistically significant was found in Q43 (practice what they believe), where the *Member for 20 Years or Less* group illustrated a higher mean from the baseline (mean = 5.04) to the end-line (mean = 5.72); $t_{(79)} = -2.762$, $p = .007$. This end-line (mean = 5.72) measurement of the *Member for 20 Years or Less* group was higher than the *Member for 21 to 40 Years* group (mean = 5.53) and the same with the *Member for 41 Plus Years* group (mean = 5.72). The second difference that was statistically significant was found in Q44 (care about community/world), where the *Member for 20 Years or Less* group illustrated a higher mean from the baseline (mean = 5.33) to the end-line (mean = 5.89); $t_{(79)} = -2.283$, $p = .025$. This end-line (mean = 5.89) measurement of the *Member for 20 Years or Less* group was higher than the *Member for 21 to 40 Years* group (mean = 5.87) and the same with the *Member for 41 Plus Years* group (mean = 5.89).

Patterns were also discovered in the results of paired t-tests that did indicate a difference that was statistically significance for the *Member for 21 to 40 Years* group, as well as another for the *Member for 20 Years or Less* group, as presented in table 5.27.

Table 5.27. Paired t-test Results of Connectedness Comparing Length of Congregational Membership

Q41, Q42, and Q44 Sense of Connectedness	$\bar{x}_b (N_b)$	$\bar{x}_e (N_e)$	df	t-value	p
Q41 Very Closely Connected or Very Disconnected					
Member for 20 Years or Less-	4.86 (28)	5.14 (28)	27	-1.247	.223
Member for 21 to 40 Years-	5.04 (23)	5.57 (23)	22	-3.425	.002
Member for 41 Plus Years-	5.75 (12)	5.42 (12)	11	.771	.457
Q42 Open-minded People Who Listen or Close-minded People Who Do Not Listen					
Member for 20 Years or Less-	4.96 (28)	5.32 (28)	27	-1.441	.161
Member for 21 to 40 Years-	5.09 (23)	5.52 (23)	22	-2.328	.030
Member for 41 Plus Years-	5.58 (12)	5.42 (12)	11	.266	.795
Q44 Care Deeply About Community/World or Care Only About Themselves					
Member for 20 Years or Less-	5.32 (28)	5.82 (28)	27	-2.049	.050
Member for 21 to 40 Years-	5.57 (23)	6.00 (23)	22	-2.647	.015
Member for 41 Plus Years-	6.25 (12)	5.92 (12)	11	1.173	.266

Q41-Q44 Color in the circle of agreement that best represents your evaluation of Tree of Life from (7) High Community, (4) Neutral), to (1) Low Community.

Again, the longer one has been a member of Tree of Life Lutheran, the more connected one feels according to the mean of the baseline questionnaire for Q25, Q41-Q44 with the exception of Q40 (see appendix Q, table Q.2). This pattern, however, was broken with three differences that were statistically significant for the *Member for 21 to 40 Years*

group and one difference that was statistically significant for the *Member for 20 Years or Less* group.

The first difference that was statistically significant was found in Q41 (very closely connected to one another), where the *Member for 21 to 40 Years* group illustrated a higher mean from the baseline (mean = 5.04) to the end-line (mean = 5.57); $t_{(22)} = -3.425$, $p = .002$. This end-line (mean = 5.57) measurement of the *Member for 21 to 40 Years* group was higher than the *Member for 20 Years or Less* group (mean = 5.14) and the *Member for 41 Plus Years* group (mean = 5.42). The second difference that was statistically significant was found in Q42 (open-minded people who are willing to listen to others), where the *Member for 21 to 40 Years* group illustrated a higher mean from the baseline (mean = 5.09) to the end-line (mean = 5.52); $t_{(22)} = -2.328$, $p = .030$. This end-line (mean = 5.52) measurement of the *Member for 21 to 40 Years* group was higher than the *Member for 20 Years or Less* group (mean = 5.32) and the *Member for 41 Plus Years* group (mean = 5.42). The third and fourth differences that were statistically significant were found in Q 44 (care deeply about community/world). The *Member for 20 Years or Less* group illustrated a higher mean in Q44 from the baseline (mean = 5.32) to the end-line (mean = 5.82); $t_{(27)} = -2.049$, $p = .050$. The *Member for 21 to 40 Years* group illustrated a higher mean as well in Q44 from the baseline (mean = 5.57) to the end-line (mean = 6.00); $t_{(22)} = -2.647$, $p = .015$.

A consistent pattern of remaining the same or decreasing from the baseline to end-line mean occurred for the *Member for 41 Years Plus* group. This was evident in all questions: Q25 (feel connected to others in church) from baseline (mean = 4.42) to end-line (mean = 4.42); Q40 (integrated, woven together family) from baseline (mean = 5.75)

to end-line (mean = 5.33); Q41 (closely connected to one another) from baseline (mean = 5.75) to end-line (mean = 5.42); Q42 (open-minded people who are willing to listen) from baseline (mean = 5.58) to end-line (mean = 5.42); Q43 (practice what they believe) from baseline (mean = 6.00) to end-line (mean = 5.83); and, Q44 (care about community/world) from baseline (mean = 6.25) to end-line (mean = 5.92). The end-line mean of this group did remain comparable to the other two age groups.

The independent t-tests and paired t-tests revealed patterns of increased growth in connectedness for both the *Member for 20 Years or Less* group and the *Member for 21 to 40 Years* group. The importance of this growth underscores a necessary shift of all members, no matter the length of belonging, feeling a sense of connection with one another and the congregation. It also reiterates that Tree of Life Lutheran does not have an issue with an *old guard* or “This is the way we’ve always done it here” mentality. The qualitative data also point to this shift, as newer members articulate a welcoming spirit and the encouragement of older members.

Intervening Variable #7: Average Worship Attendance

A seventh intervening variable of average worship attendance was measured with independent t-tests and paired t-tests in order to discover if the frequency of worship attendance does indeed impact one’s level of connectedness at Tree of Life Lutheran. No surprises were found, as those who do worship more frequently indicated a higher level of connectedness. Those who attend worship *every week* consistently had a higher mean of connectedness than those who attend *two to three times per month*. Those who, likewise, attend *two to three times per month* consistently had a higher mean than those who attend worship *once a month or less* (see appendix R, table R.1). The two

differences that were statistically significant found in these independent t-tests were consistent with the *every week* worshipping group indicating a higher level of connectedness, as found in Q43 and Q44, which is presented in table 5.28.

Table 5.28. Independent t-test Results of Connectedness Comparing Average Worship Attendance

	Q43-Q44 Sense of Connectedness	$\bar{x}_b (N_b)$	$\bar{x}_e (N_e)$	df	t-value	p
Q43 Practice What They Believe or Tend to Say One Thing and Do Opposite						
Every Week-		5.50 (56)	5.89 (47)	101	-2.102	.038
2 to 3 Times Per Month-		5.22 (32)	5.74 (27)	57	-1.936	.058
Once a Month or Less-		4.92 (25)	4.40 (10)	33	1.029	.311
Q44 Care Deeply About Community/World or Care Only About Themselves						
Every Week-		5.73 (56)	6.15 (47)	101	-2.271	.025
2 to 3 Times Per Month-		5.66 (32)	5.67 (27)	57	-.040	.968
Once a Month or Less-		5.28 (25)	5.30 (10)	33	.050	.960

Q43-Q44 Color in the circle of agreement that best represents your evaluation of Tree of Life from (7) High Community, (4) Neutral), to (1) Low Community.

The first difference that was statistically significant was found in Q43 (practice what they believe), where the *every week* worshipping group illustrated a higher mean from the baseline (mean = 5.50) to the end-line (mean = 5.89); $t_{(101)} = -2.102$, $p = .038$. The second difference that was statistically significant for this group was found in Q44 (care deeply about community/world), as this group illustrated a higher mean from the baseline (mean = 5.73) to the end-line (mean = 6.15); $t_{(101)} = -2.271$, $p = .025$.

The paired t-tests, also comparing the impact of average worship upon connectedness, differed from the pattern of the *every week* worshipping group having the

highest level of connectedness. The *two to three times per month* worshipping group had a difference that was statistically significant, as well as the *every week* group, which is presented in table 5.29.

Table 5.29 Paired t-tests Results of Connectedness Comparing Average Worship Attendance

Q25, Q40-Q44 Sense of Connectedness	\bar{x}_b (N _b)	\bar{x}_e (N _e)	df	t- value	p
Q25 I feel connected to others in this church.					
Every Week-	4.31 (39)	4.23 (39)	38	.829	.412
2 to 3 Times Per Month-	4.19 (16)	4.25 (16)	15	-.436	.669
Once a Month or Less-	3.83 (6)	3.67 (6)	5	.542	.611
Q40 Integrated Family or Group Made Up of Several Cliques					
Every Week-	5.08 (37)	5.08 (37)	36	.000	1.000
2 to 3 Times Per Month-	4.65 (17)	4.82 (17)	16	-.447	.661
Once a Month or Less-	4.17 (6)	5.33 (6)	5	-1.659	.158
Q41 Very Closely Connected or Very Disconnected					
Every Week-	5.22 (37)	5.35 (37)	36	-.682	.500
2 to 3 Times Per Month-	4.82 (17)	5.24 (17)	16	-2.135	.049
Once a Month or Less-	4.83 (6)	5.67 (6)	5	-1.185	.289
Q42 Open-minded People Who Listen or Close-minded People Who Do Not Listen					
Every Week-	5.22 (37)	5.57 (37)	36	-1.396	.171
2 to 3 Times Per Month-	5.00 (17)	5.29 (17)	16	-1.319	.206
Once a Month or Less-	4.67 (6)	5.17 (6)	5	-.696	.518
Q43 Practice What They Believe or Tend to Say One Thing and Do Opposite					
Every Week-	5.54 (37)	5.86 (37)	36	-1.707	.097
2 to 3 Times Per Month-	5.24 (17)	5.65 (17)	16	-1.951	.069
Once a Month or Less-	4.83 (6)	5.00 (6)	5	-.349	.741

Table 5.29. Paired t-tests Results of Connectedness Comparing Average Worship Attendance (cont.)

Q44 Care Deeply About Community/World or Care Only About Themselves						
Every Week-	5.68 (37)	6.08 (37)	36	-2.160	.038	
2 to 3 Times Per Month-	5.29 (17)	5.65 (17)	16	-1.852	.083	
Once a Month or Less-	5.67 (6)	5.83 (6)	5	-.237	.822	

Q25 Circle the number that best describes your strength of agreement from (5) Strongly Agree to (1) Strongly Disagree.

Q40-Q44 Color in the circle of agreement that best represents your evaluation of Tree of Life from (7) High Community, (4) Neutral, to (1) Low Community.

The first difference that was statistically significant occurred as the *every week* worshipping group illustrated a higher mean in Q44 (care deeply for community/world) from the baseline (mean = 5.68) to the end-line (mean = 6.08); $t_{(36)} = -2.160$, $p = .038$. This remained consistent with the pattern developed in the independent t-tests of average worship attendance. This pattern was different, however, with the second difference that was statistically significant found in Q41 (closely connected to one another). The *two to three times per month* worshipping group illustrated a higher mean in Q41 from the baseline (mean = 4.82) to the end-line (mean = 5.24); $t_{(16)} = -2.135$, $p = .049$. No single dominant worshipping group continued to have the highest mean for level of connectedness in the baseline, as illustrated in: Q25 (connected with others in this church) with the *two to three times per month* worshipping group having the highest (mean = 4.25); Q40 (integrated, woven together family) with the *once a month or less* worshipping group having the highest (mean = 5.33); and, Q 41 (closely connected to one another) with the *once a month or less* worshipping group have the highest again (mean = 5.67).

Average weekly worship is no longer the norm for several of Tree of Life Lutheran's families. Participants who attend worship almost weekly were 57% in the baseline and 50% in the end-line. Those who attend worship two to three times a month were 35% in the baseline and 28% in the end-line. These percentages illustrate the reality that we cannot assume that members receive invitations, announcements, and information through the week to week contact. The interventions of this project worked from this new reality, striving to connect in different ways through reaching out. The statistically significant differences illustrate that we had some success in reaching out differently, helping the *two to three times per month* worshipping group feel more connected.

Intervening Variable #8: Congregational Involvement

Other congregational involvement was measured as an intervening variable seeking to determine if any particular activities affected one's level of connectedness more than others, as presented in table 5.30.

Table 5.30. Independent t-test Results of Connectedness Due to Involvement in Congregational Activities

Congregational Activities Which Strengthen Connectedness	\bar{x}_b (N_b)	\bar{x}_e (N_e)	df	t-value	p
Q32 Worship	4.09 (110)	4.05 (86)	194	.370	.712
Q33 Fellowship	3.71 (112)	3.76 (83)	193	-.350	.726
Q34 Bible Studies	3.58 (86)	3.63 (70)	154	-.255	.799
Q35 Children's Church Activities	3.76 (80)	3.92 (59)	137	-.963	.337
Q36 Volunteering Time and Talents	4.16 (106)	4.00 (80)	184	1.318	.189
Q37 Special Church Events	4.05 (104)	4.00 (82)	185	.393	.694
Q38 Receiving Newsletter, E-mails, or Letters	3.94 (110)	3.77 (82)	190	1.337	.183
Q39 Social Media	3.47 (97)	3.49 (70)	165	-.070	.944

Please circle the strength of your agreement from 5 to 1 with the following statements: Very High (5), Very Low (1), Do Not Participate (8).

There were no differences that were statistically significant found in the involvement in congregational activities. There were, however, decreases and increases in the mean from baseline to end-line that created a noteworthy distinction, hence why all data is presented.

Decreases in the mean occurred for the following congregational activities: Q32

(worship) with a slight decrease from baseline (mean = 4.09) to end-line (mean = 4.05); Q36 (volunteering time and talents) with a decrease from baseline (mean = 4.16) to end-line (mean = 4.00); Q37 (special church events) with a slight decrease from baseline (mean = 4.05) to end-line (mean = 4.00); and, Q38 (receiving newsletter, e-mails, or letter) with a larger decrease from baseline (mean = 3.94) to end-line (3.77).

Increases in the mean occurred for the following congregational activities: Q33

(fellowship) with a slight increase from baseline (mean = 3.71) to the end-line (mean = 3.76); Q34 (Bible studies) with a small increase from baseline (mean = 3.58) to the end-line (mean = 3.63); Q35 (children's church activities) with a larger increase from baseline (mean = 3.76) to the end-line (mean = 3.92); and lastly, Q39 (social media) with a slight increase from the baseline (mean = 3.47) to the end-line (mean = 3.49). These decreases and increases, although not statistically significant, created two different types of activities. Those activities, which brought forth a slight decrease, were the larger group activities of worship, special events, etc. The other activities, which brought forth some increase, were those of smaller groups where conversation and listening took place more easily, such as: fellowship, Bible studies, children's church activities, and social media. This discovery is important to note with this project's research question of building inter-relationships through *intentional small acts of conversation and listening*.

This discovery was also highlighted as being statistically significant in the paired t-test, as presented in table 5.31.

Table 5.31. Paired t-test Results of Connectedness Due to Involvement in Congregational Activities

Congregational Activities Which Strengthen Connectedness	$\bar{x}_b (N_b)$	$\bar{x}_e (N_e)$	df	t-value	p
Q32 Worship	4.24 (63)	4.02 (63)	62	1.947	.056
Q33 Fellowship	3.77 (64)	3.89 (64)	63	-.917	.363
Q34 Bible Studies	3.67 (54)	4.20 (54)	53	-1.985	.052
Q35 Children's Church Activities	3.84 (44)	4.52 (44)	43	-2.511	.016
Q36 Volunteering Time and Talents	4.33 (60)	4.22 (60)	59	.926	.358
Q37 Special Church Events	4.24 (59)	4.24 (59)	58	.000	1.000
Q38 Receiving Newsletter, E-mails, or Letters	3.98 (63)	3.86 (63)	62	.798	.428
Q39 Social Media	3.52 (56)	3.88 (56)	55	-1.482	.144

Please circle the strength of your agreement from 5 to 1 with the following statements: Very High (5), Very Low (1), Do Not Participate (8).

The pattern of larger activities versus small group activities remained consistent in the paired t-tests. The larger group activities of worship, volunteering time and talents, special church events, etc. decreased in mean. The smaller group activities of fellowship, Bible studies, children's church activities, and social media all increased in mean from the baseline to the end-line. A statistically significant difference even occurred in Q35 (children's church activities) from the baseline (mean = 3.84) to the end-line (mean = 4.52); $t_{(43)} = -2.511$, $p = .016$. Q34 (Bible studies) was slightly short of being statistically significant with an increase from the baseline (mean = 3.67) to the end-line (mean = 4.20); $t_{(53)} = -1.985$, $p = .052$.

These data remain consistent with connectedness being built through *intentional small acts of conversation and listening*, as argued in this research project. They also remain consistent with the qualitative data, as participants expressed a need for conversation and small groups. I was surprised by the decrease for worship, but I also

realize that the end-line survey was conducted during mid to end of summer, which is Tree of Life's lowest attendance of the year.

Intervening Variable #9: Use of Media and Technology

The use of media and technology was taken into consideration as an intervening variable for this research project in order to analyze if it had a decreasing impact on Tree of Life's community, as was previously argued in chapter three. This argument that more use of media and technology means less connection did appear at first to hold true for Tree of Life's participants in this study, as there are three differences that were statistically significant for the group that indicated they use media and technology *Less Than Two Hours*, as presented in table 5.32.

Table 5.32. Independent t-test Results of Connectedness Comparing Use of Technological Device, Television, Radio, and/or Computer

	Q41-Q43 Sense of Connectedness	\bar{x}_b (N_b)	\bar{x}_e (N_e)	df	t-value	p
Q41 Very Closely Connected or Very Disconnected						
	Less Than 2 Hours-	4.87 (39)	5.46 (24)	61	-2.353	.022
	2 to 5 Hours-	5.19 (57)	5.29 (56)	111	-.418	.677
	6 to 10 Hours-	5.35 (17)	5.60 (5)	20	-.417	.681
Q42 Open-minded People Who Listen or Close-minded People Who Do Not Listen						
	Less Than 2 Hours-	5.03 (39)	5.75 (24)	61	-2.828	.006
	2 to 5 Hours-	5.09 (57)	5.21 (56)	111	-.528	.598
	6 to 10 Hours-	5.47 (17)	5.40 (5)	20	.111	.913

Table 5.32. Independent t-test Results of Connectedness Comparing Use of Technological Device, Television, Radio, and/or Computer (cont.)

Q43 Practice What They Believe or Tend to Say One Thing and Do Opposite						
Less Than 2 Hours-	5.15 (39)	5.71 (24)	61	-2.154	.035	
2 to 5 Hours-	5.23 (57)	5.64 (56)	111	-1.878	.063	
6 to 10 Hours-	5.82 (17)	5.80 (5)	20	.050	.961	

Q41-Q43 Color in the circle of agreement that best represents your evaluation of Tree of Life from (7) High Community, (4) Neutral, to (1) Low Community.

These differences that were statistically significant were indicated in Q41 (closely connected to one another), Q42 (open-minded people who are willing to listen to others), and Q43 (practice what they believe). The first difference that was statistically significant in Q41 for the *Less Than Two Hours* group was indicated from the baseline (mean = 4.87) to the end-line (mean = 5.46); $t_{(61)} = -2.353$, $p = .022$. The second difference that was statistically significant in Q42 for this group was indicated from the baseline (5.03) to the end-line (5.75); $t_{(61)} = -2.828$, $p = .006$. The last difference that was statistically significant in Q43 was indicated from the baseline (mean = 5.15) to the end-line (mean = 5.71); $t_{(61)} = -2.154$, $p = .035$.

These differences that were statistically significant, however, only showed which group had the largest increase from the baseline to the end-line. Another group, which uses media and technology *Six to Ten Hours*, illustrated that they have a higher level of connectedness in Q41 and Q43 despite the differences that were statistically significant of the *Less Than Two Hours* group. Q41 (closely connected to one another) highlighted this fact, as the end-line mean for *Less Than Two Hours* group was 5.46 and the end-line mean for the *Six to Ten Hours* was 5.60. Q43 also highlighted this fact, as the end-line mean for *Less Than Two Hours* group was 5.71 and the end-line mean for the *Six to Ten*

Hours was 5.80. Q44 was also consistent with this pattern as the end-line mean for *Less Than Two Hours* group was 5.79, the end-line mean for the *Two to Five Hours* group was 5.89, and the end-line mean for the *Six to Ten Hours* group was 6.40 (see appendix R, table R.1). These responses contradicted the previous argument that the more one uses technology and media, the less one is connected.

Paired t-tests, also comparing the use of media and technology, illustrated how this contrast began to break down. The baseline mean for the *Six to Ten Hours* group was the highest out of the groups in three out of the six questions (Q25, Q43, and Q44), but all six responses decreased from the baseline to the end-line, as seen in table 5.33.

Table 5.33. Paired t-test Results of Connectedness Comparing Use of Technological Device, Television, Radio, and/or Computer

Q25, Q40-Q44 Sense of Connectedness	\bar{x}_b (N _b)	\bar{x}_e (N _e)	df	t-value	p
Q25 I feel connected to others in this church.					
Less Than 2 Hours-	4.28 (25)	4.12 (25)	24	1.163	.256
2 to 5 Hours-	4.14 (29)	4.21 (29)	28	-.812	.424
6 to 10 Hours-	4.40 (10)	4.30 (10)	9	.557	.591
Q40 Integrated Family or Group Made Up of Several Cliques					
Less Than 2 Hours-	4.72 (25)	5.28 (25)	24	-2.113	.045
2 to 5 Hours-	4.71(28)	4.82 (28)	27	-.316	.754
6 to 10 Hours-	5.90 (10)	5.00 (10)	9	1.304	.225
Q41 Very Closely Connected or Very Disconnected					
Less Than 2 Hours-	4.80 (25)	5.56 (25)	24	-4.106	.000
2 to 5 Hours-	5.11 (28)	5.21 (28)	27	-.769	.449
6 to 10 Hours-	5.80 (10)	5.20 (10)	9	1.000	.343

Table 5.33. Paired t-test Results of Connectedness Comparing Use of Technological Device, Television, Radio, and/or Computer (cont.)

Q42 Open-minded People Who Listen or Close-minded People Who Do Not Listen						
Less Than 2 Hours-	5.16 (25)	5.64 (25)	24	-2.071	.049	
2 to 5 Hours-	4.93 (28)	5.18 (28)	27	-1.126	.270	
6 to 10 Hours-	5.60 (10)	5.50 (10)	9	.139	.893	
Q43 Practice What They Believe or Tend to Say One Thing and Do Opposite						
Less Than 2 Hours-	5.28 (25)	5.68 (25)	24	-2.000	.057	
2 to 5 Hours-	5.21 (28)	5.57 (28)	27	-1.780	.086	
6 to 10 Hours-	6.10 (10)	5.80 (10)	9	.709	.496	
Q44 Care Deeply About Community/World or Care Only About Themselves						
Less Than 2 Hours-	5.36 (25)	5.96 (25)	24	-3.000	.006	
2 to 5 Hours-	5.54 (28)	5.79 (28)	27	-1.158	.257	
6 to 10 Hours-	6.30 (10)	6.10 (10)	9	.557	.591	

Q25 Circle the number that best describes your strength of agreement from (5) Strongly Agree to (1) Strongly Disagree.

Q40-Q44 Color in the circle of agreement that best represents your evaluation of Tree of Life from (7) High Community, (4) Neutral, to (1) Low Community.

The *Less Than Two Hours* group did, however, remain consistent with the independent t-tests with differences that were statistically significant in growth of connectedness in four questions from the baseline to the end-line. The first difference that was statistically significant in Q40 (integrated, woven together family) for the *Less Than Two Hours* group was indicated from the baseline (mean = 4.72) to the end-line (mean = 5.28); $t_{(24)} = -2.113$, $p = .045$. The second difference that was statistically significant in Q41 (closely connected to one another) was indicated from the baseline (mean = 4.80) to the end-line (mean = 5.56); $t_{(24)} = -4.106$, $p < .001$. The third difference that was statistically

significant in Q42 (open-minded people who are willing to listen) for this group was indicated from the baseline (5.16) to the end-line (5.64); $t_{(24)} = -2.071$, $p = .049$. The fourth and final difference that was statistically significant in Q44 (care deeply about community/world) was indicated from the baseline (mean = 5.36) to the end-line (mean = 5.96); $t_{(24)} = -3.000$, $p = .006$.

The *Less Than Two Hours* group definitely benefitted the most from the interventions of this research project bringing significant growth in their sense of connectedness, as seen in table 5.33. Further research with the *Six to Ten Hours* group would be helpful for our congregation in order to discover what ways they originally felt a higher sense of connectedness and what changed for them in their decrease found in the end-line. Perhaps their decrease came about because all the interventions were face-to-face conversations and interactions. If this is their experience, then it is not surprising that they had a decreased sense of connectedness.

Intervening Variable #10: Location of One's Work

The location of one's work was taken into consideration as an intervening variable for this research project in order to analyze if it had a decreasing impact on Tree of Life's sense of connectedness for these particular members, as presented in table 5.34.

Table 5.34. Independent t-test Results of Connectedness Comparing Location of One's Work

Q25, Q40-Q44 Sense of Connectedness	$\bar{x}_b (N_b)$	$\bar{x}_e (N_e)$	df	t-value	p
Q25 I feel connected to others in this church.					
Work in Town-	4.11(72)	4.21 (52)	122	-.763	.447
Work out of Town-	3.89 (19)	3.93 (14)	31	-.112	.911
Q40 Integrated Family or Group Made Up of Several Cliques					
Work in Town-	4.87 (71)	5.00 (51)	120	-.469	.640
Work out of Town-	4.79 (19)	5.00 (14)	31	-.361	.721
Q41 Very Closely Connected or Very Disconnected					
Work in Town-	5.11 (71)	5.39 (51)	120	-1.641	.103
Work out of Town-	5.00 (19)	5.07 (14)	31	-.142	.888
Q42 Open-minded People Who Listen or Close-minded People Who Do Not Listen					
Work in Town-	5.01 (71)	5.33 (51)	120	-1.486	.140
Work out of Town-	5.37 (19)	5.36 (14)	31	.022	.982
Q43 Practice What They Believe or Tend to Say One Thing and Do Opposite					
Work in Town-	5.20 (71)	5.63 (51)	120	-2.117	.036
Work out of Town-	5.32 (19)	5.57 (14)	31	-.627	.535
Q44 Care Deeply About Community/World or Care Only About Themselves					
Work in Town-	5.54 (71)	5.94 (51)	120	-2.393	.018
Work out of Town-	5.58 (19)	5.64 (14)	31	-.153	.880

Q25 Circle the number that best describes your strength of agreement from (5) Strongly Agree to (1) Strongly Disagree.

Q40-Q44 Color in the circle of agreement that best represents your evaluation of Tree of Life from (7) High Community, (4) Neutral), to (1) Low Community.

Two differences that were statistically significant were indicated with the *work in town* group, who grew more in their sense of connectedness. The first difference that was statistically significant for the *work in town* group was found in Q43 (practice what they believe) from the baseline (mean = 5.20) to the end-line (mean = 5.63); $t_{(120)} = -2.117$, $p = .036$. The second difference that was statistically significant was found in Q44 (care deeply about community/world) from the baseline (mean = 5.54) to the end-line (mean = 5.94); $t_{(120)} = -2.393$, $p = .018$.

Not only did these differences that were statistically significant indicate that the *work in town* group felt a deeper sense of connectedness, but also there were consistent higher levels of mean for the *work out of town* group in Q25 (feel connected to others in church), Q40 (integrated, woven together family) and Q41 (very closely connected to one another). All data is shown in table 5.34. In contrast, two other responses in Q43 (practice what they believe) and Q44 (care deeply about community/world) did begin in the baseline with the *work out of town* group having a higher mean than the *work in town* group, but later switched in the end-line. Q43 began with the *work out of town* group in the baseline having a mean of 5.32 above the mean of the *work in town* group with 5.20. Q44 began with the *work out of town* group in the baseline having a mean of 5.58 above the mean of the *work in town* group with 5.54. Both of these switched in the end-line, as the *work in town* group increased their mean to higher than the *work out of town* group.

Paired-t tests remained consistent with the independent t-tests, revealing more differences that were statistically significant for the *work in town* group, as presented in table 5.35.

Table 5.35. Paired t-test Results of Connectedness Comparing Location of One's Work

Q41-Q44 Sense of Connectedness	$\bar{x}_b (N_b)$	$\bar{x}_e (N_e)$	df	t-value	p
Q41 Very Closely Connected or Very Disconnected					
Work in Town-	5.05 (40)	5.48 (40)	39	-2.978	.005
Work out of Town-	5.20 (10)	5.20 (10)	9	.000	1.000
Q42 Open-minded People Who Listen or Close-minded People Who Do Not Listen					
Work in Town-	5.03 (40)	5.50 (40)	39	-2.602	.013
Work out of Town-	5.40 (10)	5.00 (10)	9	.557	.591
Q43 Practice What They Believe or Tend to Say One Thing and Do Opposite					
Work in Town-	5.33 (40)	5.78 (40)	39	-2.683	.011
Work out of Town-	5.40 (10)	5.30 (10)	9	.208	.840
Q44 Care Deeply About Community/World or Care Only About Themselves					
Work in Town-	5.60 (40)	6.08 (40)	39	-2.967	.005
Work out of Town-	5.50 (10)	5.60 (10)	9	-.183	.859

Q40-Q44 Color in the circle of agreement that best represents your evaluation of Tree of Life from (7) High Community, (4) Neutral), to (1) Low Community.

Q40-Q43 in the paired t-test also began with the *work out of town* group having a higher mean than the *work in town* group, but this switched due to consistent increases in mean for the *work in town* group in their responses for four questions (see appendix T, table T.1 for complete table). These four differences that were statistically significant were found in Q41-Q44. The first difference that was statistically significant for the *work in town* group was found in Q41 (very closely connected to one another) from the baseline (mean = 5.05) to the end-line (mean = 5.49); $t_{(39)} = -2.978$, $p = .005$. The second difference that

was statistically significant was found in Q42 (open-minded people who are willing to listen) from the baseline (mean = 5.03) to the end-line (mean = 5.50); $t_{(39)} = -2.602$, $p = .013$. The third difference that was statistically significant was found in Q43 (practice what they believe) from the baseline (mean = 5.33) to the end-line (mean = 5.78); $t_{(39)} = -2.683$, $p = .011$. The fourth and final difference that was statistically significant was found in Q44 (care deeply about community/world) from the baseline (mean = 5.60) to the end-line (mean = 6.08); $t_{(39)} = -2.967$, $p = .005$.

These data indicated that the *work in town* group benefitted the most from the interventions and grew in their sense of connectedness throughout this research project. The *work out of town* group unfortunately remained the same or decreased in mean, with the exception of Q44, in response to the end-line questionnaire. These data are especially important for Tree of Life Lutheran to further explore as many members do daily commute to nearby cities for their work. Two participants indicated that church and their children's school activities are the only activities they experience in our small-town.

Intervening Variable #11: Location of One's Shopping Preferences

The location of one's shopping preferences was considered an intervening variable in order to analyze whether our increased mobility has affected our sense of community. Tree of Life Lutheran's town is located between two larger cities, where there are many more shopping amenities than in town. Both independent t-tests and paired t-tests were conducted to measure any effect found. A consistent increase in mean, which indicated growth in sense of connectedness, was found from the baseline to the end-line for both groups. The *shopping in town* group did remain consistently higher in mean over the *shopping out of town* group for both the end-line and end-line throughout

all the responses to the six questions (see appendix U, table U.1). There was one difference that was statistically significant found in Q43 (practice what they believe) from the baseline (mean = 5.51) to the end-line (mean = 5.95); $t_{(87)} = -2.266$, $p = .026$, as shown in table 5.36.

Table 5.36. Independent t-test Results of Connectedness Comparing Location of Shopping Preferences

Q43 Sense of Connectedness	$\bar{x}_b (N_b)$	$\bar{x}_e (N_e)$	df	t-value	p
Q43 Practice What They Believe or Tend to Say One Thing and Do Opposite					
Shopping In Town-	5.51 (51)	5.95 (38)	87	-2.266	.026
Shopping Out of Town-	5.08 (59)	5.46 (46)	103	-1.566	.120

Q43 Color in the circle of agreement that best represents your evaluation of Tree of Life from (7) High Community, (4) Neutral), to (1) Low Community.

This pattern, however, did not remain as consistent according to the results of the paired t-tests, as shown in table 5.37.

Table 5.37. Paired t-test Results of Connectedness Comparing Location of Shopping Preferences

Q41, Q42, Q44 Sense of Connectedness	$\bar{x}_b (N_b)$	$\bar{x}_e (N_e)$	df	t-value	p
Q41 Very Closely Connected or Very Disconnected					
Shopping In Town-	5.32 (28)	5.32 (28)	27	.000	1.000
Shopping Out of Town-	4.94 (34)	5.41 (34)	33	-4.144	.000
Q42 Open-minded People Who Listen or Close-minded People Who Do Not Listen					
Shopping In Town-	5.11 (28)	5.57 (28)	27	-1.437	.162
Shopping Out of Town-	5.12 (34)	5.32 (34)	33	-1.190	.242

Table 5.37. Paired t-test Results of Connectedness Comparing Location of Shopping Preferences (cont.)

Q44 Care Deeply About Community/World or Care Only About Themselves						
Shopping In Town-	5.57 (28)	5.96 (28)	27	-1.653	.110	
Shopping Out of Town-	5.59 (34)	5.88 (34)	33	-1.768	.086	

Q41-Q44 Color in the circle of agreement that best represents your evaluation of Tree of Life from (7) High Community, (4) Neutral, to (1) Low Community.

Both Q42 (open-minded people who are willing to listen) and Q44 (care deeply about community/world) began in the baseline with a higher mean for the *shopping out of town* group than the *shopping in town* group. The *shopping in town* group began in Q42 with a slightly lower level of connectedness (mean = 5.11) than the *shopping out of town* group (mean = 5.12). The *shopping in town* group, likewise began in Q44 with a slightly lower level of connectedness (mean = 5.57) than the *shopping out of town* group (mean = 5.59). These slight differences were cancelled out as both end-line responses were higher for the *shopping in town* group.

Generally the baseline responses for the *shopping in town* group had a higher mean, with the exception of Q41. Q41 (very closely connected to one another) indicated a higher level of connectedness with the *shopping out of town* group as statistically significant growth came from the baseline (mean = 4.94) to the end-line (mean = 5.41); $t_{(33)} = -4.144, p < .001$.

This research project was able to reach the *shopping out of town* group in order to bring more connectedness, at least in response to Q41. Both this intervening variable and the previous, location of one's work, reflect the increasing mobility of our town's demographics. Assumptions cannot be made at Tree of Life that we will interact with

other church members during other times of the week. A sense of community in our small-town has shifted from what it was in the past where most remained in town for working and shopping. Community must be developed intentionally through our area churches, such as Tree of Life, building bonding capital within our churches as well as bridging capital with our town.

Intervening Variable #12 Community Service Participation

Bridging capital is the sense of connectedness one has with the community, outside the group or organization of Tree of Life. Community service participation was utilized as an intervening variable in order to analyze if those who are involved in the community are also more connected in the congregation. A connection between bridging and bonding capital was sought through these independent t-tests and paired t-tests.

Two groups were formed from Q29 (I have participated in community service projects.) If they responded with “on a regular basis, on a semi-regular basis, or occasionally,” they were included in the *Participates in Community Service Projects* group. If they responded “never or don’t know,” they were included in the *Does Not Participate* group. Variances were indicated between the two groups according to the questions of which group had the higher level of connectedness in the baseline. Not one single group remained dominant (see appendix V, table V.1). The *Participates in Community Service Projects* group, however, remained consistently dominant in the end-line responses with a higher level of connectedness. This group also had three differences that were statistically significant found in Q42 (open-minded people willing to listen), Q43 (people who practice what they believe), and Q44 (care deeply about community/world), as shown in table 5.38.

Table 5.38. Independent t-test Results of Connectedness Comparing Community Service Project Participation

Q42-Q44 Sense of Connectedness	\bar{x}_b (N _b)	\bar{x}_e (N _e)	df	t-value	p
Q42 Open-minded People Who Listen or Close-minded People Who Do Not Listen					
Participates in Community Service Projects-	5.08 (102)	5.46 (78)	178	-2.237	.027
Does Not Participate-	5.78 (9)	4.43 (7)	14	1.687	.114
Q43 Practice What They Believe or Tend to Say One Thing and Do Opposite					
Participates in Community Service Projects-	5.25 (102)	5.74 (78)	178	-3.079	.002
Does Not Participate-	5.56 (9)	4.86 (7)	14	.930	.368
Q44 Care Deeply About Community/World or Care Only About Themselves					
Participates in Community Service Projects-	5.60 (102)	5.96 (78)	178	-2.507	.013
Does Not Participate-	5.78 (9)	5.14 (7)	14	.996	.336

Q42-Q44 Color in the circle of agreement that best represents your evaluation of Tree of Life from (7) High Community, (4) Neutral), to (1) Low Community.

The first difference that was statistically significant found in Q42 was indicated from the baseline (mean = 5.08) to the end-line (mean = 5.46); $t_{(178)} = -2.237$, $p = .027$. The second difference that was statistically significant found in Q43 was indicated from the baseline (mean = 5.25) to the end-line (mean = 5.74); $t_{(178)} = -3.079$, $p = .002$. The third difference that was statistically significant found in Q44 was indicated from the baseline (mean = 5.60) to the end-line (mean = 5.96); $t_{(178)} = -2.507$, $p = .013$.

This pattern of the *Participate in Community Service Projects* group did remain consistent in the paired t-test results, as well with four differences that were statistically significant in connectedness for this group, as shown in table 5.39.

Table 5.39. Paired t-test Results of Connectedness Comparing Community Service Project Participation

Q41-Q44 Sense of Connectedness	$\bar{x}_b (N_b)$	$\bar{x}_e (N_e)$	df	t- value	p
Q41 Very Closely Connected or Very Disconnected					
Participates in Community Service Projects-	5.07 (56)	5.36 (56)	55	-2.211	.031
Does Not Participate-	5.17 (6)	5.00 (6)	5	.170	.872
Q42 Open-minded People Who Listen or Close-minded People Who Do Not Listen					
Participates in Community Service Projects-	5.05 (56)	5.43 (56)	55	-2.468	.017
Does Not Participate-	5.83 (6)	5.00 (6)	5	.752	.486
Q43 Practice What They Believe or Tend to Say One Thing and Do Opposite					
Participates in Community Service Projects-	5.30 (56)	5.66 (56)	55	-2.541	.014
Does Not Participate-	6.00 (6)	5.50 (6)	5	.889	.415
Q44 Care Deeply About Community/World or Care Only About Themselves					
Participates in Community Service Projects-	5.55 (56)	5.95 (56)	55	-2.739	.008
Does Not Participate-	5.83 (6)	5.50 (6)	5	.598	.576

Q25 Circle the number that best describes your strength of agreement from (5) Strongly Agree to (1) Strongly Disagree.

Q40-Q44 Color in the circle of agreement that best represents your evaluation of Tree of Life from (7) High Community, (4) Neutral, to (1) Low Community.

The first difference that was statistically significant was found in Q41 (very closely connected to one another) from the baseline (mean = 5.07) to the end-line (mean = 5.36); $t_{(55)} = -2.211$, $p = .031$. The second difference that was statistically significant found in Q42 (open-minded people who are willing to listen) was indicated from the baseline (mean = 5.05) to the end-line (mean = 5.43); $t_{(55)} = -2.468$, $p = .017$. The third difference

that was statistically significant found in Q43 (people who practice what they believe) was indicated from the baseline (mean = 5.30) to the end-line (mean = 5.66); $t_{(55)} = -2.541$, $p = .014$. The fourth and final difference that was statistically significant found in Q44 (care deeply for community/world) was indicated from the baseline (mean = 5.55) to the end-line (mean = 5.95); $t_{(55)} = -2.739$, $p = .008$.

These differences that were statistically significant, as well as consistently higher levels of connectedness, for the *Participate in Community Service Projects* group remained in direct contrast to the *Does Not Participate* group. The *Does Not Participate* group consistently decreased in mean from the baseline to the end-line in five out of the six questions. These differences that were statistically significant for the *Participate in Community Service Projects* group and the consistent decreases for the *Does Not Participate* group reflected in these paired t-tests that those who do participate in the community with bridging capital do feel an overall sense of increase in their bonding capital with the congregation.

Further Testing of Bridging and Bonding Capital

Other questions within the baseline and end-line questionnaires further illustrated responses regarding the bridging and bonding capital of Tree of Life Lutheran. Q27-Q31 further illustrated the bridging capital with Tree of Life's community, as seen in table 5.40.

Table 5.40. Independent t-test Results of Bridging Capital with Tree of Life Lutheran's Community

Bridging Capital Questions	$\bar{x}_b (N_b)$	$\bar{x}_e (N_e)$	df	t-value	p
Q27 Reputation of Congregation in Community	1.76 (115)	1.64 (85)	198	1.103	.271
<i>Q27 Mark one choice per question with (1) Very Positive Reputation, (2) Mostly Positive Reputation, (3) Somewhat Positive Reputation, (4) Very Negative Reputation, and (5) Don't Know.</i>					
Q28 Frequency of Encouragement to Care for Other in Community	1.74 (115)	1.45 (86)	199	2.032	.043
Q29 Frequency of Participation in Community Projects	2.49 (113)	2.29 (86)	197	1.502	.135
<i>Q28-29 Mark one choice per question with (1) On a Regular Basis-Monthly, (2) On a Semi-Regular Basis-3 to 4 Times a Year, (3) Occasionally-Once or Twice a Year, (4) Seldom/Never, and (5) Don't Know.</i>					
Q30 Feel at Home in Community of Tree of Life Lutheran	1.64 (115)	1.57 (83)	196	.661	.509
<i>Q30 Mark one choice per question with (1) Very Helpful, (2) Somewhat helpful, (3) Rarely Helpful, (4) Not Helpful At All, (5) Don't Know.</i>					
Q31 Frequency of Greeted by Other Members while Out in Community	1.61 (114)	1.58 (83)	195	.237	.813
<i>Q31 Mark one choice per question with (1) On a Regular Basis-Monthly, (2) On a Semi-Regular Basis-3 to 4 Times a Year, (3) Occasionally-Once or Twice a Year, (4) Seldom/Never, and (5) Don't Know.</i>					

Inverted numbers were used in these data for further measuring of bridging capital, which means that a decrease in number indicated growth. A consistent decrease in mean for all the questions indicated that further growth was made in bridging capital between Tree of Life Lutheran and its community. A difference that was statistically significant was indicated in Q28 (frequency of encouragement to care for other in community), as seen from the baseline (mean = 1.74) to the end-line (mean = 1.45); $t_{(199)} = 2.032$, $p = .043$.

Paired t-tests indicated, however, that the sixty-seven participants matched between the baseline and end-line did not indicate growth in bridging capital, but a decrease, as shown in table 5.41.

Table 5.41. Paired t-test Results of Bridging Capital with Tree of Life Lutheran's Community

Bridging Capital Questions	\bar{x}_b (N _b)	\bar{x}_e (N _e)	df	t-value	p
Q27 Reputation of Congregation in Community	1.77 (66)	1.92 (66)	65	-.756	.453
<i>Q27 Mark one choice per question with (1) Very Positive Reputation, (2) Mostly Positive Reputation, (3) Somewhat Positive Reputation, (4) Very Negative Reputation, and (5) Don't Know.</i>					
Q28 Frequency of Encouragement to Care for Other in Community	1.58 (66)	1.61 (66)	65	-.148	.883
Q29 Frequency of Participation in Community Projects	2.49 (65)	2.48 (65)	64	.076	.939
<i>Q28 and 29 Mark one choice per question with (1) On a Regular Basis-Monthly, (2) On a Semi-Regular Basis-3 to 4 Times a Year, (3) Occasionally-Once or Twice a Year, (4) Seldom/Never, and (5) Don't Know.</i>					
Q 30 Feel at Home in Community of Tree of Life Lutheran	1.53 (66)	1.86 (66)	65	-1.549	.126
<i>Q30 Mark one choice per question with (1) Very Helpful, (2) Somewhat helpful, (3) Rarely Helpful, (4) Not Helpful At All, (5) Don't Know.</i>					
Q31 Frequency of Greeted by Other Members while Out in Community	1.52 (65)	1.95 (65)	64	-1.857	.068
<i>Q31 Mark one choice per question with (1) On a Regular Basis-Monthly, (2) On a Semi-Regular Basis-3 to 4 Times a Year, (3) Occasionally-Once or Twice a Year, (4) Seldom/Never, and (5) Don't Know.</i>					

The only growth was indicated in a slight increase in mean found in Q29 from the baseline (mean = 2.49) to the end-line (mean = 2.48). All other responses indicated a decline, which did not indicate any differences that were statistically significant.

Bonding capital was further illustrated in the baseline and end-line questionnaires through Q23, Q24, and Q26. These questions focused upon: (Q23) having friends in the congregation, (Q24) coming to be with others over all, and (Q26) trusting others in the congregation. Independent t-tests showed no differences that were statistically significant (see appendix W, table W.1). A growth in mean for Q24 indicated a slight growth from the baseline (mean = 3.90) to the end-line (mean = 3.95).

Paired t-tests also illustrated some decrease in mean (see appendix W, table W.2). Perhaps the depth of inter-relationships found in friendships, being with others, and trust did not fully develop yet within the nine months of the research project. Tree of Life did not experience the depth yet in developing their inter-relationships, but those who completed the end-line questionnaire indicated more interest in continuing such interventions and activities.

Additional Questions from End-line Questionnaire

Participants who completed the end-line questionnaire were asked additional questions regarding their participation, if they felt more connected, reasons why, and their future interest in similar activities. The participants first indicated if they participated in an intervention or not, as shown on table 5.42. I did not add the additional intervention of the carnival fund raiser, which was an oversight on my part.

Table 5.42. Percentages of Participation in Interventions

Intervention	N	n	Percentage
Q46			
#2 Intervention God's Work, Our Hands	86	45	50.0
Q47			
#1 Intervention New Member/Mentor Program	87	22	25.3
Q48			
#3 Intervention Half-Time Conversations between Services	86	10	11.6
Q49			
#5 Intervention Interviews with Younger, Less Involved Families	85	5	5.6
Q50			
#4 Intervention 100 th Anniversary Monthly Celebrations	87	75	86.2

Percentages reflect those who answered Yes (1) to participating.

The monthly 100th Anniversary celebrations had the most participants with 86.2%. The God's Work, Our Hands day had the second most participants with 50.0%. The New Member/Mentor Program had the third most participants with 25.3%. The percentage of the interviews with younger families is believed to be lower due to their lack of completing the end-line questionnaire.

Participants, overall, felt more connected after participating in these interventions as indicated by Q51. Seventy-four (n) out of eighty-six (N) participants indicated their increased sense of connectedness by indicating a Yes (1), when asked, "Did the previously listed activities help you feel better connected with one another in our congregation?" This number accounts for 86% of the end-line questionnaire participants.

Reasons, which built our bonding capital, were sought as to why these participants felt more connected within the congregation. A number of possible reasons were listed Q52A-F, which asked for a Yes (1) or No (2) response. Percentages were based on those who replied yes. Table 5.43 illustrates these reasons.

Table 5.43. Reasons Why Participants Feel More Connected in The Congregation (Bonding Capital)

End-line Question	N	n	Percentage
Q52A Had Conversations with Others	72	62	86.1
Q52B Felt Listened to By Others	70	62	88.6
Q52C Others Took Interest in My Family	69	54	78.3
Q52D I Know Names Better	71	62	87.3
Q52E Deepened My Relationships with Others in Church	70	55	78.6
Q52F Talked About Our Faith	70	42	60.0

Percentages reflect those who answered Yes(1) for reasons they feel more connected

The top three percentages indicate the top three reasons participants feel more connected: had conversation with others, felt listened to by others, and knowing names better. These top three reasons strengthen this thesis' argument that inter-relationships were built through *intentional small acts of conversation and listening* at Tree of Life Lutheran.

The increased bonding capital within the congregation also affected participants' sense of connection with others in the community, thus building bridging capital. Participants were asked to answer Q53, "Overall, I feel better connected because," as they were asked to check any of the provided statements that applied. (See key below table 5.44 for statements.) These statements were tallied together based on the number of statements each participant checked. If a participant checked three of the above statements, this person received a "3" in a summary data column. If a participant marked two of these statements, then a "2" was inserted, and so forth. Table 5.44 illustrates the percentages of participants who marked all three statements, only two of the three statements, or only one of the statements.

Table 5.44. Reasons Why Participants Feel More Connected through the Congregation to the Community (Bridging Capital)

Number of Q 53 Statements			
	Marked	Frequency (n) (N=74)	Percentage
Three Statements Checked		54	73.0
Two Statements Checked		11	14.9
One Statement Checked		9	12.2

Check all that apply:

___ I was able to network with others in the congregation whom I also got to see around the community and at various events.

___ Belonging to our congregation has helped me discover more ways that I can serve and volunteer in my community.

___ I was able to have conversations that encouraged me to participate in helping my neighbors and others in need in our community.

A larger number of marked statements indicated an increased level of connectedness with the community. Fifty-four out of ninety end-line questionnaire participants (73%) marked

all three statements. This majority of participants illustrate that their inter-relationships through the congregation strengthen their sense of connectedness with the community as well.

A majority of participants also indicated an interest in future participation in similar activities, which will continue to grow Tree of Life's bonding and bridging capital. This interest is shown on table 5.45. I am curious why twenty-six participants, which was one-third, indicated that they "Didn't Know." Perhaps they were hesitant to indicate a commitment when future schedules were unknown at this time.

Table 5.45. Interest in Future Activities Similar to Interventions

Q56 Interested in Participating in More Activities that Build our Congregation's Sense of Connectedness in the Future	Frequency (n) (N=78)	Percentage
Yes	49	62.8
No	3	3.8
Don't Know	26	33.3

Yes (1), No (2), Don't Know (3)

Summary of Quantitative Data

Tree of Life Lutheran grew in their sense of connectedness with one another and their community. Particular groups indicated statistically significant growth, such as: the younger group (19-39), women, those with an annual income of \$80,001 or more, those with a master's or doctorate educational level, those who grew up other than Lutheran, those who have been members for twenty years or less, those who attend worship weekly or attend two to three times a month, those who use media and technology less than two hours, those who work and shop in town, and those who participate in community service projects. Areas of decrease signified areas of needed growth with other groups, such as:

men, those with an annual income of \$40,000 or less, those with a high school graduate level or less, those who work out of town, and those who do not participate in community service projects. Results also indicated that those church activities which are small group in nature brought more growth in connectedness than those which take place in larger groups. Perhaps a longer amount of time for the project would have also developed a deeper sense of bridging and bonding capital in areas of friendship and trust. Qualitative data are explored in order to further illustrate Tree of Life's growth in their inter-relationships and their awareness of them.

Qualitative Data

Introduction

The qualitative data from this modified PAR research project came from six baseline interviews, five focus groups in response to the interventions, and six end-line interviews. My memo writing and journaling were also utilized to capture some of my initial reactions and responses. Other qualitative data were drawn from responses to open-ended questions from Q45 in the baseline questionnaire and Q53-Q56 in the end-line questionnaire.

The qualitative data were prepared with two phases of coding. The initial coding, as explained by Charmaz, included word-by-word, line-by-line, and incident-by-incident to generate *in vivo* codes.⁴ The goal of this phase was "to remain open to the data and to see nuances in them."⁵ The second phase included focused coding, which was identifying

⁴ Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*, 124-127.

⁵ Ibid., 125.

categories by clustering *in vivo* codes and then creating axial codes by clustering focused codes. My final level of coding was identifying theoretical relationships among the axial codes.

These qualitative data are first examined with the data results of the baseline interviews, including the open-ended responses from the baseline questionnaire. The end-line interviews are secondly explored, along with the open-ended responses from the end-line questionnaire. These data results and explanation illustrate the before and after picture of Tree of Life Lutheran's sense of connectedness. The qualitative data from the focus groups is thirdly explored. These results and explanation pinpoint where changes of growth in connectedness occurred.

Baseline Interviews and Open-Ended Responses of Questionnaire

The *in vivo* codes from the six baseline interviews and the open-ended Q45 were combined into one list of data before focused codes were developed. There were originally 112 *in vivo* codes that were further analyzed into the development of thirty-five focused codes (see table 5.46). These focused codes included: how one became a member of Tree of Life Lutheran, why one has or has not remained active in the congregation, experiences with the congregation that have caused one to remain connected or given reasons for disconnect, one's evaluation of their sense of connectedness of the congregation, and ways in which Tree of Life could become more connected with each other and the community.

Table 5.46. Baseline Focused Codes

-
1. Married into the church
 2. Grew up in the T of L congregation
 3. Growing up in faith
 4. Growing children of faith
 5. Having family at T of L Lutheran
 6. Knowing a lot of people before
 7. Welcoming church
 8. Being part of the women's groups
 9. Being here for the same reason
 10. Having a welcoming pastor
 11. Going to own groups
 12. Not wanting to commit
 13. Not as focused on church
 14. Living/Working out of town
 15. Having previous arrogant pastor
 16. Previous leader focused on money
 17. Part of leadership in transitional times
 18. Living godly lives without worship
 19. Trying to be all things to all people
 20. People saying one thing and doing another
 21. Focus brings connection
 22. Back to the basics of Lutheran church
 23. Seeing others in the community who know you
 24. Positive community involvement
 25. Connecting a different way
 26. Helping because asked
 27. Having more social times
 28. Being visited at home
 29. Something special with mentors
 30. Society not as connected
 31. Stuck between two worlds
 32. Community organizations ceasing
 33. Decreased volunteers in community
 34. Not just a Lutheran problem—church not as important
 35. Loss of loyalty of community members
-

Careful analysis of these focused codes, while seeking relationships between them, led to formation of four axial codes: initial and continuous connecting points, disconnecting points, reconnecting points, and impacting obstacles, as shown on table 5.47.

Table 5.47. Baseline Axial Codes

 Axial Codes (AC) and Corresponding Focused Codes (FC)

1. Initial and Continuous Connecting Points
 - ¹Married into the church
 - ²Grew up in the T of L congregation
 - ³Growing up in faith
 - ⁴Growing children of faith
 - ⁵Having family at T of L Lutheran
 - ⁶Knowing a lot of people before
 - ⁷Welcoming church
 - ⁸Being part of the women's groups
 - ⁹Being here for the same reason
 - ¹⁰Having a welcoming pastor

 2. Disconnecting Points
 - ¹¹Going to own groups
 - ¹²Not wanting to commit
 - ¹³Not as focused on church
 - ¹⁴Living/Working out of town
 - ¹⁵Having previous arrogant pastor
 - ¹⁶Previous leader focused on money
 - ¹⁷Part of leadership in transitional times
 - ¹⁸Living godly lives without worship
 - ¹⁹Trying to be all things to all people
 - ²⁰People saying one thing and doing another

 3. Reconnecting Points
 - ²¹Focus brings connection
 - ²²Back to the basics of Lutheran church
 - ²³Seeing others in the community who know you
 - ²⁴Positive community involvement
 - ²⁵Connecting a different way
 - ²⁶Helping because asked
 - ²⁷Having more social times
 - ²⁸Being visited at home
 - ²⁹Something special with mentors

 4. Impacting Obstacles
 - ³⁰Society not as connected
 - ³¹Stuck between two worlds
 - ³²Community organizations ceasing
 - ³³Decreased volunteers in community
 - ³⁴Not just a Lutheran problem—church not as important
 - ³⁵Loss of loyalty of community members
-

Initial and Continuous Connecting Points

Interview responses pertaining to how one became a member and when one first felt a sense of belonging in the congregation shaped the first axial code of initial and continuous connecting points. Three of the interviewees married into the congregation. Anita shared how her wedding was her initial connecting point, as she stated, “The church ladies helped me get married. They just treated me like I was their daughter” (AW—Baseline Interview). Another interviewee, Bob, grew up in the congregation, and stated that he has always felt that he has belonged, as he stated, “I don’t know there again that I’ve ever felt that I haven’t belonged” (BT—Baseline Interview). Two of the interviewees moved from out of town and joined the congregation. Jessica and her husband were looking for a church that had other children, as they “wanted to make sure that our daughter had a church with her friends” (JG—Baseline Interview). Heidi also joined the congregation because “we kind of got to the point where we needed to get our daughter enrolled in confirmation” (HJ—Baseline interview).

Disconnecting Points

Responses to events or experiences that have hindered one from feeling connected shaped the second axial code of disconnecting points. Two interviewees expressed their disconnecting points, as they spoke specifically about double standards they witnessed in the past with other members in the congregation. Will expressed a disappointment with others as he stated, “Unfortunately the more money they have, the more control they think they get” (WB—Baseline interview). Bob stated, “There are groups that get along and groups that don’t get along. People tend to go to their own group in their comfort zone” (BT—Baseline interview). Two interviewees also expressed disconnecting points

through leadership. Heidi shared about when they first became members of the congregation ten years ago:

You know when you come to a church ... you know even some of the not so great ones that I've had in my life ... [the pastors] usually are the ones that welcome you. You really feel like there is a connection there and they reach out to you and they are trying to draw you in and they make sure that they see you, they say hi. Well, I never got that. I always felt like we were left to others ... like almost that it was a committee's chore (HJ—Baseline interview).

Bob shared, "I wasn't a huge fan of the pastor and it seemed like he was all about spending money. We had two pastors at the time and could hardly make ends meet, and then you hear that they don't spend any time at the nursing home. It just leaves you with a bad taste" (BT—Baseline interview). Two other interviewees also shared about being council presidents during transitional times between pastors and how they felt a disconnect with the synod staff. These disconnecting points, as well as others, led to discussion that shaped the third axial code.

Reconnecting Points

Other responses of what it might look like if Tree of Life Lutheran were more connected and how one would benefit from the interventions developed into the third axial code of reconnecting points. Three of the interviewees expressed that focus and going back to the basic foundational teachings of the Lutheran church could serve as reconnecting points. Luke stated, "We need to be more fundamentally built on the fundamentals of the Lutheran church. I think that we've wandered off from that trying to please other people ... trying to draw in other people. We've lost some of that faithfulness" (LW—Baseline interview). All the interviewees spoke about the positive community involvement of Tree of Life and how it helps the congregation connect with

each other and the community. Anita spoke specially about the mentor program in which her daughter participated, “The girls played volleyball together, and there is just now something special about their relationship after the mentor program. And that leads me to believe that after I read that we’ll do the new member and mentor program ... we might be onto something there” (AW—Baseline interview). These responses were insightful, but most of them were ideas that happen inside the church building. All six interviewees also expressed impacting obstacles that came in the way of their sense of connectedness with the congregation, which shaped the next axial code.

Impacting Obstacles

The fourth axial code was quite reflective of descriptions of community and church previously discussed in chapter four. Several of the interviewees articulated changes in community and church life that they have noticed, but do not understand why they have happened or what we are to do. Luke stated:

Well, I think the pendulum is swinging the wrong way unfortunately ... back to my comment about the Jaycees. I compare it a little bit to participation in the church or other organizations. Used to be really thriving. And I think church used to be more thriving than it used to be too. People don’t want to belong. They don’t want to commit. I don’t think it is a problem of what you are offering or not offering (SW-Baseline Interview).

Another interviewee, Anita shared, “I think it’s like people our age (sixties) and older, who ... that’s not to say that there aren’t some younger people that also have a lot of commitment and connectivity, but I just think that group is smaller. Do they know? Were they given the information? I just wonder if people today realize what it takes to run the church” (AW—Baseline Interview). Will also named this weakened sense of connectedness in community and church, “I don’t know. I’m not a big church goer, but

you observe that this is not just a Lutheran problem. You read the papers and you can see that there aren't as many going to church as there was twenty years ago" (WB—Baseline Interview). One of the younger interviewees, Bob, named the reality of a changed society, where many activities are scheduled on Sundays. "Yeah, we live stuck between two worlds. You too. You've got family here at church and then kids that are becoming more active as well. You don't know what to do" (BT—Baseline Interview). These descriptions of today's sense of community and society reflected how one is impacted with obstacles in trying to connect through church and in community.

Baseline Theoretical Codes

These four axial codes created a relationship with one another as they formed theoretical codes based on the participating life cycle of a member for Tree of Life Lutheran (see figure 5.8).

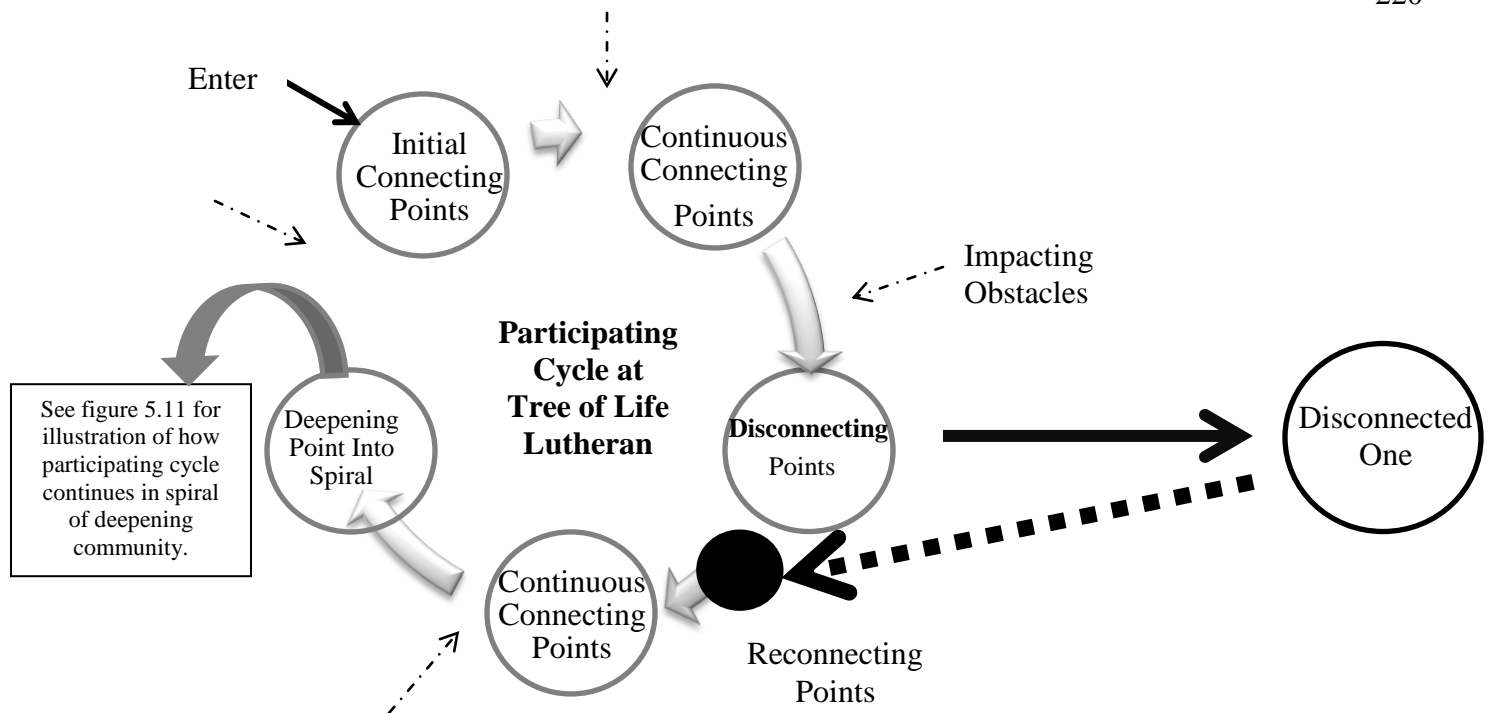


Figure 5.8. Baseline Theoretical Codes

Key--Impacting Obstacles (outside dotted arrows pointed toward cycle), Reconnecting Points (solid black circle), Entry or Disconnecting Movement of Member (one-directional solid, straight black arrows), Disconnected One's Journey back into Cycle (black dashed arrow), Continuation to Spiral of Deepening Community (downward black curved arrow)

Interviewees not only named initial connecting points, but also the continuous connecting points that kept them in the cycle of participating in and with Tree of Life Lutheran. The initial connecting points moved into continuous connecting points, but reality in participation also brought forth disconnecting points. These disconnection points usually moved a member out of the participating cycle. Reconnecting points were expressed and provided, according to the interviewees, yet they were only found in the participating cycle of the congregation. A disconnected one had to move oneself back into the cycle in order to find a reconnection point (dashed arrow). A shallower sense of connectedness was also experienced because disconnecting points did not allow members to fully experience the participating cycle, where they could hit deepening points. These

deepening points could move them into a spiral of ongoing reiterations of the participating cycle, which would move the individual and the congregation into a deepened sense of connectedness and community (see figure 5.11 with further explanation). Figure 5.8 illustrates how Tree of Life was functioning prior to the research project when one became disconnected. The end-line qualitative data shows a different outcome of how and where one reconnects, which also allowed for reconnected members to travel into the spiral of deepened connectedness and community. The focused codes begin to illustrate this difference.

End-line Interviews and Open-Ended Responses of Questionnaire

The end-line interviews provided similar responses to the baseline interviews in how one initially connects and stays connected, what various disconnecting points still exist, and what impacting obstacles occur. All the responses from the six interviews were drawn from 139 *in vivo* codes into thirty-nine focused codes. Similar words and phrases of the *in vivo* codes were duplicated or some single responses stood out, which created the focused codes. Some of the focused codes for the three men and three women were different in these end-line interviews compared to the baseline. The end-line responses brought forth notable differences in how men and women initially connect and how they benefit. These responses also exposed a change that occurred during the research project. One who was disconnected was provided a reconnection point where he/she was located, rather than expected to return solely to the participation of the congregation. These differences can be detected in the end-line focused codes, as shown in table 5.48.

Table 5.48. End-line Focused Codes

-
1. Not needing connection to attend worship and/or church activities
 2. Going to church and/or activities because:
 - a. Having faith in God
 - b. Seeing need and wanting to help
 - c. Willing to come whenever can use gift or passion
 3. Connecting to others
 4. Enjoying people and being a member
 5. Being part of something that helps church and/or others
 6. Finding common goal/reason/purpose for coming together
 7. Talking about what learned at service or commonalities
 8. Sharing stories from older members and given encouragement
 9. Encountering church members in church and or community
 10. Experiencing welcoming spirit of congregation
 11. Wanting to come more because of good connections
 12. Not feeling judged
 13. Opening up to others' inspiring faith stories
 14. Personally reaching out by others to invite or involve
 15. Coming together as generations
 16. Going out of own social or church group circles
 17. Having common belief system to draw us back in
 18. Being part of connecting activities in worship that draw together
 19. Experiencing deeper meaning and bond through church than other activities or organizations
 20. Growing individually in connecting to the congregation
 21. Trusting and respecting one another
 22. Witnessing community's participation, support, and fellowship
 23. Connecting done by synodical bishop and synod staff
 24. Seeing non-active families return
 25. Increasing involvement and leadership of younger members
 26. Experiencing fun when get together
 27. Becoming more of a community of *want-to* rather than *have-to*
 28. Reaching out in different ways to new ones for them to relate
 29. Having and making history together
 30. Increasing of participation overall
 31. Knowing names, who to ask for help, and what it takes to be church
 32. Helping others feel needed in common goal or purpose
 33. Not liking change, but making sense after while
 34. Being between two worlds of athletics/activities and what believe is important for family
 35. Seeing effects of weakened society
 36. Worrying about regular worship attendance when low
 37. Hearing positive comments in church, but negative outside of church
 38. Getting lost when chasing what you think people want
 39. Having conflict with pastors in past
-

These focused codes from the end-line interviews underscored many commonalities with the baseline interviews: such as, *having a focus with common goal or purpose, having conflict or disappointment in past leadership, or seeing the effects of a weakened society*. Several focused codes, however, conveyed a change in the congregation with words and phrases, such as: *experiencing fun when together, becoming a community of want-to, reaching out in different ways, knowing names and who to ask, going out of own social or group circle to reach others, and trusting and respecting others*. The three men and three women who were interviewed all spoke differing responses according to their gender. All three men stated that they do not come to church to be connected, but they enjoy the benefit of connecting while being a part of the congregation. All three women shared that they do not feel judged in the congregation and that stories of encouragement are most important to them. These, as well as the other focused codes, were shaped into eight end-line axial codes, which are: initial connecting points for men, benefitting points for men, initial connecting points for women, benefitting points for women, reconnecting points, continuous connecting points, disconnecting points, and impacting obstacles, as shown in table 5.49.

Table 5.49. End-line Axial Codes

Axial Codes (AC) and Corresponding Focused Codes (FC)

1. Initial Connecting Points for Men

¹Not needing connection to attend worship and/or church activities

²Going to church and/or activities because:

- a. Having faith in God
- b. Seeing need and wanting to help
- c. Willing to come whenever can use gift or passion

Table 5.49. End-line Axial Codes (cont.)

-
2. Benefitting Points for Men
 - ³Connecting to others
 - ⁴Enjoying people and being a member
 - ⁵Being part of something that helps church and/or others
 - ⁶Finding common goal/reason/purpose for coming together
 3. Initial Connecting Points for Women
 - ⁷Talking about what learned in service or commonalities
 - ⁸Sharing stories from older members and given encouragement
 - ⁹Encountering church members in church and/or community
 - ¹⁰Experiencing welcoming spirit of congregation
 4. Benefitting Points for Women
 - ¹¹Wanting to come more because of good connections
 - ¹²Not feeling judged
 - ¹³Opening up to others' inspiring faith stories
 - ¹⁴Finding common goal/reason/purpose for coming together
 5. Reconnecting Points
 - ¹⁵Personally reaching out by others to invite and involve
 - ¹⁶Coming together of generations
 - ¹⁷Going out of own social or church group circles
 - ¹⁸Having common belief system to draw us back in
 - ¹⁹Experiencing deeper meaning and bond through church than other activities or organizations
 6. Continuous Connecting Points
 - ²⁰Growing individually in connecting to the congregation
 - ²¹Trusting and respecting one another
 - ²²Witnessing community's participation, support, and fellowship
 - ²³Connecting done by synodical bishop and synod staff
 - ²⁴Seeing non-active families return
 - ²⁵Increasing involvement and leadership of younger members
 - ²⁶Experiencing fun when get together
 - ²⁷Becoming more of a community of *want-to* rather than *have-to*
 - ²⁸Reaching out in different ways to new ones for them to relate
 - ²⁹Having and making history together
 - ³⁰Increasing of participation overall
 - ³¹Knowing names, who to ask for help, and what it takes to be church
 - ³²Helping others feel needed in common goal or purpose
 7. Disconnecting Points
 - ³³Hearing positive comments in church, but negative outside of church
 - ³⁴Getting lost when chasing what you think people want
 - ³⁵Having conflict with pastors in past

Table 5.49. End-line Axial Codes (cont.)

8. Impacting Obstacles
³⁶ Not liking change, but making sense after while
³⁷ Being between two worlds of athletics/activities and what believe is important for family
³⁸ Seeing effects of weakened society
³⁹ Worrying about regular worship attendance when low

Initial Connecting Points for Men

All three men interviewed expressed that they do not come to church in order to connect, which shaped the first axial code. Robert replied, “I guess I don’t have to feel connected to want to come” (RN—End-line interview). Luke also underscored this, as he shared, “I don’t know if I attend church to be connected to people (LW—End-line interview). Bob also replied similarly, as he stated, “I’m not one that needs to make connections” (BT—End-line interview). The three men all expressed reasons why they initially connected, which included: *having faith, seeing the need and wanting to help, willing to come whenever they can use gift or passion.*

Benefitting Points as Men in Congregation

All three men, however, expressed that they like the benefit of connecting when they participate, which shaped the second axial code. They enjoy people and being a member. They like being part of something that helps the church or others. They are willing to come together when there is a common goal, purpose, or need. Bob especially expressed, “I guess I feel a connection when I am asked to help” (BT—End-line interview). These initial and benefitting points for men are different from the three women interviewed for the end-line.

Initial Connecting Points for Women

All three women spoke about initial connecting points that were framed around conversations and/or relational encounters with others at church or in the community.

Jessica is one who lives out of town, but speaks about conversations that have encouraged her and her daughter.

Everyone is so nice and welcoming to my daughter. She's just a two-year-old and I get so nervous that others could say, "You have to be quiet" or they get mad because they can't hear. But here after the service, everyone says, "Oh she is so cute" or maybe they play with her. After service others share their stories of their kids when they were younger and how these are times to be super grateful for and even though it can be super stressful, it is the best time of your life you're having now. It's really like a village helping us (JG—End-line interview).

Penny also articulated such encouraging conversations that occurred during a difficult time when others reached out. She shared, "Then you'd be surprised by the people you would've thought maybe not be okay with things and they reached out after a worship service" (PA—End-line interview). The women also stated benefits that they experience through their participation and attendance.

Benefitting Points as Women in Congregation

All three women stated a benefitting point of being connected with Tree of Life as they do not feel judged here. Two of the three women spoke about the women's Bible studies groups, where they are inspired by the faith stories they hear. Jessica also expressed, "I feel like we have grown in our connections with people in the church and with friendships. I just think we've made some good connections that make it easy to want to come" (JG—End-line interview). All three women did respond like the men in stating that they appreciate the benefit of coming together with a common purpose or goal. Penny articulated, "Sometimes you don't get out of your normal circle. Sometimes

you don't have the opportunity to work with those people and get to know them. I like to have a reason to work with those I don't normally work with. I suppose it's like we have a common goal to draw and keep us together" (PA—End-line interview). Anita shared "I can't think of another purpose better than the church's" (AW—End-line interview).

Reconnecting Points

All the men and women together provided many new reconnecting points from the baseline to the end-line. Many of these reconnecting points explained a shift in where one is able to reconnect after being disconnected. These include: *reaching out personally through a phone call or visit, going out of own social or group circles, experiencing a deeper meaning together, and being drawn back in by a common belief system*. These new reconnecting points signified a movement that one is greeted by reconnecting points wherever he/she is found when another reaches out to them. These reconnecting points provide the opportunity for one to reconnect and reengage in the participating cycle of Tree of Life, where one experiences several continuous connecting points and the opportunity to deepen community while circling through reiterations of participating cycle (see figure 5.11).

Continuous Connecting Points

The participating cycle of a Tree of Life Lutheran member flows through continuous connecting points that strengthen one's connection with other congregational members and the community. These continuous connecting points articulate a change in the congregation, as they were focused upon: *trust, respect, witnessing other community participation, seeing other non-active families return, and witnessing an increased*

participation and leadership of younger members. Jessica described the change she witnessed in the congregation, as she stated, “It is more of a celebration each Sunday ... a celebration of those who come because they want to. Once you feel like you are more a community, this is something that you want to do. It’s a celebration each Sunday with worship with your friends and those connected with” (JG—End-line interview). Penny, as she reflected upon the 100th Anniversary choir, shared, “I just felt so good to do something as a group again. That was a fun group. It was neat and it was going towards the 100th celebration—the reason why we were doing it was very cool. It was just a neat day that was meaningful” (PA—End-line interview)! Bob and Anita both shared that it has been great to see some families that we have not seen in a long time. The participating cycle for Tree of Life members moves through continuous connecting points and into deepening points of connectedness, but still contains impacting obstacles and disconnecting points. The list for impacting obstacles, however, substantially decreased from the baseline to the end-line.

Impacting Obstacles

The six interviewees still expressed what outside obstacles impacted their congregational participation. Bob underscored what he originally said in the baseline interview, as he still felt stuck between the two worlds of children’s activities on Sundays and church. Robert named that facing changes in our society is difficult, but with understanding comes sense-making. Anita shared her concern for decreasing worship attendance on some weekends, as she stated, “We’re beginning to see the effects of what happens to a weakened society” (AW—End-line interview). The decrease in these impacting obstacles was truthful to the reality each experiences, but also signified a

stronger connection with the congregation. Disconnection points, the final axial code, also decreased in number from the baseline to the end-line.

Disconnecting Points

Only three disconnection points were consistently brought forth throughout the six end-line interviews. Other points that had been disconnection points in the baseline were no longer a consideration through growth in connectedness for various interviewees. Jessica shared a particular point about living out of town. She articulated, “I guess I’ve also found some other people who live out of town. It’s like, okay, we’re not the only people. At first it seemed like we were the only people who didn’t live in town, but now we’ve met so many different people that where we live doesn’t affect our connections as much” (JG—End-line interview).

End-line Theoretical Codes

These eight axial codes were shaped together again in the theoretical coding of the participating cycle of a Tree of Life Lutheran member. This cycle is very similar to the initial figure shaped from the baseline interviews, but it does signify changes that occurred through this research project. Particularly, changes occurred in describing men and women’s initial and benefitting connecting points and in how one reconnects into the cycle after disconnection (see figure 5.9).

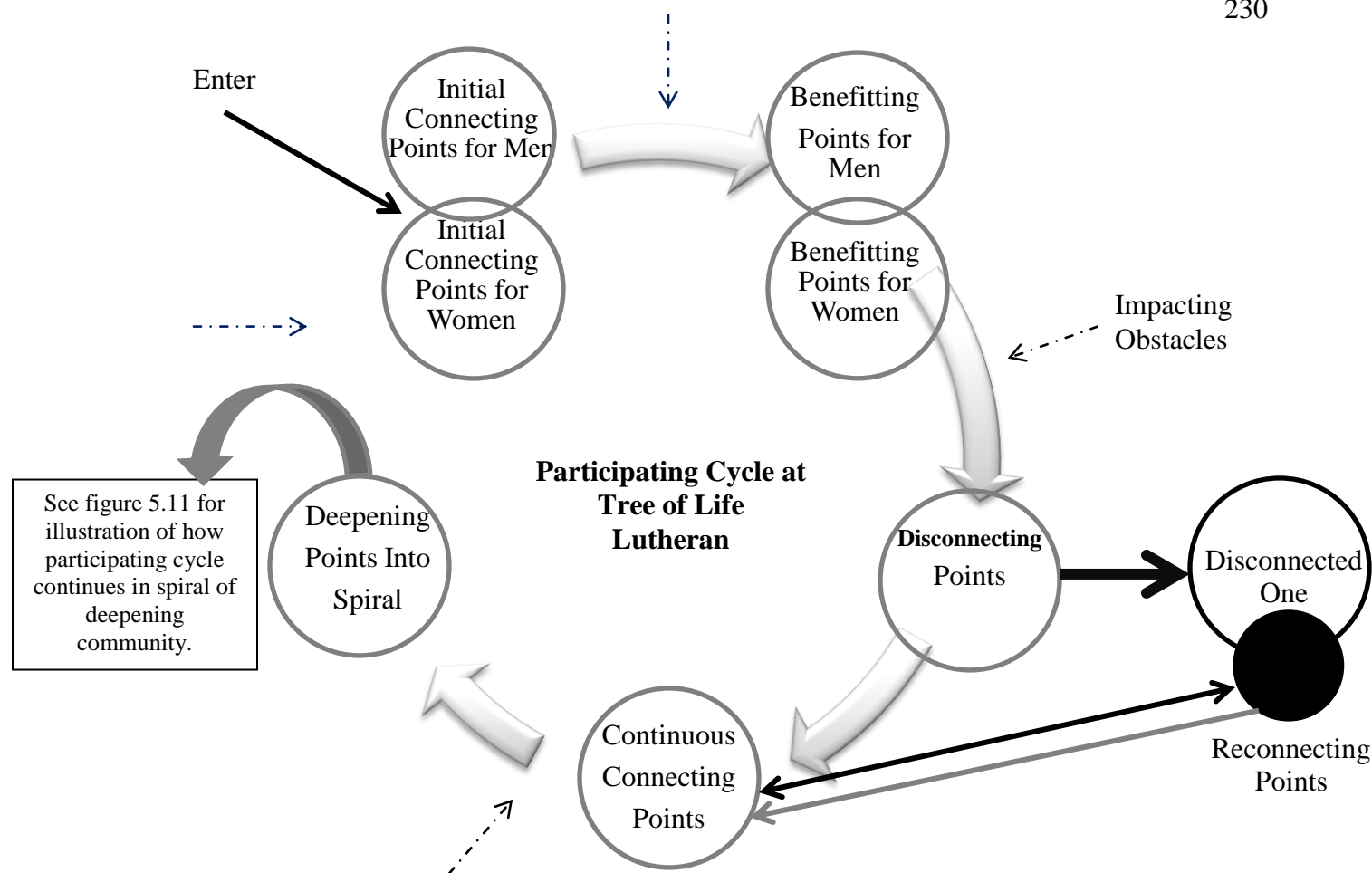


Figure 5.9. End-line Theoretical Codes

Key--Impacting Obstacles (outside dotted arrows pointed toward cycle), Reconnecting Points (solid black circle), Entry or Disconnecting Movement of Member (one-directional solid, straight black arrows), Member Reaching Out to Disconnected One (two-directional black arrow), Disconnected One's Journey back into Cycle (one-directional grey arrow), Continuation to Spiral of Deepening Community (downward black curved arrow)

The movement of the end-line theoretical codes illustrated that there were important differences for men and women in initially connecting and their perceptions of benefitting. Both men and women, however, move similarly through the participation cycle, as they did in the baseline. There are still disconnection points and impacting obstacles, but how one reconnects differed. The baseline theoretical codes illustrated how a disconnected one was left to their own to move back towards reconnection in the location of the church and others. The end-line theoretical codes illustrated a shift in where the reconnection points are located. They are now found out with the one who

disconnected. A partnership is also illustrated as the disconnected one has another member to journey with them back into the participating cycle of Tree of Life Lutheran (two-directional black arrow). A deepened sense of connectedness and community also occurred because members (connected and newly reconnected) traveled into a spiral of more reiterations of the participating cycle, which moved Tree of Life's sense of connectedness from a shallow community to a deepened community (see figure 5.11 with further explanation). These shifts came from changes within the interventions of the research project. Focus groups provided opportunity to discern where and why the changes occurred.

Focus Groups

All five interventions, including the additional one from the carnival, had a focus group meet after the intervention concluded. Two of the interventions had focus groups that met within a few weeks of their conclusion. These were God's Work, Our Hands and the carnival. All the others met after a series of gatherings, which included: the New Members/Mentor Program, Half-time conversations; monthly 100th Anniversary celebrations; and, home visits to less involved, younger families. The carnival and monthly 100th Anniversary celebrations met together for the sake of having multiple generations and gender.

These focus group conversations brought forth what changes occurred, when they happened, and why they transpired. These changes first surfaced in the original 164 *in vivo* codes, which were then paired down into thirty-one focused codes, as shown on table 5.50.

Table 5.50. Focus Group Focused Codes

-
1. Not knowing aspects and connections of others
 2. Not knowing what opportunities are being missed
 3. Not knowing history of the church
 4. Not knowing all the work that goes on behind the scenes in the congregation
 5. Not knowing others strengths and talents
 6. Not being approached or asked before because not known
 7. Clustering with people or groups already know when not know others
 8. Including all generations
 9. Bringing community together
 10. Communicating purpose so others understood and bonded with others
 11. Learning can take on leadership roles
 12. Working as a team
 13. Seeing other young adults, especially men, stepping up
 14. Being flexible with one another
 15. Making personal calls to invite and involve
 16. Having conversation questions that established base
 17. Praying and celebrating task/even at conclusion
 18. Knowing who and where to ask for help now
 19. Getting to know others and networking
 20. Knowing and appreciating behind the scenes work of the congregation
 21. Knowing and appreciating history of the church
 22. Knowing and learning how to be a part of congregation
 23. Knowing others' strengths and talents
 24. Providing alternative, different opportunities to connect that are:
 - a. Communicated with purpose
 - b. Multi-generational to teach younger ones how to be church
 - c. Social and special
 - d. Helping community and others
 25. Having expectations for members to give time
 26. Having different, flexible style of leadership with changes for better
 27. Having down-to-earth leader who relations to others in church and community
 28. Helping individuals overcome past excuses
 29. Reaching out personally to participants/members
 30. Providing opportunities for children to be involved
 31. Having difficulty in finding time to meet
-

Patterns were easily detected in the participants' language used to describe their experience in the various interventions. The phrases, *not knowing* and *knowing* were repeatedly used to explain shifts in individuals' sense of connectedness. Much feedback

was articulated about the style of leadership currently at Tree of Life Lutheran, as I serve as senior pastor. These repetitive phrases and words were formed into the focus group axial codes, as shown on table 5.51.

Table 5.51. Focus Group Axial Codes

Axial Codes (AC) and Corresponding Focused Codes (FC)

1. Disconnecting Points: Not Knowing
 - ¹Not knowing aspects and connections of others
 - ²Not knowing what opportunities are being missed
 - ³Not knowing history of the church
 - ⁴Not knowing all the work that goes on behind the scenes in the congregation
 - ⁵Not knowing others' strengths and talents
 - ⁶Not being approached or asked before because not known
 - ⁷Clustering with people or groups already know when not know others

2. Reconnecting Points through Reaching Out (What Change Occurred and When)
 - ⁸Including all generations
 - ⁹Bringing community together
 - ¹⁰Communicating purpose so others understood and bonded with others
 - ¹¹Learning can take on leadership roles
 - ¹²Working as a team
 - ¹³Seeing other young adults, especially men, stepping up
 - ¹⁴Being flexible with one another
 - ¹⁵Making personal calls to invite and involve
 - ¹⁶Having conversation questions that established base
 - ¹⁷Praying and celebrating task/event at conclusion

3. Accompanying Membership (Why Change Happened)
 - ¹⁸Knowing who and where to ask for help now
 - ¹⁹Getting to know others and networking
 - ²⁰Knowing and appreciating behind the scenes work of the congregation
 - ²¹Knowing and appreciating history of the church
 - ²²Knowing and learning how to be a part of congregation
 - ²³Knowing others' strengths and talents

Table 5.51. Focus Group Axial Codes (cont.)

4.	Accompanying Leadership (Why Change Happened)
²⁴	Providing alternative, different opportunities to connect that are:
a.	Communicated with purpose
b.	Multi-generational to teach younger ones how to be church
c.	Social and special
d.	Helping community and others
²⁵	Having expectations for members to give time
²⁶	Having different, flexible style of leadership with changes for better
²⁷	Having down-to-earth leader who relates to others in church and community
²⁸	Helping individuals overcome past excuses
²⁹	Reaching out personally to participants/members
³⁰	Providing opportunities for children to be involved
5.	Impacting Obstacle (What Continues to Affect the Change)
³¹	Having difficulty in finding time to meet

These five axial codes continued to build upon the axial codes from the baseline interviews. The focus group axial codes differed from the baseline and end-line in that they particularly addressed the interventions indicating what changes occurred, when they happened, and why. These axial codes include: disconnecting points, not knowing (before the change occurred); reconnecting points (what changed and when changes happened); accompanying membership (why changes occurred); accompanying leadership (why changes occurred); and impacting obstacle (what continues to affect the change). These are more fully explored, as follows.

Disconnecting Points: Not Knowing (Before the Change Occurred)

Not knowing was a phrase repeatedly articulated by focus group participants. Many new and/or younger members articulated that they did not know names, who to ask for help, and how ministry was accomplished in this congregation. Participants also articulated the reason for not knowing, as Rachel expressed during the Half-time

conversations focus group, “I feel like we don’t take the time to have conversations anymore because of so many activities going on—just go, go, go. It’s so important to take the time to have conversations” (FG3-2). Linda from this focus group added, “We’re all in our own little same group” (FG3-3). The anniversary and carnival focus group articulated, as well, that there were strengths and talents about the younger men that they did not know before. *Not knowing* was a repeated theme, which often disconnected members from their participation in with Tree of Life Lutheran.

Reconnecting Points (What Changed and When Changes Happened)

The reconnecting points are what changed through the interventions, as disconnected ones shifted from *not knowing* to *knowing*. The reconnecting points changed as members reached out from the participating cycle of Tree of Life to wherever the disconnected ones were to be found. This move happened whenever the interventions included multi-generational events, personal contacts and invitations, and working together as a team.

Hope, Ted, Deb, and Amy each expressed in the home visits with younger families that they feel a stronger sense of connection through the events that include all generations. All four of them stated their children’s church activities, such as the carnival and other Sunday school activities are the most important for their families, as these establish a foundational base of faith and involves parents. Deb stated, “I believe it takes a community to raise a child” (FG5-2). Trisha reflected upon one of the monthly 100th Anniversary celebrations of Christmas caroling, as she shared:

For me the caroling was huge because my nieces, who aren’t that involved, came and they sang. I remember that it was a feeling that they are learning to be part of the congregation. They did something for the church and it was on their own.

Sitting back I wished there were more opportunities to teach our younger generation how they can be a part of it (FG4/A-1).

Personal contacts and invitations of asking for help were also a major change of reaching out to bring the reconnecting points to the disconnected ones. Reaching out to where disconnected ones where through these personal contacts moved members outside their given social circles. Grace was an integral member of the carnival planning team, as she made personal calls to invite Sunday school families and other ages to participate. She stated that she learned, “to not be afraid to ask those who are maybe too busy or in things ... don’t assume and give them opportunities to be involved” (FG4/A-2). Lynette also articulated this, as she shared, “For me not knowing as many people in the community, this has taught me to just ask and be willing to come out of my comfort zone. I know who you are and you may not know me, but will you help with this? Just to be kind of uncomfortable and be okay with it” (FG4/A-4). Linda, in the Half-time conversation’s focus group, articulated these personal contacts. “When you get people involved, then they feel part of the church. They belong. If you have a sign-up sheet and ask for volunteers, they won’t. But if you actually ask them to get involved individually, they will” (FG3-3).

Personal contacts were also established during the God’s Work, Our Hands event, as participants answered together conversation starters. Sharon reflected upon her work area of packaging meals and conversing with others. “It was just the little things in our conversation, but they made a big difference. All of a sudden you felt very at ease. Yes, now we’re all comfortable. We’re all doing something we haven’t done before, but then we’re all feeling that unity in being together. It took us all to get this work done” (FG2-3). This change was also shared as Linda articulated, “Every time you get to know

someone, you feel like you belong more” (FG3-3). Julie shared to this experience, “I don’t feel we judged each other. It was just our opening up and learning about one another” (FG3-5). The *not knowing* was turning into *knowing*, as the change in Tree of Life’s sense of connectedness was happening.

This change was also evident as it was also occurring in the first New Member/Mentor gatherings. Sue shared she assumed she knew things about others and did not realize existing differences. She said, “I thought it was very interesting to listen to my group we mentored and I just assumed that we all come to church the same way. It was very different as it was for them and for us. So that very much opened my eyes” (FG1-6). Tina, a new member of Tree of Life, shared, “Now we just know who to go to ask things about the church” (FG1-4). She also continued to share, “It makes me realize that when I do see new faces that I need to try to reach out, so that they will know more about us and the church. “So now as I see people at the church and hear them asking, I need to make the effort to say, ‘Anything I can help you with’” (FG1-4)?

The change in Tree of Life’s sense of connectedness also happened whenever team work occurred, such as during the New Member/Mentor Program gatherings and the carnival. Sue, who served as a mentor for new members, articulated her role in this team work, as she shared, “I’ve learned that you’ve got to be a good model or good example, so it pushed me to be a better Lutheran ... better person to show up and be present and be supportive. You can’t just show up and appear. You need to be there for others” (FG1-6). Grace reflected upon the carnival organization and stated, “We all did different roles and we had a team that worked together” (FG4/A-2).

Accompanying Membership (Why Changes Occurred)

The axial code of reconnecting points allowed members to reenter the participating cycle of Tree of Life, where they discovered others accompanying them in their journey. This accompanying membership reframed the disconnection points of *not knowing* to reconnection points of *knowing*. This change happened because connections were no longer assumed; they were intentionally made through conversations, listening, multi-generational events, personal contact, and team work.

One continuous connection point that I highlighted immediately in my journaling was while listening to the carnival group. Lynette, a young member in her twenties stated, “It has made me more appreciative of all the work that goes on behind-the-scenes that we didn’t know. Now it makes me more willing to attend ... you know there is something going on and we can go. We should try to participate because we know now the effort it takes ... a lot of effort goes into making it happen” (FG4/A-4). Madeline, from the God’s Work, Our Hands project, honestly shared that by using the conversation starters, “I learned things about people that I’ve never known before” (FG2-6). Cheryl also reflected in that group, as she stated, “Now that I know these people, when I see them again I will think of these connections. Then I am more willing to go up and say hello” (FG2-4). A member of the anniversary group shared, “I did not know much of the church history, but now that I know” (FG4/A-10). Harriet shared in reflection of the anniversary celebrations, “I am so thankful I was part of making new history” (FG4/A-8).

Accompanying Leadership (Why Changes Occurred)

Two focus groups, the New Member/Mentor Program and home visits to younger families, shared about my leadership that also accompanied them in these interventions. I

highlighted one pivotal point of clarity in my journal of how leadership has shifted for this congregation. This point was articulated, as Greg shared:

It's changed a lot. Just with you coming on as a new pastor, it's night and day from what it used to be. It's just a different leadership style. There are a lot of opportunities now that we didn't do previously. It's like we're all new members under your reign. Our dynamics have changed. I think even a lot of older members are finding their way in how they are finding their way in the church because you've changed so much for the better. You've done a great job in giving us a lot of other alternatives than just showing up on Sunday morning to sit for an hour. You've brought a lot that demands us to give our time and that's good. It's a different capacity in how we are being the church (FG1-3).

Sue also affirmed Greg, as she stated, "It's the flexibility" (FG1-6)! Greg responded, "Thank you! That's the word! Before it was really clearly defined and it was black and white that you went to worship and then you went home and that was it. I think you are bringing the congregation together more. You are giving us a lot of different ways for us to be part of the church" (FG1-3). Deb articulated a change in leadership style with this congregation, as she shared, "Our pastor is a down to earth person who you can relate to—in church, at school, or even at the ball park" (FG5-2). I, as researcher and pastor during this project, was struck that the participants named a different style of leadership and how it is effective for how the congregation is functioning and growing in their sense of connectedness. Both the accompanying membership and leadership served as reasons why the change in Tree of Life's sense of connectedness changed and increased, as well as deepened as several members continued into reiterations of the participating cycle (see figure 5.11).

Impacting Obstacle (What Continues to Affect the Change)

All the focus groups articulated one dominant impacting obstacle that kept affecting their participation in these interventions and their ability to grow in their sense

of connectedness. This obstacle was finding time to meet with one another. The new members and mentors struggled to meet for the four times as expected, but still adapted in meeting together in larger groups for fewer times. Ralph in the God's Work, Our Hands project articulated, "For me the difficult part is finding the time ... setting that time aside. You just never have the time. But today, we were forced to be right there and we needed to talk to make the time pass. Usually, we're in too much of a hurry" (FG2-1). Madeline, also in this group shared a similar reflection, as she stated, "You know, sometimes it is hard to stay at church, but once you're there, you get so focused on being there—being present in the present ... being part of something bigger than yourself" (FG2-6). Finding the time for *intentional small acts of conversation and listening* is always an obstacle, but Tree of Life was able to find creative, different ways to connect and grow together.

Focus Groups Theoretical Codes

These axial codes were shaped in their relationship with one another as the what, when, and why of the change occurred through the interventions, as shown in figure 5.10.

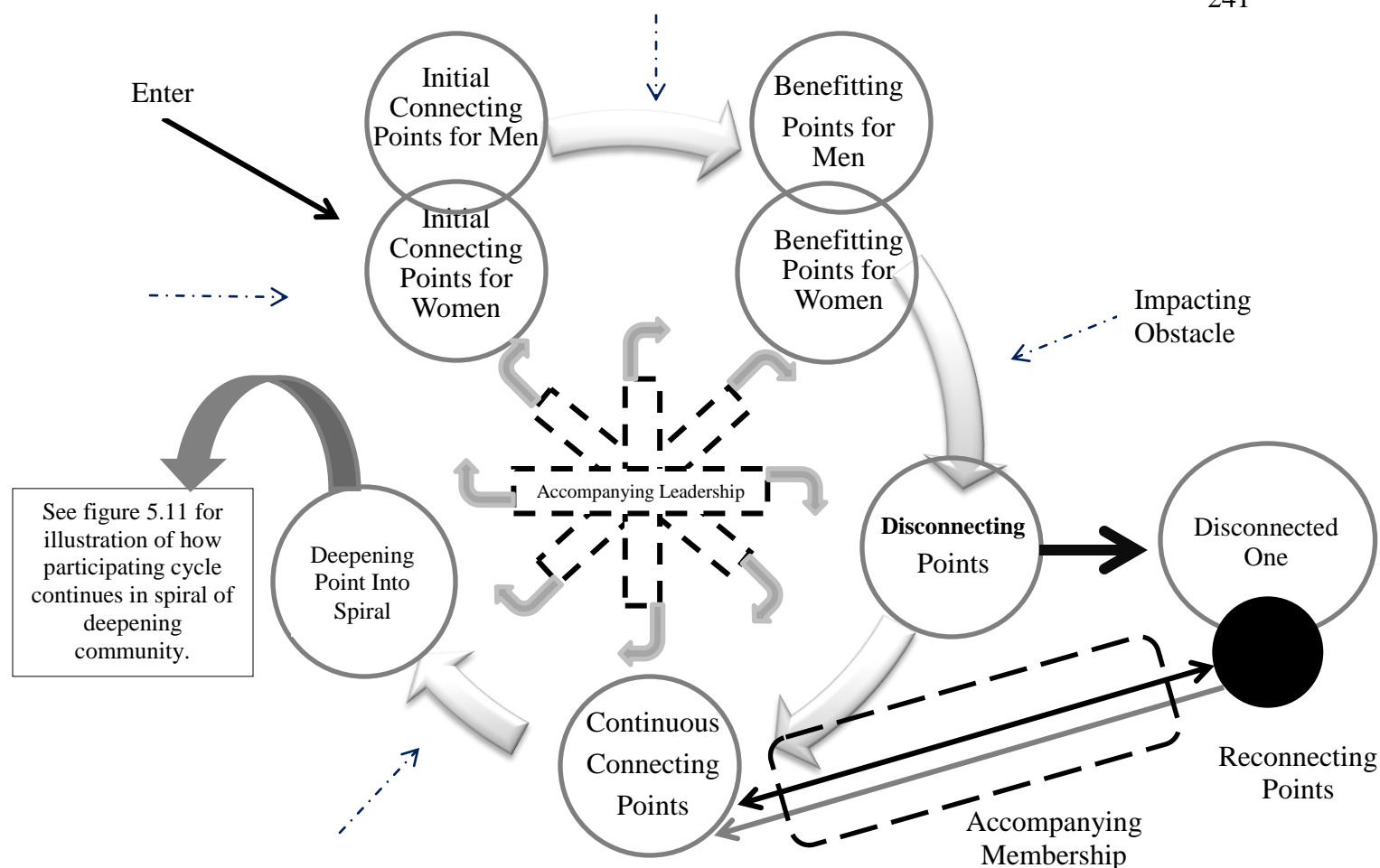


Figure 5.10. Focus Groups Theoretical Codes: Where the Change Occurred

Key--Impacting Obstacles (outside dotted arrows pointed toward cycle), Reconnecting Points (solid black circle), Areas Where Changes Occurred: Accompanying Leadership and Membership (dashed boxes), Entry or Disconnecting Movement of Member (one-directional solid, straight black arrows), Member Reaching Out to Disconnected One (two-directional black arrow), Disconnected One's Journey back into Cycle (one-directional grey arrow), Continuation to Spiral of Deepening Community (downward black curved arrow)

The increased change of connectedness was found through the reconnecting points (solid black circle), as members reached out from the participating cycle of Tree of Life Lutheran (two-directional black arrow). This change occurred because of the accompanying leadership (dashed box) that was modeled through the interventions and participating cycle, as well as the *accompanying membership* (dashed box) of those who journeyed with disconnected one back into the cycle through personal contact, multi-

generational events, and team work, all of which included *intentional small acts of conversation and listening*. The theoretical coding of these focus groups showed us what change happened, when it occurred and why. This coding also showed us how the participating cycle became a spiral, where reiterations of the cycle with the same type of connecting points allowed a deepened sense of connectedness and community to be experienced, as shown in figure 5.11.

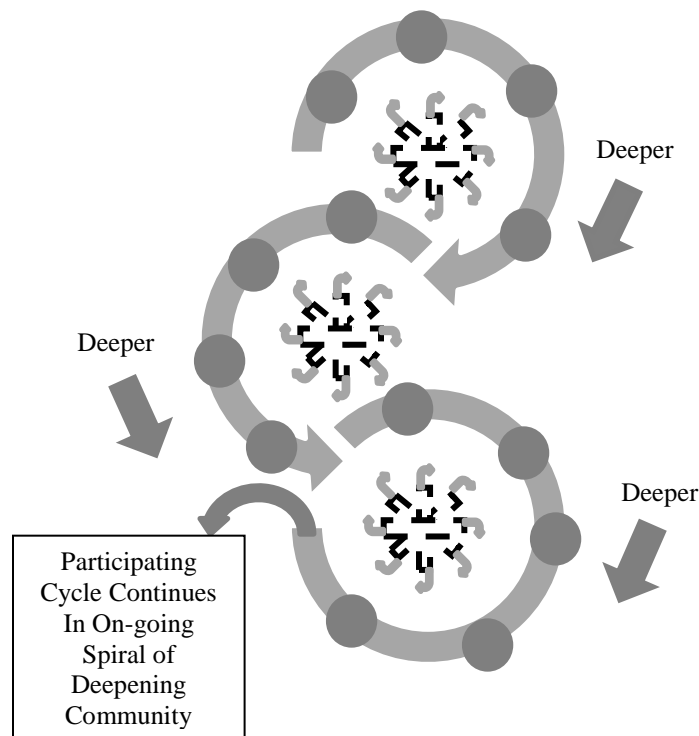


Figure 5.11. Spiral of Deepening Community through Reiterations of Participating Cycle of Tree of Life

Each reiteration of the participating cycle still contains the same benefitting points, continuous connecting points, and reconnection points, as each level brings a deeper sense connectedness and community. The illustration of how disconnected ones become reconnected through *accompanying membership* is still a part of each reiteration, but was left out in figure 5.11 for the sake of simplicity.

Summary

The myth of small was dispelled through this modified PAR, as participants learned that many church members experienced disconnecting points of *not knowing*. A gospel of small with *intentional small acts of conversation and listening* dispelled that myth as they brought forth a deeper sense of connectedness and growing awareness of them. Chapter six brings together the results of these quantitative and qualitative data with the biblical, theological, and theoretical lenses. The lenses interact with the data as they explain the results and other aspects that went beyond what was anticipated.

CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSIONS

The myth of small was dispelled at Tree of Life Lutheran through this modified PAR project. This project's findings allowed Tree of Life to realize *what* was happening as they previously lived in a small-town myth of connection, *who* was connected and disconnected as a result, *why* disconnection occurred for several and *why* it was difficult to reconnect, and *how* they were able to dispel the myth of small through *small acts of conversation and listening*. The project's findings of *what, who, why, and how* are first explored in order to summarize what changes occurred for Tree of Life to strengthen their inter-relationships and their growing awareness of them, and thicken the fabric of their social capital. These findings, as well as the changes that occurred, are then secondly cross-examined with the theoretical lenses discussed in chapter two and the biblical and theological lenses in chapter three. The limitations of generalizing from these findings are thirdly discussed in consideration of various aspects of the project's research, methodology and design, timing, group of people, and what could have been done differently. A consideration of what generalizability is possible is also considered. Possible questions and ideas are lastly offered for future research, which could grow from this study.

Findings: What, Who, Why, and How

What—A Myth of Small

Tree of Life Lutheran was living a small-town myth, a widely-held belief that their community remained relatively connected and close to one another despite the rapidly changing society they were experiencing in their midst and around them. The impact of technological advances in farming methods and equipment that changed the rural landscape, increased mobility of work and shopping opportunities, and intensified schedules of commitments due to an increase in youth sports and activities were all weakening the fabric of their sense of connectedness without them fully realizing what was happening. They still enjoyed living what sociologists label *rural mystique*.

In a way, “the mystique is composed of treasured or almost sacred elements. It is an idealized form of community that stands in contrast to urban life. It is the antithesis of the modern urban world, somehow more moral, virtuous and simple.”¹ Tree of Life members are still able to capture this mystique in some ways, as they celebrate their annual community festivals, maintain a quaint downtown of stores, have a relatively strong and safe school district, and maintain the importance of church with five local congregations. Living in this myth, nevertheless, caused members to not realize the growing disconnection in their midst. Their simple *rural mystique* allowed them to live in small-town myth, but it was at the cost of their inter-relationships weakening and the fabric of their social capital thinning.

¹ David L. Brown and Kai A. Schafft, *Rural People and Communities in the 21st Century: Resilience and Transformation* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2011), 10.

Who the Connected and Disconnected Ones Were

Baseline questionnaires and interviews blew the cover off of this small-town myth, as data revealed who was connected and who was not. The connected ones were those who were older, grew up Lutheran, and belonged to the congregation the longest. *Older* members indicated their stronger level of connection in the church with almost a half point higher mean (4.47) than the *younger* (3.93) and *middle-age* groups (3.94) in their strength of agreement for Q25 (feel connected to others in the church), as found through baseline paired t-tests (see table M.1, appendix M). Those who grew up *Lutheran* also indicated a stronger level of connection in the baseline questionnaire, as Q25 showed almost a quarter point of higher mean for the *Lutheran* group (4.25) than the *Other Than Lutheran* (3.98), as found through the baseline independent t-tests (see table P.1 in appendix P). The baseline paired t-tests also indicated a higher mean for the *Lutheran* group (4.30) than the *Other Than Lutheran* (4.13), which is found in table P.2, appendix P. Those who were members the longest (*Members for 41 Plus Years*) also indicated a stronger level of connection in the congregation, as they indicated a higher mean of connection (4.42) compared to the *Members for 20 to 40 Years* (4.26) and *Members for 20 Years or Less* (4.14) (see table Q.2, appendix Q).

Those who were initially the connected ones in this research project personified the average ELCA member, as found in a recent research and evaluation project of the ELCA.

When it comes to age, nearly 35 percent of ELCA members are over the age of 65 compared to about 15 percent of the U.S. population. In a recent survey for *The Lutheran* magazine using their subscriber list and a social media invitation to

respond to the survey, 77 percent of the subscribers and 62 percent of the social media respondents were 55 and older.²

If Tree of Life did not do this research project and blow the cover off of their small-town myth, then they too could have lived into the ELCA's current reality of becoming an aging church. This research project, instead, gave them the opportunity to identify who the disconnected ones were in order to make the necessary adaptive changes.

The disconnected ones at Tree of Life were the *younger age group* (ages 19-39), those who grew up *Other Than Lutheran*, and those who have been *Members for 20 Years or Less*. The previously examined data consistently illustrated these three groups at the lowest level of connection in regards to Q25 (feel connected to others in this church). There were, of course, other categories from the intervening variables examined in chapter five, but these three created the most alarming trend of what could be early signs of a dying congregation. If Tree of Life chose not to make adaptive changes in order to connect these disconnected ones, they would have remained in their small-town myth, creating more disconnection points for others.

Why Disconnection Happened

Disconnection happened because Tree of Life chose to, as expressed in the baseline interviews, ignore previous habits of each other going into their own social circles/groups, saying one thing and doing another, and losing commitment and focus in church. One interviewee believed that Tree of Life lost focus because they were trying to be all things to all people (LW—Baseline Interview). Previous leadership tried hiring more staff, implementing larger programs, and bringing in larger events, but Tree of Life

² Inskeep, "Priorities in Context," 12.

found themselves in a place of less joy, turned somewhat inward, lacking focus, and disconnected from one another. No previous leadership was to blame, as impacting obstacles of society were effecting congregations throughout the country and many church leaders did not know how to respond.

Baseline interviewees could articulate such impacting obstacles happening in society, as they listed: *society is not as connected, community organizations are ceasing and volunteers decreasing, and a sense of loss of loyalty in community members has happened.* Will articulated this loss of loyalty, as he described his previous ownership of a local car dealership:

You know when we were in the car business, if we could get a customer when they were twenty-five and keep them until they were forty-five, and then we virtually had them for life. It is loyalty ... then you take care of them. But now the younger ones ... they've got a dollar and they expect that if they bought the car in [the nearby city] for cheaper, they still expected us to take care of them. If it's not too far to buy it then it's not too far to get it fixed (WB—Baseline interview).

These societal changes not only affected our small-town community, but also impacted the congregational life of Tree of Life. Several baseline interviewees, who acknowledged the reality of these changes, articulated a need to connect in a different way.

How Disconnected Ones Became Reconnected

A different way to connect was what this modified PAR project gave Tree of Life Lutheran. *Intentional small acts of conversation and listening* were utilized as a different way to strengthen inter-relationships and thicken the fabric of their connectedness to one another and the community. Previous leadership tried *big* solutions of staff, programs, and events, but this project intentionally implemented interventions that focused upon one *small act of conversation and listening* at a time. These *intentional small acts* were

implemented in aiding new members in their sense of connection through a mentor program, working together on a community service project with conversation starters, bringing together worshippers from the two different Sunday morning worship hours, celebrating Tree of Life's 100th Anniversary through various projects with conversation starters, home visits with our younger families, and an additional fund-raising carnival for a handicapped accessible lift for our Sunday school. Most of these interventions began with an orientation on meaningful conversation and listening (see appendix X). Conversation starters and/or questions were also provided so that the conversation had direction, purpose, and clarity (see appendices H, I, and J).

Focus groups were convened shortly after the completion of each intervention. Participants of these groups articulated how disconnected ones were reconnected into the participating cycle of Tree of Life Lutheran, as they shared that these interventions: *included all generations, went out of previous social circles, brought community together, communicated a purpose for coming together and bonding, worked as a team and was flexible with one another, made personal calls to invite and involve, had conversation starters, and involved praying and celebrating with one another.* These ways in which disconnected members were reconnected illustrated *what* changes occurred for Tree of Life during this project.

What Changes Occurred and Why

Three major changes occurred for Tree of Life through the process of this research project: a relocation of where reconnecting points were made for disconnected ones, a realization of differences for men and women in initial and benefitting connecting points, and a significant amount of growth in Tree of Life's sense of connectedness and

strengthening of inter-relationships. The reason why these changes occurred is due to an *accompanying leadership and membership*, which resulted from new learned behavior developed through *intentional small acts of conversation and listening*.

The first major change that occurred was the relocation of reconnecting points in the participating cycle of Tree of Life Lutheran. Prior to the modified PAR, baseline interviews illustrated that a disconnected member could only reconnect if he/she traveled alone back into the participating cycle (see figure 5.8). The reconnecting points were only found back in the cycle itself. These reconnecting points did not remain in the cycle itself, as a result of the research project. A shift occurred as these reconnecting points moved from the participating cycle out to where the disconnected one was (see figure 5.9). The disconnected one was no longer left to him/herself to come back alone, but to have others reach out to them, providing a point of reconnection where he/or she was to be found. This relocation of reconnecting points also provided another member to accompany the disconnected one back into the participating cycle of Tree of Life. This shift in reconnecting points also allowed connected and reconnected members to travel further in the participating cycle into deepening points, where reiterations of the cycle took members in a deeper sense of connectedness and community (see figure 5.11).

The second major change that occurred was a realization of differences for men and women in initial and benefitting connecting points. This realization did not become apparent until the end-line interviews, when all three men articulated that they do not come to church to connect. They come because of their faith, seeing a need and wanting to help, or because they were asked in using a gift or passion of theirs. The three women, in turn, responded that they do come for the connections as they are able to talk about

what they have learned, share stories and are given encouragement, and are encountered by other members of the congregation. The benefitting points for both men and women found commonalities as they both enjoy the benefit of connecting and finding a common purpose or goal together.

These different initial connecting points and common benefitting points were important to articulate and name, as the quantitative data showed that the men's sense of connectedness decreased during the project. The independent t-tests did indicate a slight increase of connectedness, but the paired t-tests showed a small decrease in four out of the six standardized questions of connectedness (see table 5.20). The baseline questionnaire data indicated that men had a higher level in connectedness, but the end-line showed a lower level of connectedness, as indicated in: Q25 (feel connected to others in this church), Q40 (integrated family or group made up of cliques), Q41 (very closely connected or very disconnected), and Q42 (open-minded people or close-minded). The paired t-tests also indicated four areas differences that were statistically significant for women, which is in direct contrast to the men.

This discovery is of utmost importance as we have begun to grow in our sense of connectedness at Tree of Life. We have learned how to shift the reconnecting points to where disconnected ones are located, but in order to connect and reconnect both men and women we need to consider the discovered differences found in both the quantitative and qualitative data. These different initial connecting points for men and women give us opportunity to examine our approaches in leadership and membership.

The third major change that occurred for Tree of Life is its significant growth in a sense of connectedness throughout the various intervening variables tested; especially the

variables of age groups, childhood church background, and length of congregational membership. Three differences that were statistically significant occurred in the paired t-tests for the *younger* and *middle-age* groups. The *younger* group indicated in the end-line questionnaire a higher sense of community as an integrated family (Q40) and a very closely connected group (Q41). The *middle-age* group indicated a higher sense of community as a congregation that cares deeply about the community and world (Q44). Both the *younger* and *middle-age* groups had a consistent increase in mean for all the standard questions (Q25, Q41-Q44), which indicated growth for both groups (see table 5.18).

The *Other Than Lutheran* group, as part of the church background variable, also showed differences that were statistically significant in the paired t-tests in three areas: Q41 (very closely connected), Q43 (practice what they believe), and Q44 (care deeply about community/world) (see table 5.25). All three of these end-line responses had a higher mean than the *Lutheran* group. Both groups displayed consistent increases of mean from the baseline to the end-line in all but Q25. This growth is important for both groups, but particularly the *Other Than Lutheran* group that was in need of stronger connection prior to the project's interventions.

A similar area of growth which was needed was with the *Members of 20 Years or Less* group and the *Members for 21 to 40 Years* group. The longer one was a member, the more one was connected, as was portrayed through the baseline questionnaire. Both independent t-tests and paired t-tests indicated differences that were statistically significant for both of these groups through the end-line questionnaire. The *Members of 20 Years or Less* group had two differences that were statistically significant in Q43

(practice what they believe) and Q44 (care about the community/world), as found in the independent t-tests (see table 5.26). The *Members for 21 to 40 Years* group had three differences that were statistically significant in Q41 (very closely connected), Q42 (open-minded people), and Q44 (care about the community/world). The *Members for 41 Plus Years* group experienced a stagnant or decreased mean, which is important to note, in all six of the standard questions of measurement for connectedness for the paired t-tests. Three of these means still indicated a higher mean for the three groups, but still showed a slight decrease from the baseline (see table 5.27). This could be a direct reflection of three of the interventions (New Member/Mentor program, interviews with younger families, and the additional carnival), which focused more on the younger population of the congregation.

These three areas indicated the much needed growth to connect our *younger*, *Other Than Lutheran*, and *Members of 40 or Less Years* groups, so that we as Tree of Life could begin to reverse trends of becoming an aging congregation where only the older, grew up Lutheran, and longest members were previously connected. These areas, nevertheless, were not the only areas that experienced significant growth. Four other intervening variables displayed other areas of growth with those who attend worship less than weekly, regularly use technological devices and/or television, shop out of town, and participate in community service.

Those who do attend worship *every week* did logically experience the most differences that were statistically significant, as indicated in the independent t-tests with Q43 (practice what they believe) and Q44 (care deeply about the community/world). Growth was found, as well, with the group that worships *2 to 3 Times Per Month* in the

paired t-tests with Q41 (very closely connected) (see table 5.28). This growth, although found in only one question, does indicate that some growth is beginning to happen with what is expressed today as the average worship attendance of twice a month.

Regular technological use of devices and/or television and radio brought forth surprising growth as well with the group that uses technological devices and/or television and radio for *2 to 5 Hours*. The group who uses these *Less Than 2 Hours* logically had the most significant growth of stronger agreement with three differences that were statistically significant in the independent t-tests and four in the paired t-tests (see tables 5.32 and 5.33), but the group who uses *2 to 5 hours* experienced a consistent increase in mean for all questions in both the independent t-tests and paired t-tests. The paired t-test for social media in Q39 also indicated a consistent increase in mean from the baseline (3.52) to the end-line (3.88). Tree of Life Lutheran is beginning to discover ways in which social media and technology can be utilized in growing a sense of connectedness. Two of the three end-line interviewees also indicated this growth, as they shared their appreciation for the awareness social media brings. They did indicate though that it cannot take the place of face-to-face contact (JG and AW—Baseline Interviews).

Tree of Life Lutheran's small-town does have an intact downtown with several stores, but it also faces the increased mobility of shopping opportunities in a nearby city. The group that *shops in town* consistently had a higher means of connection throughout both independent t-tests and paired t-tests, but the *shops out of town* group also consistently grew in mean (see tables 5.36 and 5.37). They did in fact experience one difference that was statistically significant in the paired t-tests of Q41 (very closely connected) as found in table 5.37. The consistent growth in mean of stronger connection,

as well as the difference that was statistically significant, indicates that we at Tree of Life are making adaptive changes in responding to the increased mobility of our members.

Providing community service projects also created an opportunity for members to become more connected with one another and the community. Those who *participate in community service projects* consistently had a higher mean, indicating a stronger level of connectedness or community, than those *who do not participate*. The group who *participates in community service projects* had three differences that were statistically significant in the independent t-tests, as well as four in the paired t-tests (see tables 5.38 and 5.39). Community service projects, such as the God's Work, Our Hands, Part 2 intervention of this project, allowed members to come together with a common goal and purpose, while participating in conversation starters to connect them better with other participants.

These areas of growth are important in illustrating that Tree of Life is making adaptive changes necessary in strengthening their inter-relationships and deepening their sense of connectedness and community. Areas of needed growth were also discovered through the data. These areas are found with those of lower income and educational levels, those who work out of town, and the congregation's awareness of their inter-relationships. Each of these areas showed a decreased strength of agreement or *stagnant to little* response in connectedness. The nine months of the project perhaps did not give enough time to develop these areas more deeply or become more aware of them, but these areas indicate needed future growth.

Overall, all the areas of significant change and growth occurred because of a style of accompaniment found in both leadership and membership. Focus groups uncovered

why this accompaniment drew out a growth in connectedness and deepened community. *Accompanying leadership* modeled and spun out an approach of reaching out to members (connected and disconnected) wherever they were at in the cycle of participating. *Flexibility, being down to earth, expectations of members participating*, and even modeling *small acts of conversation and listening* modeled an accompaniment that members began to practice into their way of behaving. They began an *accompanying membership*, as they too reached out to disconnected members through personal contacts and invitations, intentional visits, involving multiple generations, and team work. Their *intentional small acts of conversation and listening* drew members back into the participating cycle of Tree of Life where their inter-relationships were strengthened and the fabric of connectedness was thickened, as well as sense of community deepened. These areas of growth and reasons why they occurred are also cross-examined with lenses of chapter two and three, so that this interpretation of the research findings may be deepened theoretically, biblically, and theologically.

Findings Cross-Examined with Lenses

Theoretical Lenses

Community, social capital, open systems theory, transformational leadership, and *intentional small acts of meaningful conversation and listening* provided theoretical lenses through which the data of this study was viewed. They provided an interpretive means for understanding where Tree of Life Lutheran began in this study and further enhanced language to describe the change that came through the modified PAR.

Community

Two definitions of community were central to this research project. First, the project continually spoke of reaching out into Tree of Life Lutheran's surrounding community. Community in this sense is defined demographically as the group of people who live in the small-town where Tree of Life is located. Second, the project continually spoke about a sense of community, which is "socially defined as a group of people who share the same interest, religion, race, etc."³ These two definitions gave our congregation a starting place to define what community is and name the type of community we were experiencing at the beginning of this project.

Initial conversations defining our current type of community were held at our annual church council retreat in August of 2014. The council was presented with Peter Born's three types of community: no-community, shallow community, and a fear-based community.⁴ Council members felt that our congregation was reflecting a shallow community, which Born defines as having fewer emotional bonds, time-limited connections, occasional associations, and distant greetings. They felt that our congregation was not living in a deepened sense of community, where inter-relationships exhibited a sense of trust and commitment to one another. This conversation, which defined and articulated what type of community we were, became the impetus for Q40-Q44 in the baseline and end-line questionnaire (see appendix C).

These questions exhibited a range of agreement with strongly agree on the left (higher/deeper sense of community), neutral in the middle, and strongly agree on the

³ "Community."

⁴ Born, *Deepening Community*, 62-63.

right (lower/shallower sense of community). Both sides of this range had two extremes on the left and right. Q40 for example ranged from the left extreme with *an integrated, woven together family* to the right extreme with *a group largely made up of several cliques*. The data from Q40-Q44 in both the independent t-tests and paired t-tests showed a consistent increase in mean, which indicated a deepening in Tree of Life's sense of community (see tables 5.13, 5.14, and K.1-appendix K). The findings of these quantitative data are also underscored in the findings of the qualitative data, where reiterations of Tree of Life's participating cycle were experienced once members were reconnected through the *accompanying leadership* and *accompanying membership*. These reiterations brought forth a deepened sense of connectedness and community as members continued to participate and grow, as illustrated in figure 6.12.

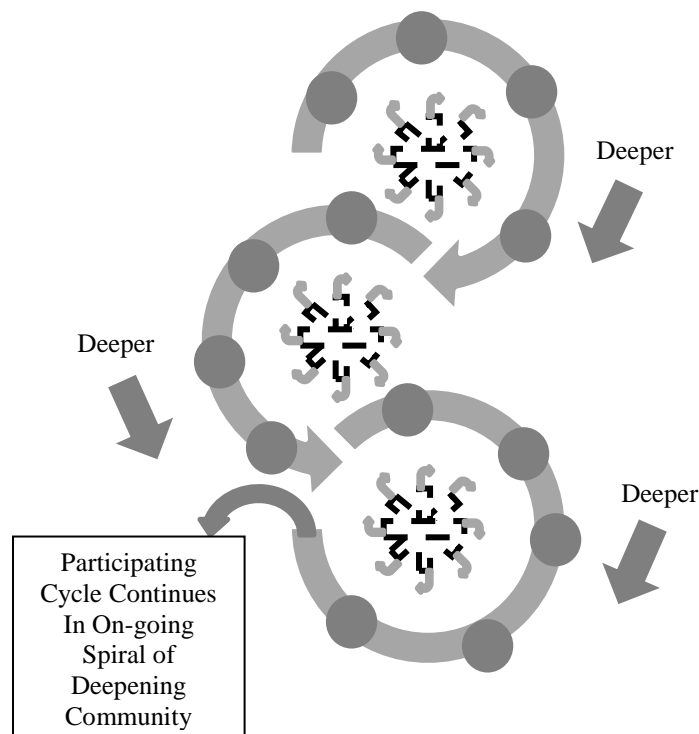


Figure 6.12. Spiral of Deepening Community through Reiterations of Participating Cycle of Tree of Life

This modified PAR project allowed Tree of Life to experience such benefits of being together in deepened community. These benefits included: increase in effectiveness, mutual aid and success, improvement of health and well-being, and a gained sense of identity and purpose. Qualitative data clarified these benefits, which resulted in a deeper connectedness.

The first benefit, an increase in effectiveness, was articulated in the focus groups as the interventions provided opportunity for teamwork, such as in the monthly 100th Anniversary celebrations and the carnival fund-raiser (see table 5.51). Participants shared how they came to know and appreciate the behind-the-scenes work of the congregation, which they never knew before. An increased awareness of others' strengths and talents was also gained, as participants intentionally reached out to others who were disconnected and not involved. Tree of Life experienced an increase in effectiveness because they were no longer relying on only members in the participating cycle; instead, they broke out of existing social circles, as well as the participating cycle, and reached out to others with new reconnecting points.

Mutual aid and success was the second benefit of community that Tree of Life experienced through this project. They experienced, in Robert Putnam's words, "a positive epidemic," which is, "the visible and active presence of a remarkable number of people who think it's possible to do things in turn convince others that it is possible, desirable, and even expected that they, too, will participate and accomplish something."⁵ We experienced a positive epidemic as we accomplished God's Work, Our Hands, Part 2, when we packaged over 7,500 meals within three hours. We also experienced this every

⁵ Putnam, Feldstein, and Cohen, *Better Together*, 255.

time we did a monthly 100th Anniversary celebration, such as the 100 nativities at Christmas or events with our attempted goal of 100 participants. Perhaps our least expected, positive epidemic was the additional intervention of the Carnival Fund-raiser for our handicap accessible efforts. A snow-ball effect literally happened as a small group of four women began conversations with friends, disconnected members, and existing members, drawing them into the efforts. We were surprised that we raised over \$9,000, but more importantly Tree of Life experienced the benefit of mutual aid and success of community when we worked together for the sake of others. It was truly a positive epidemic of community!

A third benefit of community that was experienced was an improvement in the health and well-being of community members. This health and well-being is experienced when a group of people take care of one another, live in relationships, and stay together. This was especially experienced in Intervention One: New Member/Mentor Program, Intervention Three: Half-time Conversations; and Intervention Five: Home Visits to Younger, Less Involved Families. New members felt a sense of others caring for them through their mentors, as they were able to answer questions of not knowing. A sense of coming together happened in the Half-time Conversations for members, who normally do not see one another because of different worship hours. Those who were somewhat disconnected had the opportunity to share their thoughts and reflections as PAR team members reached out to them and visited them in their homes.

Staying together was a message given to disconnected ones as points of reconnection were brought to them. This benefit was especially articulated through the *benefitting points of men and women* from the six end-line interviews. The men named

benefits of coming together, such as: *connecting to others, enjoying people and being a member, and being a part of something that helps church and/or others*. The women named benefits, such as: *wanting to come more because of good connections, sharing stories from older members and given encouragement, and experiencing welcoming spirit of the congregation* (see table 5.49).

Both the men and the women named the fourth benefit, identity and purpose, which were experienced through the lens of community. All six of the baseline interviewees articulated that a benefit of coming together is *finding a common goal/reason/purpose*. Two in particular stated that a common goal or purpose is what forces them to come out of their normal social circles. One articulated that she could not think of a better purpose than the purpose of the church (AW—Baseline Interviews). Identity was particularly expressed in one focused code, *getting lost when chasing what you think people want*. Luke expressed in both the baseline and end-line interviews a need to get back to the basics so that we could refocus on who we are and what our purpose is. These benefits of community allowed Tree of Life Lutheran to deepen their sense of community and also strengthen their social capital with one another (bonding) and the community of their small-town (bridging).

Social Capital

Tree of Life Lutheran found its roots in the German heritage and perhaps even in the German way of life, *Gemeinschaft*, which Tönnies used to describe rural societies that are based on “personal relationships and face-to-face interactions in which social

relations are valued as an end or goal.”⁶ These roots unfortunately weakened as the fabric of their social capital thinned. Impacting obstacles, resulting from changes in society, weakened their sense of connectedness with one another and created a shallow sense of community.

Sociologists Robert Putnam and Flora and Flora would have described Tree of Life’s thinned fabric as one with fewer connections, decreased reciprocity and trust, and a lack of collective identity and shared future.⁷ Robert Wuthnow would have described Tree of Life as one with loose connections.⁸ Tönnies would have simply called it *Gessellschaft*, a shallow community where, “relationships are impersonal, formal, and frequently guided by contractual arrangements.”⁹ Flora and Flora would have called us a congregation that was living in a form of *clientelism*, where our bridging capital was high and our bonding capital was low. Tree of Life Lutheran members described themselves through the axial code of *disconnecting points* in the baseline interviews: *going to own groups, not wanting to commit, not as focused on church, living/working out of town, trying to be all things to all people, and people saying one thing and doing another* (see table 5.47). The participants of the baseline questionnaire described themselves through the quantitative data, which illustrated a consistent lower mean in their sense of connection throughout the independent t-tests measuring the overall sense of connectedness (see table 5.13).

⁶ Tönnies and Loomis, *Community and Society*, 33-34.

⁷ Flora and Flora, *Rural Communities*, 5-10; Putnam, *Bowling Alone*.

⁸ Wuthnow, *Loose Connections*, 7-8.

⁹ Tönnies and Loomis, *Community and Society*, 65.

Flora and Flora would have challenged Tree of Life to increase its two types of social capital: bonding and bridging. Bonding social capital is like the superglue that connects communities together through face-to-face interactions and relationships. Bridging capital involves singular ties between the congregation and the surrounding community. Tree of Life was functioning in a *clientelism*, where their bonding capital was low and their bridging capital was high, as indicated by the grey box in figure 6.13.

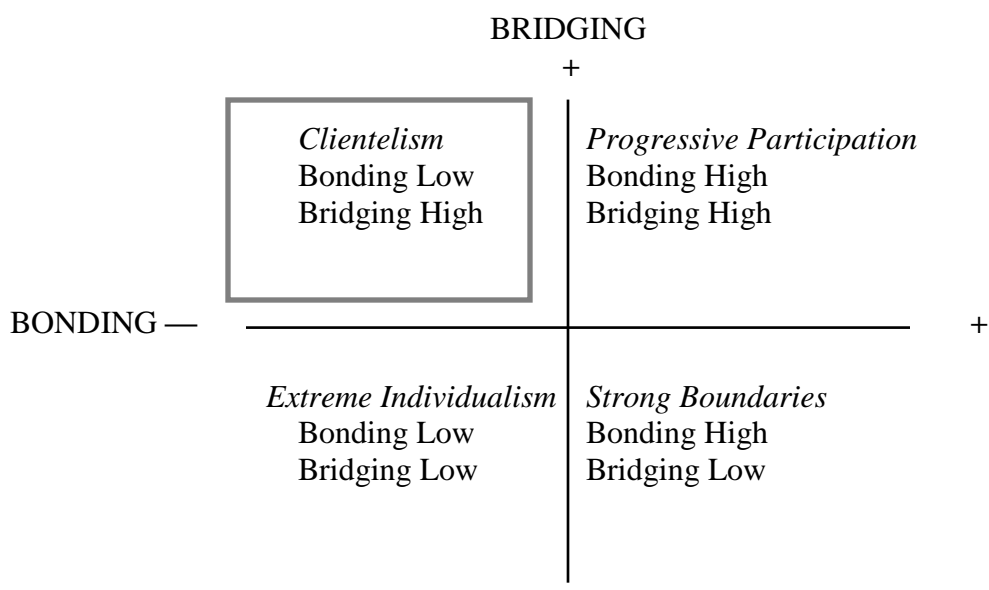


Figure 6.13. Flora and Flora's Social Capital Typology with Tree of Life's Baseline Assessment¹⁰

Tree of Life has always had a high bridging capital, as it has focused on fund-raising efforts for families in need, begun the area food pantry and back-pack program, and continued its efforts in a community-wide VBS and the after school program. This was also evident in participants' responses to Q27-Q31 pertaining to the congregation's life in the community of its small-town (see tables 5.40 and 5.41). The average mean ranged from (1) *Very Positive* or *Very Helpful* to (2) *Mostly Positive* or *Somewhat Helpful*

¹⁰ Flora and Flora, *Rural Communities*, 128.

as participants were asked to answer questions about the care for others in the community, participation in community service projects, feeling at home in the small-town, and being greeted by other members while out in community. This higher bridging capital was not matched evenly with Tree of Life's bonding capital. The independent t-test from the baseline questionnaire of Q40 (integrated family or group made up of several cliques) showed a consistent level of agreement of neutral (4) between high community (7) and low community (1) (see table 5.13). The lower sense of bonding capital in conjunction with the higher sense of bridging capital created *clientelism*, where Tree of Life was perhaps functioning as a local boss or benefactor to members and/or the community.

The modified PAR project gave Tree of Life the opportunity to increase both their bonding and bridging social capital and begin to grow towards *progressive participation*, where together participants decide upon priorities based on the common good of the congregation and community. The grey box in figure 6.12 was not moved completely from *clientelism* to *progressive participation* in order to signify the growth that is still in process for Tree of Life. Whereas Tree of Life grew in indicated differences that were statistically significant in their social inter-relationships, their awareness of these relationships only brought forth one difference that was statistically significant.

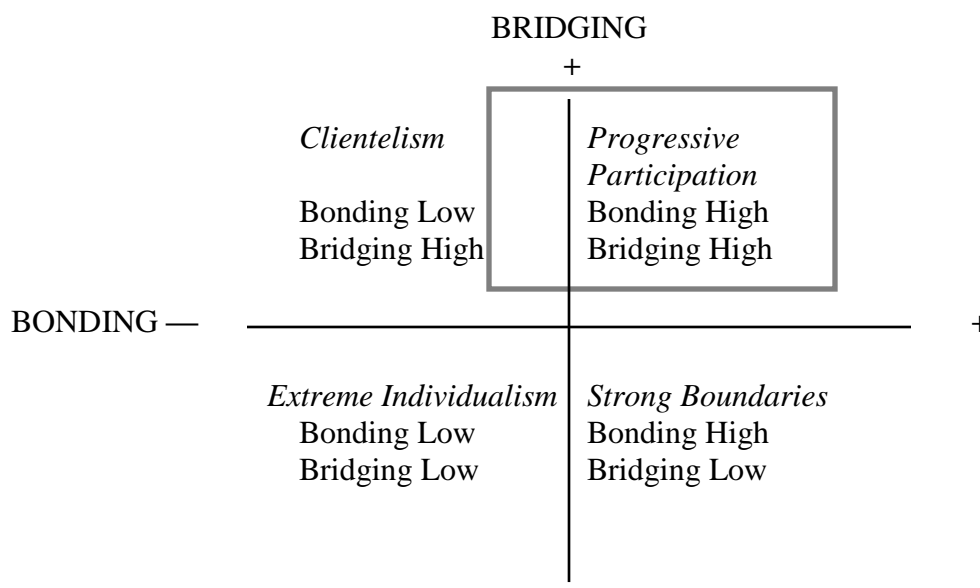


Figure 6.14. Flora and Flora's Social Capital Typology with Tree of Life's End-line Assessment¹¹

Participants indicated a difference that was statistically significant in their strength of agreement in Q20 finding congregational people help them cope with daily struggles or difficult times in life. This increase was indicated from the baseline (mean = 2.30) to the end-line (mean = 2.81); $t_{(62)} = -2.395$, $p = .020$. Q18 (people are welcoming) and Q19 (people greet and know me by name) both indicated a slight decrease in mean, whereas Q21 (feel comfortable approaching others and having conversation) had a slight increase (see appendix L, table L.2). The difference that was statistically significant in Q20 of the paired t-test indicates we are beginning to deepen our inter-relationships, but still are in the midst of more to come. We are still growing towards a complete shift from *clientelism* to *progressive participation*. The differences that were statistically significant, as well as the differences that were not statistically significant, but still had consistent

¹¹ Ibid.

increases of mean are still to be commended and explored, so that future growth continues.

Tree of Life consistently grew in both bonding and bridging capital. Their sense of community became higher and deeper according to Q40-Q44 in both the independent t-tests and paired t-tests (see tables 5.13 and 5.14). A sense of *progressive participation* was very evident in the collective efforts of the God's Work, Our Hands project, the 100th Anniversary celebrations, and Carnival Fund-raiser. Participants decided upon priorities together in implementing these interventions and reached out for the sake of the common good of the congregation and community.

Tree of Life's progressing growth from *clientelism* to *progressive participation* is to be celebrated especially in the midst of challenges, which Robert Putnam names as mobility and sprawl, pressure and time, and the frequency of consumption of mass media of entertainment.¹² Putnam argued that mass media competes for our scarce time, inhibits our social participation, and provides a false sense of personal connection. Quantitative data from the baseline questionnaire also agreed with Putnam's argument. The group who uses technological devices and/or television *Less Than 2 Hours* experienced the most statistically significant differences in growing in a sense of connectedness as found in both the independent t-tests and paired t-tests (see tables 5.32 and 5.33).

The major difference from Putnam's argument, however, is today's reality of social media. This particular argument of Putnam's was written in the year 2000 before much of social media was developed.¹³ Those who use devices and/or television *6 to 10*

¹² Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 231.

¹³ Ibid.

Hours per day in this research consistently had a higher mean indicating a stronger sense of connectedness in the baseline (see tables 5.32 and 5.33). This sense of connectedness did decrease somewhat from the baseline to end-line questionnaires, but this group remained at a higher level of connectedness in several of the standard questions (Q25, Q40-Q44). This growth in connectedness through social media was also measured through the paired t-test of Q39. An increase in mean from the baseline (3.52) to the end-line (3.88) indicated a higher level of agreement that one's involvement in social media helps to increase connectedness in the congregation.

This is one of the many ways Tree of Life is beginning to make adaptive changes in today's society in order to thicken the fabric of its social capital and deepen its sense of connectedness with both its bonding and bridging capital. Tree of Life has begun to reflect the nine congregations in Ammerman's study, as they look for spaces of sociability recognizing that relationships are spread out over wider, multiple areas of work/shopping location, on-line accessibility, and various impacting obstacles.¹⁴ A sense of *Gemeinschaft* was recovered as the fabric of social capital thickened and inter-relationships were strengthened. Tree of Life, while recognizing their role as generators of social capital in their small-town German community, adapted as it began to function as an open system considering their connections with their environment or context surrounding them.

¹⁴ Ammerman and Farnsley, *Congregation & Community*, 365.

Open Systems Theory

Tree of Life Lutheran has always had a love for their small-town community and their relationships outside themselves. They previously functioned without realization from a place of *clientelism*, as they behaved more like a benefactor in a top-down organization. This modified PAR gave them the opportunity to function in an open systems manner, behaving their way into a new way of connecting with their environment, where they functioned as equal to equal. They did not need to become more open in order to survive, but through clarity of identity and purpose they became more open and began to adapt their ways of reaching out into their environment.

This project gave them the opportunity to inadvertently journey through Mary Jo Hatch and Ann L. Cunliffe's levels of analysis as they considered their relationship with their context or environment.¹⁵ The first level of analysis studies the organization's immediate environment of the stakeholders, the vital players who form the inter-networks of the organization. Examining our bonding capital through the baseline questionnaire and interviews allowed Tree of Life to evaluate their inter-networks and create a readiness factor in naming their weakened social inter-relationships within vital players in the immediate environment of church members. The second level of analysis, which studies the conditions and trends in the environment, provided a chance for Tree of Life to consider why disconnections had occurred and what impacting obstacles were affecting them. All the interviews and focus groups named these impacting obstacles, such as: *being between two worlds of athletics/activities and what is believed to be*

¹⁵ Hatch, *Organization Theory*, 65.

important for family, seeing the effects of weakened society, society not as connected, and not just a Lutheran problem—church not as important (see tables 5.47 and 5.49).

Naming these obstacles provided discussion in how they impact the environment of the organization. Considerations were made in order to experiment and practice reaching out to those disconnected due to such obstacles. The third level of analysis, which is globalization, gave us opportunity to analyze Tree of Life's permeability, so that we may attend to changes in the environment and interpret meaning in how we could respond. We also were able to clarify our purpose and goals, while functioning in particular to our changed context of increased mobility, use of technological devices, sporadic free-time which affects volunteerism, and the disequilibrium that we continue to face in the midst of the fast-paced changing society of the postmodern era. This postmodern era, as well as this project, created an awakening that we are a living open system capable of renewal.

We grew into a more fully opened system that functions together as we experimented, adjusted, and behaved our way into new discoveries in how to reconnect others and deepen our sense of community. Our open system changed our attitudes of how to connect others and our behaviors in reaching out. The anxious questions spoken previously, such as "Where are they" gave way to "Let me call them and find out." We began to make the adaptive changes necessary to serve God's purpose in our context because of the small steps we took in this project. Peter Block reinforces the way in which we began our adaptive changes, as he states, "Sustainable changes in community occur locally on a small scale, happen slowly, and are initiated at a grassroots level."¹⁶

¹⁶ Block, *Community: The Structure of Belonging*, 26.

These small changes began to occur as we began with the leadership style of myself, staff, and the PAR team. This leadership reflected the lens of transformational leadership.

Transformational Leadership

The necessary adaptive changes, which Tree of Life Lutheran began to make through this project, were spun out initially through the leadership of me, our staff, and PAR team. Leadership was no longer a *transactional* leadership, where skills and capacities of leaders were developed around how to most effectively engage people when they came into the church; rather, leadership became a *transformational* leadership, which “involves an exceptional form of influence that moves followers to accomplish more than what is usually expected of them.”¹⁷ This was particularly reflected in the New Member/Mentor intervention focus group:

It’s changed a lot. Just with you coming on as a new pastor, it’s night and day from what it used to be. It’s just a different leadership style. There are a lot of opportunities now that we didn’t do previously. It’s like we’re all new members under your reign. Our dynamics have changed. I think even a lot of older members are finding their way in the church because you’ve changed so much for the better. You’ve done a great job in giving us a lot of other alternatives than just showing up on Sunday morning to sit for an hour. You’ve brought a lot that demands us to give our time and that’s good. It’s a different capacity in how we are being the church (FG1-3).

Greg verbalized a shift in leadership, particularly through my pastoral leadership, as Tree of Life Lutheran realized they could not have leadership primarily focused on how to most effectively engage people when they came into the church. Leadership, prior to this project, was focused on only the participating cycle and those in it (see figure 5.8).

Adaptive change could only be made if leadership spun out a system of accompaniment

¹⁷ Northouse, *Leadership*, 161.

that moved in and beyond the participating cycle. A leadership was utilized, as we accompanied members wherever they were to be found. Deb articulated this change in leadership style with Tree of Life, as she shared, “Our pastor is a down to earth person who you can relate to—in church, at school, or even at the ball park” (FG5-2). This *accompanying leadership* exhibited a *transformational* leadership that is socialized and concerned with the collective good of the environment, context, and members’ daily lives.

This *accompanying leadership* of the pastor, staff, and PAR team also included aspects of idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual motivation, and individualized consideration.¹⁸ All of our above listed leadership provided a supportive climate in which we especially listened to individual needs of members, such as in the following interventions: the New Member/Mentor program; Home Visits with Younger, Less Involved Families; and various projects of the 100th Anniversary Celebrations. This shift from *transactional* to *transformational* leadership was also experienced as focus groups shared that the alternative, different opportunities were: *communicated with a purpose, multi-generational, social and special*, and *gave opportunity to help the community and others* (see table 5.51). These opportunities spun the modeling of accompaniment from leadership out into the membership.

An *accompanying membership* developed as these opportunities gave members a chance to reach out personally to other participants/members or those disconnected. The *accompanying membership* moved congregational relationships beyond the participating cycle out to where other members were. Tree of Life no longer functions with

¹⁸ Ibid., 167-170.

transactional leadership that focuses only on engagement with members inside the participating cycle in the church; we function with a *transformational* leadership that engages with members inside and outside the participating cycle where one can reconnect where he/she is found. *Transformational* leadership with a model of accompaniment spun out into *accompanying membership* because we functioned as an open system with our context utilizing the power of small acts. These small acts are what began sustainable changes in our congregation and community because they occurred on a small scale and happened slowly—one *intentional small act of conversation and listening* at a time.

Small Acts of Conversation and Listening

Tree of Life Lutheran had been living in a myth of small-town life, as they assumed conversations and listening were already taking place. They did not take into account the impacting obstacles surrounding them of a changed society, especially the impact of newer families that moved into town and commuted to the nearby city for work. This modified PAR project reoriented our congregation to dispel the small-town myth and begin using our primary modes of relating and belonging in community: speech and listening. “Speech is the primary mode of relating and being listened to is the primary means of being understood and appreciated.”¹⁹ Participants indicated in the end-line questionnaire that they felt more connected because 86.1% of them had conversations with others and 88.6% felt listened to by others (see table 5.43). Strengthening our inter-relationships and deepening our social capital occurred through the *accompanying*

¹⁹ Nichols, *The Lost Art of Listening*, 38.

leadership and membership, as each reached out with *intentional small acts of conversation and listening*.

Meaningful Conversation

A shift was cultivated from *meaningless* to *meaningful* conversations through the *accompanying leadership*, which the PAR team, staff, and I modeled throughout the project. Each intervention began with “A Place to Start: *Meaningless* Conversations vs. *Meaningful* Conversations with Listening for the Sake of the Other,” which I compiled and developed from learnings in chapter two (see appendix X). We wanted to create “a lived experience of how we naturally self-organize to think together, strengthen community, and ignite innovation.”²⁰ We believed that if we cultivated *meaningful* conversation, we would move away from the polarities, cynicalness, weakened trust, and problem-oriented small-town talk of *meaningless* conversations.

These cultivated, *meaningful* conversations gave us the opportunity to notice what was going on especially in how members connect, disconnect, and reconnect. We were able to clarify to one another our thoughts and experiences through the baseline and end-line interviews, interventions, and focus groups. Participants were able to articulate a sense of knowing they were not as connected, as well as some of the impacting obstacles. They were quite honest in sharing what they did not know prior to the modified PAR project. They were also able to enter into a sense of innovation as these *meaningful* conversations gave them the occasion to rediscover goals and passions, and regain focus. Inquiry was evoked, as the two core necessities that Block lists were experienced. These

²⁰ Brown, *The World Cafe*, 5.

two core necessities are experiencing everyone as equal and utilizing questions that matter.²¹

Meaningful conversation in an open system functions not with a top down management model, but an *accompanying leadership* and *membership* that creates a sense of equality where everyone's thoughts and experiences were considered throughout this process. Questions that mattered were asked within this experienced equality, as Tree of Life moved away from the poor question, "Where is everyone at worship?" to the question that mattered, "Why are these members/participants disconnected and how can we reconnect them?" We grew because of the questions we were asking, just as Brown states, "Human systems grow toward what they persistently ask about."²² Our shift from meaningless conversations to meaningful conversations happened because we asked questions that mattered and then listened.

Listening

Listening is "to pay attention, take an interest, care about, take to heart, validate, acknowledge, be moved ... appreciate."²³ Listening has an intense impact upon self-development; hence, it also has an intense impact upon the development of an organization like Tree of Life. Just as a child's desire to be in relationship is experienced and affirmed when caretakers attune themselves as they listen, so too were Tree of Life's members' desires to be in relationship with one another. Listening strengthened inter-relationships and brought forth deeper connections, as members reached out to

²¹ Block, *Community*, 114.

²² Brown, *The World Cafe*, 91.

²³ Nichols, *The Lost Art of Listening*, 14.

disconnected ones, asked questions that mattered, and listened. This listening response grew benefits of trust, understanding, and respect as these members' inter-relationships were strengthened and as they accompanied one another back into the participating cycle of Tree of Life.

This effective listening was also part of the orientation for each intervention (see appendix X). We did not assume participants knew how to effectively listen. Poor listening was defined as a listening operating according to their own agenda, preconceived notions, defensive emotional reactions, or preparation of one's own response in the listener's mind. Participants were encouraged to empty their filled-filters of their own agenda, what they have to get done later, and preconceived notions. They were invited to let go of their own needs so that they may concentrate on the others in effective listening.

Effective listening allowed connected and disconnected members to come into a sense of knowing, which was not previously experienced (see table 5.51). Listening enabled: *knowing who and where to ask for help, knowing others and networking, knowing and appreciating behind-the-scenes work of congregation, knowing history of the congregation, and knowing others' strengths and talents*. Effective listening also happened as 87.3% of participants knew one another's names better, 78.6% of participants felt their relationships deepened with others, 78.3% of participants had interest taken in their individual families, and 60% talked about faith (see table 5.43).

Meaningful conversation and listening, coupled together, created the tool of adaptive change for this project. These two together became the adaptive behaviors that we practiced into a new, strengthened way of being more deeply connected. Inter-

relationships grew, as examined through the sociological lenses and measured through the research methodology and data of this modified PAR. These inter-relationships and this sense of connectedness also deepened through the work of the Holy Spirit, as we “got back to the basics” of our faith (LW—End-line and Baseline Interviews). We went back to the basics with a biblical and theological focus through such lenses as discussed below.

Biblical Lenses

Two biblical themes framed and supported this research. Biblical themes anchored this study in the midst of God’s action in building and deepening community. The biblical themes of hearing and a gospel of the small are reviewed in light of the research data to explain how *intentional small acts of conversation and listening* in this project created great increases in community through the kingdom of God. The theological themes of incarnation, perichoresis, and sense of belonging are then explored as lenses of interpretation. These themes explain how God’s incarnational presence brings God’s perichoretical community into our communities, where we are given a sense of belonging.

Hearing

The lens of listening moved us back to the basics of a biblical sense of hearing. Our *intentional small acts of conversation and listening* empowered us to shift our listening into hearing, which is a formative practice of discipleship in relationship to God and one another in community. We were empowered to make this shift because of God’s work, as God has enabled a sense of hearing for God’s people throughout history.

God's people first heard God because God heard them. God heard their cries in their brokenness in slavery in Egypt and later in exile in Babylon (Exodus 3 and Isaiah 59). God responded in relationship to them as God remembered God's covenant to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and delivered them. God's people responded to God, as they responded by hearing (*shamà*) and obeying. God's people would continue to live and hear God in their covenantal relationship, but they would fail to be obedient throughout history. God did not give up, as God acted decisively for God's people, bringing Christ who would establish a new covenant of his blood given for all. "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me" (I Corinthians 11: 25b). Christ's new covenant delivered God's people to hear (*akouo*) and to believe. Hearing in the biblical sense was transformed from our obedience to our faith, as we grow in this covenantal relationship with God and others.

The biblical sense of hearing pulls us back to our vocational calling as Christ's church to live in the dialogical co-presence with God and one another. "As people enter into a vital dialogical co-presence with God, their experience of this relationship provides an openness to persons in dialogue—who are the image of God."²⁴ Entering into a dialogical co-presence with God and one another moves us in God's continued covenantal relationship, seeing one another in the image of God. Seeing God's image in one another brings an openness that was not there before.

Tree of Life's openness was measured in the baseline and end-line questionnaires through Q42 (Open-minded people who listen or close-minded people who do not listen). Both the independent t-tests and paired t-tests indicated a consistent growth in mean,

²⁴ Wimberly, "Called to Listen," 334.

indicating a stronger, deeper sense of community with one another through the action of listening (see tables 5.13 and K.1, appendix K). A sense of openness grew, as seen in the independent t-tests (mean increased from 5.12 to 5.38) and in the paired t-tests (mean increased from 5.13 to 5.41). End-line interviewees also named this growing sense of openness with one another as they shared reasons for reconnecting: *coming together of generations, opening up to others' faith stories, going out of own social circles, and experiencing a deeper meaning and bond through church than other activities or organizations* (see table 5.49). Penny shared particularly that it was “having a common belief system” that drew her back (PA—End-line Interview).

Our common belief system in God's covenant with us empowers us to hear one another and grow in a covenantal relationship with one another. The *accompanying membership* emboldens this covenantal relationship as we reached out of the participating cycle of the congregation, met disconnected ones where they were, heard their individual stories, and accompanied them back into the participating cycle of life together. The Holy Spirit empowered the hearing that occurred through the interventions, focus groups, and interviews, so that Tree of Life could shift from a question of obedience, “Where are they? Why aren't they at worship?” to a question of faith “Why aren't they here and where can I go to them?” Hearing God's call moved Tree of Life in this practice of discipleship so that we could grow our sense of connectedness with one another. This hearing occurred and continues to happen because of a gospel of the small found in the *intentional small acts of conversation and listening*.

A Gospel of the Small

Our *intentional small acts of conversation and listening* were the ordinary means, which God used to bring forth God's kingdom of abundance in our congregation. This modified PAR project provided opportunity for us to learn to be content with God's small means and trust that God would enlarge our vision of growing in our inter-relationships and deepen our sense of community. We went back to the basics in the Bible of God's use of a few (*oligos*) and those things that are small (*mikros*) in outward or physical size.

God called forth a small (*mikros*) shepherd boy, David, to defeat the big and mighty Goliath (I Samuel 17). God brought forth the Messiah, the Word of God, in the form of a small baby. Jesus used a few (*oligos*) loaves and five fish to feed a crowd of 5,000 plus with an abundance of twelve baskets left over (Matthew 15:34). Jesus increasingly spoke about the *mikros* growing into the kingdom's greatness as encouragement to the disciples in the face of what others believed to be insignificant and too small.

Jesus especially spoke of the use of the *mikros* in kingdom parables, such as the mustard seed parable. Emphasis is especially placed on Matthew's mustard seed parable because of the outcome of the small seed's growth. "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches (Matthew 13:31b-32). The small seed is used to grow a place for the birds to gather and create their place of rest and care for family.

Our *intentional small acts of conversation and listening* were the small seeds that God gave us to plant and cultivate for God to grow a place for others to gather and create

a place of rest and care for their family. We planted the small seed each time we reached out. Just as God used the small in taking a sprig and planting it on the high mountain for it to grow into a noble cedar, so too does God grow a large tree out of the mustard seed of our *intentional small acts of conversation and listening* (Ezekiel 17:22-23 and Matthew 13:31b-32). God remained consistent in God's actions into our present day with our congregation.

The purpose of this parable was "to inform the multitudes and the disciples that despite a small beginning, the kingdom in its present phases will result in glorious, great proportions in which people for all races from all over the world will experience the blessings of the kingdom of heaven."²⁵ The purpose of this parable stood true for Tree of Life as we discovered that we do not have to jump to a big, quick-fix program, but rather trust that God will grow us from the seeds of our conversations and listening into a greater community where the blessings of the kingdom are experienced.

These blessings were beginning to be experienced, as found in the data from the focus groups and end-line interviews. Sharon reflected upon her work area of packaging meals and conversing with others. "It was just the little things in our conversation, but they made a big difference. All of a sudden you felt very at ease. Yes, now we're all comfortable" (FG2-3). Small acts of simple conversations to call and invite someone to participate, for example, grew into the greatness of our additional intervention of the carnival and our 100th Anniversary celebration in July 2016. No one counted the number in attendance at the carnival, but a blessing of community was experienced with all denominations of the small-town present, younger members helping and participating,

²⁵ Bailey, "The Parable of the Mustard Seed," 458.

and funds being raised for our handicap accessibility. Other blessings were experienced as we prayed and celebrated the task or event at the end of the intervention, especially after the God's Work, Our Hands intervention. Hank shared, "It was so powerful to pray over the packaged meals knowing they would go to hundreds of others and feed them." The small act of a simple work day, in addition to *intentional small acts of conversation and listening*, would bless hundreds. Tree of Life was living a kingdom moment similar to a few loaves and five fish feeding thousands.

Tree of Life continues to dispel the myth of small-town life with a gospel of the small. We have learned that God takes our faithful small acts and grows them into a gathering space in this tree of life for others to nest in God's greatness. We celebrate this and also realize that we are not completely there yet, as our awareness and deepening of relationships are still developing. Further testing of Tree of Life's bonding capital with Q23 (I have friends in this church) and Q26 (I felt that I can trust several people in this church) revealed that we remained the same or had a slight decrease from our baseline to end-line in both independent t-tests and paired t-tests (see tables W.1 and W.2, appendix W). Perhaps the depth of inter-relationships found in friendships, being with others, and trust did not fully develop yet within the nine months of this research project, but we believe that God will remain consistent with us too as God has been with God's people throughout history. God will keep growing our seeds of our *intentional small acts of conversation and listening* into a tree of life where many are called to gather, nest, care for family, and then reach out to others who are disconnected as they are drawn into experiencing the incarnational presence of Jesus Christ together.

Theological Lenses

The theological themes of incarnation, perichoresis, and sense of belonging are explored as lenses of interpretation in conversation with the research data. These themes explain how God's incarnational presence brought God's perichoretical community into our congregation and community, where a sense of belonging was experienced for participants in a deeper sense of community. These theological lenses indicate the source through which the small seeds of *intentional small acts of conversation and listening* grew.

Incarnation

The incarnation of God in Jesus Christ grew and still grows the seeds of our *intentional small acts of conversation and listening* for the sake of a greater community. The incarnation of Jesus Christ begins through the small itself with the ordinary birth of Jesus, as he was born as a small babe. The perspective of beginning small was also kept as Jesus promised his incarnational presence. "For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them" (Matthew 18:20).

Jesus' promise, beginning with the small, embodied the "new bond between God and humans and through the community of brothers and sisters."²⁶ The small was revealed, as one of the ways the revealed self of God would turn expected ways upside down as he went on to tell stories in "the concreteness of place at a specific time to

²⁶ Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, 114.

particular people with names and addresses.”²⁷ The small babe grew, giving his life, so that God would be present with us.

The incarnation with its small beginnings lived, suffered, and died so that we would never be separated from the indwelling of God in our ordinary lives again. The Holy Spirit blew into our communities, bringing the incarnation of God to continue to dwell amongst us until Christ returns. The incarnation continues to bring *God beside us*, as God longs to be with God’s loved ones in fellowship.

This modified PAR taught Tree of Life how the incarnational presence of Christ draws all of us, even those disconnected, into fellowship with God and one another. As we live in this time between fragments of individual lives caused by sin and reconciled community through the incarnation of God, we live in the hope of a new creation. This hope moves us from disconnection to reconnection as a forgiven and reconciled community. It moves us from our small-town myth to a gospel of the small, where the incarnation of Christ replants our seeds of *intentional small acts of conversation and listening* to grow deeply into a new, transformed community answering the call to branch out as disciples with the promised indwelling of Christ.

I believe this branching out was the pivotal change in Tree of Life, as we learned how others used to reconnect, what reaching out was needed, and how disconnected ones now become reconnected, as illustrated in figure 6.15.

²⁷ Roxburgh, *Missional*, 72.

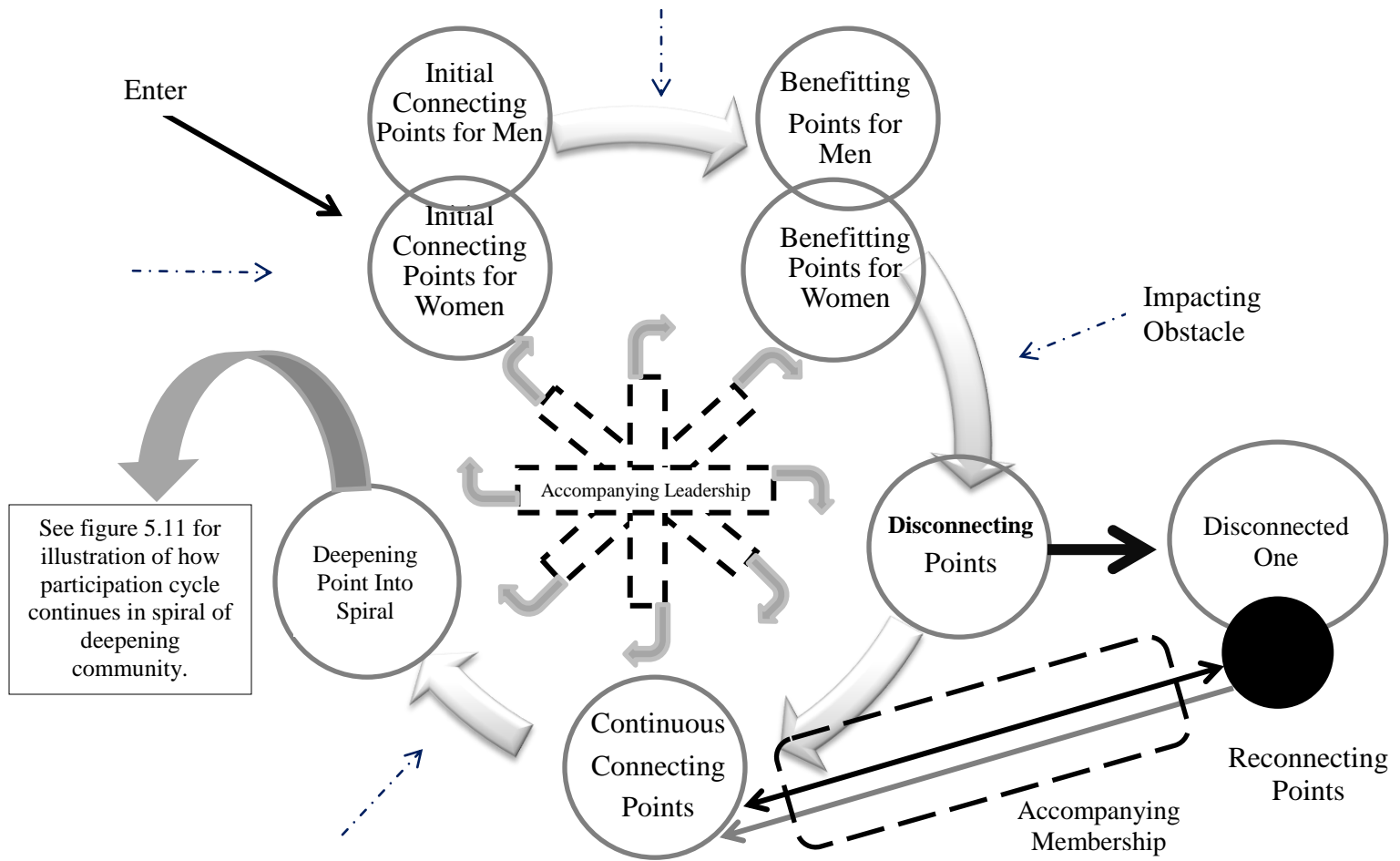


Figure 6.15. A Shift through the Incarnational Presence of Accompanying Membership

Key- Impacting Obstacles (outside dotted arrows pointed toward cycle), Reconnecting Points (solid black circle), Areas Where Changes Occurred: Accompanying Leadership and Membership (dashed boxes), Entry or Disconnecting Movement of Member (one-directional solid, straight black arrows), Member Reaching Out to Disconnected One (two-directional black arrow), Disconnected One Journey back into Cycle (one-directional grey arrow), Continuation to Spiral of Deepening Community (downward black curved arrow)

Figure 6.15 illustrates that the reconnecting points shifted from the participating cycle of Tree of Life out to where the disconnected one was found. The disconnected one was not left to oneself to come back to the participating cycle, but was accompanied together with another member. This accompaniment was particularly experienced through

intergenerational activities, team work, and personal phone calls of invitation, which were all experienced through the interventions.

This accompaniment illustrated Jesus' incarnational promise that where two or three are gathered, Christ is there. The *accompanying membership* embodied this gathering not only between brothers and sisters in community, but also between God and humans. Thus, God's bliss increased every time we were drawn into fellowship with God and one another, especially as the disconnected was accompanied back and restored into community.

Jesus Christ entered into the lives of people, especially those closed out by the domination system of Jesus' day, and accompanied them back into community. Mark describes this entrance through the word *erchomai*, which means to enter in and be present.²⁸ The use of *erchomai* twenty-nine times stresses Christ's incarnational presence entering into the lives of those disconnected from community, so that they would be restored back. The incarnational presence of Christ in the *accompanying membership* of Tree of Life now embodies Christ's presence entering into the lives of the disconnected in order to bring reconnection and restored community for all. When the disconnected are reconnected for the sake of greater community, God uses the small for the greater experience of community where the perichoretic nature of God is experienced.

Perichoresis

God's children enter into the open perichoretic community of the Triune God through their fellowship with Christ and one another. Moltmann describes perichoresis in

²⁸ Stassen, "Incarnational Discipleship and Recovery of a Historically Realistic Jesus," 69.

noun form as a “Whirl, rotation, circulation around the neighborhood,” or in verb form, “going from one to another, encircling, and embracing.”²⁹ Figure 6.16 illustrates this whirl, rotation, or circulation of Tree of Life Lutheran’s participating cycle together.

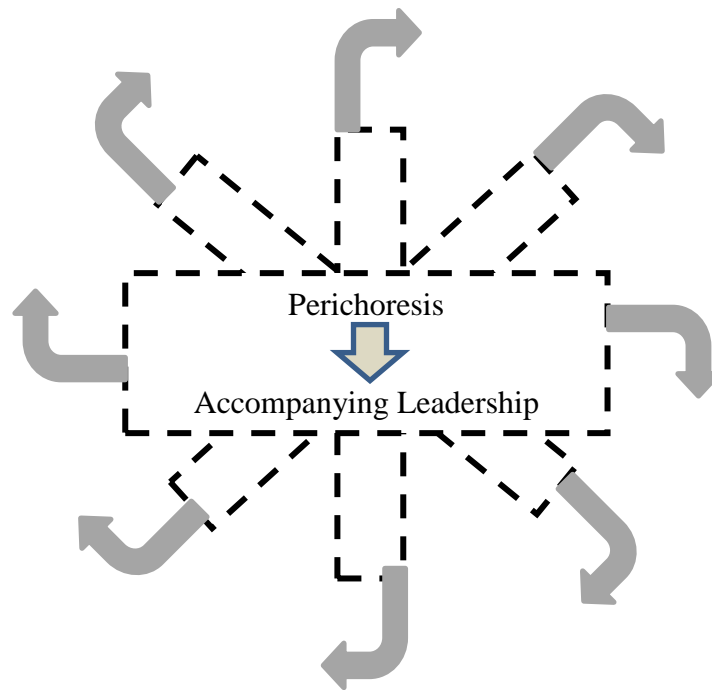


Figure 6.16. Perichoretic Nature through Accompanying Leadership Spun Out into Tree of Life’s Participating Cycle

This figure comes from the center illustration of figure 6.15 of *accompanying leadership*. It depicts the perichoretic nature of God as the source of what is initially spun out in the participating cycle of Tree of Life. The perichoretic nature of God is initially spun out as each person of the Trinity works together in a unified movement that frees and unites God’s community of Tree of Life. Jesus’ prayer comes to life as the perichoretic nature is spun out in the leadership of the participating cycle. “As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us” (John 17.21). The Holy Trinity

²⁹ Moltmann, “Perichoresis,” 113.

is in the participating cycle of Tree of Life spinning out the mutual indwelling where the human community is in the divine community and the divine community is in the human community.

The mutual indwelling of the divine community makes our lives together Trinitarian as, “The perichoretic unity of the triune God should there be understood as social, inviting, integrating, unifying, and thus world-open community. The perichoretic unity of the divine persons is so wide open that the whole world can find room and rest and eternal life within it.”³⁰ Tree of Life experienced a transformation while embracing our Trinitarian lives through this research project. The whirl, circulation, or rotation of the perichoretic nature of God propelled the *accompanying leadership* into the *accompanying membership*.

The *accompanying membership* emboldened the indwelling of the Trinity, as the church embraced living in the image of the triune personhood of God and living out its salvation. Salvation is, in Zizioulas’ argument, “being in the image of God by participating in God’s relationship personality.”³¹ The personal, communal nature of being negates the self-centered sin of individualistic desire and moves us in unified communion in the image of the triune God’s perichoretic nature.

We were shifted from the self-centered sin of individualistic desire to the unified communion with the perichoretic nature of God and one another. The individualistic desire kept us in our own social circles, such as articulated by Penny in her end-line interview:

³⁰ Ibid., 120.

³¹ Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, 50.

Sometimes you don't get out of your normal circle whether it be because of kids and sports ... you know the parents of your kids' friends and those that you are used to being with. Sometimes you don't have the opportunity to work with those others and get to know them. I like to have a reason to work with those I don't normally work with or be with or whatever that may be. I suppose it's like we had a common goal—like it was to pack those meals—so that common goal kept us together (PA—End-line Interview).

The interventions of the modified PAR gave Penny and many others the opportunity to get out of their normal, individually-desired social circle and work with others around a common goal. Penny, as well as many of Tree of Life, experienced God's relationship personality that Zizioulas described.

They experienced the unified, perichoretic nature of God, while still being particular persons with various gifts. "The various gifts, services, and activities that all Christians have correspond to the divine multiplicity. Just as the one deity exists as the Father, Son, and the Spirit, so also do these different divine persons distribute gifts to all Christians ... these gifts are distributed for the benefit of all."³²

We, therefore, live in the benefits of mutual giving, receiving, and communication that come from the self-emptying (kenosis) for the sake of another. Self-emptying is a characteristic of how the three distinct persons of the Trinity live for one another. As this kenosis is lived out in, with, and for another, we individuals no longer function from subject to object, but rather as subject to subject, as we give and take, hear and respond, and touch and experience life together.³³ We are emptied for the sake of one another as we live in continued communication, personifying the reciprocity of the Holy Trinity.

³² Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 219.

³³ Moltmann, "Perichoresis," 124.

Each person of the perichoretic community acts within the unity of the other and moves them in constant communication, which is reflected through the church.

Tree of Life reflected a new, constant communication as we dispelled the myth of small through the gospel of our *intentional small acts of conversation and listening*. The perichoretic benefits of giving, receiving, and communication were experienced as we increased our sense of connection with one another (bonding capital) and the community (bridging community). This communication enabled participants to feel more connected as the top three reasons were made apparent through Q52 (Reasons why participants feel more connected in the congregation): 86.1% for having conversation with others, 88.6% for being listened to by others, and 87.3 % for knowing names better (see table 5.43). This communication also created more connection through the congregation to the community in Q53, where participants marked one to three statements indicating their increased level of connection. The statements to be marked were: I was able to network with others in the congregation whom I also got to see around the community and at various events; Belonging to our congregation has helped me discover more ways that I can serve and volunteer in my community; and, I was able to have conversations that encouraged me to participate in helping my neighbors and others in need in our community. The level of connectedness was indicated as 73.0% of the seventy-four participants marked all three statements (see table 5.44).

This perichoretic lens was central to this research project as it gave an image of community of which we are already made part and called to spin out through our *accompanying leadership and membership*. The spinning out of the perichoretic nature of

God lived out the relationality, especially as more and more came to discover a newfound sense of belonging in our life together as Tree of Life Lutheran and in our community.

Sense of Belonging

We found ourselves, as Tree of Life, living in a weakened social capital with fewer social inter-relationships. Zscheile argues that we individuals have created our identity through consumer lifestyle choices.³⁴ Butler Bass articulates that belonging has been reduced to adhering to a certain belief and way of behaving.³⁵ I would also add that polarities found within political divisiveness of the presidential campaign of 2016 accentuates both of these arguments that one must choose according to their consumer lifestyle choices and then believe and behave according to that polarity.

The weakened social capital and polarity driven by individualistic, consumer choices is not the intent for God's people created for community. The current state of our society does not create a sense of belonging, but instead creates further exclusion and isolation. God's intent for community, instead, uproots these individualistic-driven, polarized, consumeristic notions and reroots them into relationships of mutual belonging. Our sense of belonging becomes,

... the risk to move beyond the world we know, to venture out on pilgrimage, to accept exile. And it is the risk of being with companions on that journey, God, a spouse, friends, children, mentors, teachers, people who came from the same place we did, people who came from entirely different places, saints and sinners of all sorts, those known to us and those unknown, our secret longing, questions, and fears. Whose am I? O God, I am thine!³⁶

³⁴ Zscheile, *The Agile Church*, 18.

³⁵ Bass, *Christianity after Religion*, 79-80.

³⁶ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 355.

Our sense of belonging was transformed as we asked and learned why individuals felt and functioned as disconnected ones. We had lost a sense of risking being on a pilgrimage together, as Gadamer challenged. Our individualistic, somewhat polarized, consumeristic-driven selves kept us in our own social groups and particular worship hour. Asking disconnected ones why they did not feel a sense of belonging moved us to vulnerability, where we became willing to risk and be transformed.

Being vulnerable and moving in risk opened us to experience the incarnation of God's presence, where we lived into our identity and purpose to *remember, rejoice, and reach out* (Tree of Life's congregational mission statement). We, as Christ's church, were given "tremendous opportunity to rehear the gospel, to deepen the church's identity and practice, and to learn how to form community with new neighbors."³⁷ We lived into Jesus' kingdom ways of reaching out to those who do not feel they belong and were moved out away from the participating cycle of life together. These ways called us to listen and learn, giving us opportunity to embrace a new shared communion where others experience a sense of belonging.

Strengthening our inter-relationships and thickening the fabric of our social capital became a holy communion where we further understand how we belong to God and one another. This sense of belonging reversed the notion that one must believe and behave in certain ways, and instead created an atmosphere of invitation for all to belong even if one was disconnected. Tree of Life previously functioned that one must come to worship in order to belong, but now we function that we reach out and invite because one belongs already through Christ. Greg articulated this change in one of the focus groups,

³⁷ Zscheile, *The Agile Church*, 55.

Before it was really clearly defined and it was black and white that you went to worship and then you went home and that was it. We were not given a lot of different ways to be part of the church and belong. But now, we come to either service on Sunday or on Wednesday, and the church offers a ton of other stuff. There is so much more that we are getting involved in. Maybe not necessarily we aren't always there on a Sunday, but we've been a part of the congregation in ways that people may not see. Before members may think that going to church was the only way, but now there are so many other ways to be church together (FG1-3).

There are so many more ways to be church together and create a sense of belonging for all church members and participants. The dispelled myth of small exposed a new, different way of being church as we continue to enter into our *intentional small acts of conversation and listening* and be the church of Christ that reaches out to the disconnected, offering a place to belong for all.

Generalizability: Limitations and Possibilities

The overall project was successful in growing Tree of Life Lutheran's inter-relationships and their awareness of them, however, various limitations are found in this modified PAR research project. These various limitations narrow the research's generalizability. These limitations include: various aspects of my research, methodology and design, timing, group of people, and what could have been done differently.

Two various aspects of my research, which were location and the purpose of my project, limited the generalizability of this project. The research was conducted in a small-town with the purpose of dispelling the myth of small-town assumptions. Tree of Life is located in a town of almost 2,000 people in the rural Midwest. Not all research findings of this research, as a result, could be applied in an urban setting with a larger population. The congregational size of Tree of Life also limits the generalizability of this project. A corporate size congregation with thousands of members, located in a city,

could use similar interventions, but the context of that congregation would dramatically alter the methodology and design this project's research.

The methodology and design of this modified PAR was particularly intended for a congregation that interacts frequently with one another inside and outside the church building throughout the community. The interventions were designed to create gatherings for those who see one another frequently, but do not intentionally take time to have conversations and listen. The design of the modified PAR is also limited in that it did not utilize a full Participatory Action Research project in which all participants learn, reflect, and construct the next interventions and steps. It became modified as the PAR team planned and implemented the next steps. This limited the shaping of interventions, as we perhaps missed opportunities and possibilities that other participants would have contributed.

The timing of the project was a limitation for the measurements of growth in the end-line questionnaire and interviews. Much quantitative data indicated consistent increases in mean, which were very close to becoming statistically significant. The nine months of the project, along with the end-line questionnaire and interviews, could not capture further growth that would have come some months later.

The group of people was diverse in gender, income levels, educational levels, and age ranges, but was limiting in that no minorities were a part of the project. Tables 5.1-5.4 depict this diversity. Tree of Life Lutheran's small town, unfortunately, does not bring a diverse ethnicity for its population, as it is dominantly white at 97.8%. Hispanics

make up 0.9% and blacks make up 0.5% of the town's population.³⁸ This lack of ethnic diversity limits this project's generalizability to only towns that are similar demographically.

The modified PAR research project's design and implementation went well and according to plan overall. I would have done a full PAR if I could have done things differently. I believe that our PAR team did a thorough and complete job, but we limited the project by not receiving more input from participants. I would have also included more research and study on the differences found between men and women in the end-line questionnaires and interviews. If these differences were surfaced in the baseline, I would have had opportunity to include them in the remainder of the project.

These limitations, as many as there were, also exposed possibilities of how this research can be generalized for other congregations seeking to strengthen their inter-relationships and grow their social capital with one another and community. The first point of generalizability is that a gospel of the small found in *intentional small acts of conversation and listening* can impact congregations of all sizes. The second point is that the act of reaching out must be actually practiced as an act of discipleship, as well as proclaimed. The third and final point is that men and women do connect in congregational life differently and these differences, once further explored, will create more points of reconnection

A gospel of the small found in *intentional small acts of conversation and listening* can impact congregations of all sizes in order to grow their social capital with one

³⁸ "Stats About All Us Cities," <http://www.city-data.com> (accessed December 14, 2016). The exact URL is not shared for reasons for confidentiality.

another and their community. Although this modified PAR brought limitations particular to a small-town and midsize congregation, all congregations can exercise the act of meaningful conversations and deep listening in some form. Small means of a branch, child, seed, etc. were intentionally used biblically in order to show God's greatness of the kingdom come forth. These means were used for a king for God's chosen people, a bush to provide shelter for the birds, and a savior for the world. If God uses small means for great impact, then we as the church are called to believe that God uses the small in our midst no matter the size of congregation. Small means in congregational life can come in the form of small groups, care ministries, education, and fellowship. This project had particular interventions to match the ministry and context of Tree of Life, but similar interventions can be created utilizing a gospel of the small with *intentional small acts of conversation and listening* in other ministries and contexts as well.

The act of reaching out must be actually practiced as an act of discipleship, as well as proclaimed. This second point of generalizability was the key finding of the modified PAR for Tree of Life. Tree of Life had proclaimed their mission statement *Remember, Rejoice, and Reach Out* well, but the project revealed that they were not practicing the act of reaching out as well as they believed. The baseline questionnaire and interviews, as well as the focus groups, revealed that reconnection points were only offered within the participating cycle of the congregation. Little to no reconnection points were offered wherever the disconnected ones were to be found. Reaching out was practiced mostly when a disconnected one reentered the participating cycle through his/her own efforts. The modified PAR caused Tree of Life to examine how they were not fully practicing the act of reaching out. The interventions gave opportunity for Tree

of Life to more fully reach out as reconnection points were given wherever the disconnected one was found. Tree of Life lived into the behavior of fully reaching out as an act of discipleship. The *accompanying membership* embodied the incarnation of Jesus as disconnected ones were welcomed back into participating with the joy of another walking with them.

The transformational change that occurred for Tree of Life can be generalized for other congregations, as they learn from our mistakes. Studying figures 5.8-5.11 gives congregations an illustration of what was actually practiced before and after the modified PAR. Individual and group interviews could be utilized in order to accurately measure a congregation's practice of reaching out. Particular interventions could then be created in order for a congregation to practice their way into fully living the act of discipleship of reaching out.

The final point of generalizability is that men and women do connect in congregational life differently and these differences, once further explored, will create more points of reconnection. Tree of Life is not a unique congregation in the sense that women more fully participate in the life of the congregation. This is easily seen in our Sunday school and confirmation teachers and volunteers. The majority are women. Often the women are leading their families in participation in congregational life. Discovering that men and women connect differently into congregational life at Tree of Life was a key finding for our congregation, as we realized that we were creating a majority of initial and reconnecting points that motivated mostly women's participation. Even a large part of this modified PAR fit more with how women connect. The end-line interviews brought forth key differences, as the men listed that they initially connect because of their

faith, seeing a need and wanting to help, and a sense of willingness to come whenever they can use a gift of passion, especially when asked. Women, on the other hand, connect because of conversations, stories, encounters with others, and the welcoming spirit. Tree of Life was fortunate in this project to utilize interventions that had particular needs, work, and gifts to be shared, which did help the men connect. Yet our eyes were opened as we realized these differences for which we would like to further research. They are essential in helping us and other congregations understand and utilize different ways to help both men and women initially connect and reconnect in the participating cycle of a congregation.

Future Research from This Project

Two areas are identified in this study as potential areas in need of future research. These include: the differences between men and women in how they connect into congregations and community and the need for more *intentional small acts of conversation and listening* in society's context of a deeply divided nation and the church's role in bringing forth the greatness of the kingdom in healing and restoration.

This research project identified the differences between men and women for initial connecting and reconnecting points. The end-line interviewees were able to articulate these differences through the questions of the interview protocol. These named differences compel us now to seek a deeper understanding of why men and women connect differently and how. Further research is needed to build upon the initial findings of this project. Further psychological and biological studies may reveal scientific reasons as to why and how men and women connect differently. Sociological studies may also reveal how and why there are these gender differences as society and home environment

shapes one socially. Particular journals, such as *The Journal for Scientific Study of Religion*, could also be utilized in order to study these psychological, biological, and sociological reasons in light of the congregational life of the church.

Further research is also needed to expand these research findings as our country has and continues to navigate deeply dividing political issues. The need for more *intentional small acts of conversation and listening* in this divided context became even more essential after the 2016 presidential election. The divisive political nature of the campaign emboldened many in society to polarize to extreme opposites. Big issues of xenophobia, racism, and sexism were given renewed platforms of prominence. Because of this research project, I believe that the church has a vital role to play in our society through *intentional small acts of conversation and listening*.

Further research is needed to build upon the conversation starters provided for the various interventions of the modified PAR utilized in this project. More resources are needed in order to move a congregation, like Tree of Life, who has become readied and connected, to have more difficult conversations. An example of theological reflection with political topics is found in Miroslav Volf's work, *Public Faith in Action*.³⁹ Tree of Life used this tool as a study prior to the presidential campaign. The Sunday following the election was also a time when we built upon our conversational and listening skills as we "Met in the Middle." One participant expressed that he did not understand the fear others were having, but he came to learn. Another, who is a public school teacher in a nearby city, wiped tears and told of her Iraqi student who is afraid of her parents being deported.

³⁹ Volf, *A Public Faith*.

The church, now more than ever, is called forth in faithful small acts in order to bring the greatness of the kingdom in healing and restoration. Further research and more resources are needed so that the small seeds of our intentional conversations and listening may take root and unfold the greatness of God's kingdom in our midst. Victoria Safford invites us to this call as the church.

Like everybody else, we are doing small work within the Great Work of creation, and thus do we aid it and abet it in unfolding. We stand where we will stand, on little plots of ground, where we are "called" to stand—in our congregations, classrooms, offices, factories, in fields of lettuces and apricots, in hospitals, in prisons (on both sides, at various times, of the gates), in streets, in community groups. And it is sacred ground if we would honor it, if we would bring to it a blessing of sacrifice and risk.⁴⁰

We are standing on sacred ground ready to continue in the call to do small work within the Great Work of God's kingdom which unfolds.

Summary

This overview of results and bringing the research findings into conversation with the theoretical, biblical, and theological lenses offers a response to the main research question of this modified PAR:

How might a Participatory Action Research intervention utilizing small acts of conversation and listening increase the social inter-relationships of Tree of Life Lutheran and our awareness of them?

I conclude that the modified PAR utilizing *intentional small acts of conversation and listening* did increase our social inter-relationships and is beginning to increase our awareness of them. This modified PAR also deepened our sense of connectedness and community, as we traveled more reiterations of the participating cycle in a spiral of

⁴⁰ Victoria Safford, "The Small Work in the Great Work," in *The Impossible Will Take a While*, ed. Paul Rogat Loeb (Philadelphia, PA: Basic Books, 2014), 228-229.

continued depth. Participants in the interviews and focus groups could articulate a change in society, along with feeling a sense of disconnection prior to the interventions. Their awareness of our weakened connections compelled us as Tree of Life Lutheran to conduct this research project, participate in the interventions, and discover that indeed God's greatness was revealed through our small acts. We are beginning to grow these small seeds of conversation and listening into the Tree of Life where God gathers us for deepened community as the kingdom of God is experienced by all.

EPILOGUE

Our D.Min. CML cohort was given the assignment during our first winter class to create a life map and write a mission and vision statement for our sense of call as a leader in the church. That assignment brought forth clarity as I linked together high school actions of caring for small and often forgotten school activities and participants to my present actions as a pastor. I began this D.Min. CML degree while serving a four-point rural parish and conclude this degree while serving a middle-sized congregation in a small-town. I continue to live out the mission and vision statement I wrote four years ago:

Mission Statement: I am called to the small to see the big in ministry to, with, and through the church participating in God's mission in the world as God's kingdom has come and is coming.

Vision Statement: I will see the big in the small by connecting, communicating, and celebrating Christ's smaller church with the bigger purpose of God's mission.

This original assignment served as the impetus to conduct this modified PAR. I had been convinced, prior to this project, that God calls the church to partner with God in faithful small acts that God increases into the greatness of the kingdom. I had also been convinced that God would use the smaller church to teach the larger church how to restore the broken, fragmented society of today's context. The findings of this project allow me now to have validated data on which to begin to base my assumptions and passion for the small.

My thesis project continues to inform and help influence my approach to ministry, as: I have a greater understanding for the need of small groups in congregational life and

the cultivation of *meaningful* conversation and listening; I am not as apt to jump on the bandwagon of the latest big program; and, I keep my eyes and ears attuned to God's incarnational actions working in our midst, especially through the small. Somedays it is easy to see the bigger picture of decreasing attendance and struggling budgets of most congregations, but knowing how the small was used by God in this project reaffirms that God is indeed at work. As a result, God calls me forward in faithful response in each small act of my own, trusting that God will grow God's great work.

My mission and vision statements came about because of this D.Min. CML program, which created an intentional, structured time of growing and learning. The D.Min. CML program gave me the opportunity to gain skills, access tools, and implement research methodology. I have become empowered to lead a congregation to be in partnership with God in today's changing society in an *accompanying leadership*. Just as my congregation learned how to truly practice the discipleship of reaching out through their *accompanying membership*, I have practiced my way into a new behavior of missional leadership.

The change of call during this program also gave me the opportunity to learn a new set of questions and reset my leadership with a fresh start. I was struck by my different approach in the call interviews, when I asked the call committee to name their congregational core values. I also wrote my leadership core values. What a joy to match these two together during the second interview. This D.Min. program reframed not only that approach, but many more. It has given me a confidence and a hope that the incarnational God is at work, especially through small acts, bringing forth God's kingdom through a living, vital church such as Tree of Life Lutheran.

APPENDIX A

IMPLIED CONSENT FORM FOR QUANTITATIVE QUESTIONNAIRES

October 15, 2015

Dear Member of Tree of Life Lutheran,

You are invited to participate in a study of how to deepen our sense of connectedness with one another as a congregation and with our community. I hope to learn how intentional small acts of conversation and listening can affect the larger system of how we feel connected together. You were selected as a possible participant in this study because of your involvement in the life of our congregation and your particular generation.

If you decide to participate, please complete the enclosed survey. Your return of this survey is implied consent. The survey is designed to measure your sense of connectedness with others in the congregation and our community. It will take about fifteen minutes to complete. No benefits accrue to you for answering the survey, but your responses will be used to define areas of growth.

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will not be disclosed.

Your decision whether or not to participate will not prejudice your future relationships with this congregation. If you decide to participate, you are free to discontinue participation at any time without prejudice.

If you have any questions, please contact me at XXX.XXX.XXXX or pastorsarah@windstream.net.

Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

Pastor Sarah Cordray

APPENDIX B

NEWSLETTER INVITATION

Dear Tree of Life Lutheran Members,

Please complete your survey!! Pastor Sarah is beginning her research project for her doctoral thesis and needs your help. She is asking you to complete either a printed survey or one on-line that can be e-mailed to you through a link to SurveyMonkey. The survey will measure our sense of community and connectedness that you feel with others in the congregation. Printed copies are available on the Welcome Center or call the office with your e-mail if you have not yet received a link by Dec. 1st. Thank you for participating!

Pastor Sarah

APPENDIX C

BASELINE AND END-LINE QUESTIONNAIRE

TREE OF LIFE LUTHERAN CHURCH SURVEY ON CONNECTEDNESS WITH ONE ANOTHER AND COMMUNITY

Thank you for participating in this research study regarding our connectedness as a congregation and with our community. This questionnaire seeks to establish a sense of who you are, your sense of connectedness with the congregation, the congregation's connectedness with our community. This questionnaire will also help us evaluate our congregational activities and worship's effectiveness in helping you feel connected.

Your completion of the survey indicates your consent to participate. Please do not put your name on the survey to insure confidentiality. Only summary data will be used for analysis.

Part I: Information about You

Please fill in one circle per question. Please shade the circles completely like ●

1. I am:
 - ☐ Female
 - ☐ Male

2. The calendar day of month for my birthday is: ***(Please enter two digits representing numerical calendar day, excluding month. For example 1 3.)***
 — —

3. My year of birth is: ***(Please enter four digits representing year.)***
 — — — —

4. Current marital status
 - ☐ Married
 - ☐ Separated
 - ☐ Divorced
 - ☐ Never Married
 - ☐ Widowed
 - ☐ Other _____
5. I have at home either partial or full-time (you may include both children and step-children if applicable):
 - ☐ No children
 - ☐ One child, age _____
 - ☐ Two children, ages _____
 - ☐ Three children, ages _____
 - ☐ Four children, ages _____
 - ☐ _____ children, ages _____
6. What is the highest educational level you have attained?
 - ☐ 8th Grade
 - ☐ High School Graduate
 - ☐ Community or Technical College for skill labor
 - ☐ Associate Degree
 - ☐ College Graduate
 - ☐ master's
 - ☐ Doctorate
 - ☐ Other _____
 - ☐ Prefer to not answer
7. What is the annual gross household income before taxes for your household?
 - ☐ \$20,000 or less
 - ☐ \$20,001 to \$40,000
 - ☐ \$40,001 to \$60,000
 - ☐ \$60,001 to \$80,000
 - ☐ \$80,001 to \$100,000
 - ☐ Over \$100,000
 - ☐ Prefer to not answer
8. Where do you work?
 - ☐ Syracuse or surrounding area
 - ☐ Lincoln
 - ☐ Omaha
 - ☐ Other
 - ☐ Work from home
 - ☐ Stay at-home parent

9. Where do you do your majority of shopping for groceries and household needs?
- ☐ Syracuse or surrounding area
 - ☐ Lincoln
 - ☐ Omaha
 - ☐ Other
10. How often do you engage in watching television, listening to the radio, and/or using iPad/Kindle or other mobile device for entertainment purposes during a typical day?
- ☐ Less than 2 hours per day
 - ☐ 2 to 5 hours per day
 - ☐ 6 to 10 hours per day
 - ☐ Over 10 hours per day
11. If you grew up attending church, what was your denominational church family during childhood?
- ☐ Catholic
 - ☐ Episcopalian
 - ☐ Lutheran
 - ☐ Methodist
 - ☐ Presbyterian
 - ☐ Evangelical
 - ☐ Baptist
 - ☐ Other _____
 - ☐ Unchurched
12. How many years have you been a member of Tree of Life Lutheran?
- ☐ New member to 5 years
 - ☐ 6 to 10 years
 - ☐ 11 to 20 years
 - ☐ 21 to 30 years
 - ☐ 31 to 40 years
 - ☐ 41 to 50 years
 - ☐ 51+ years
 - ☐ Have not become a member, but attend or participate
13. On average, how many times do you attend worship services in this congregation?
- ☐ Almost every week
 - ☐ Two to Three times a month
 - ☐ Once a month
 - ☐ Twice a year or less
 - ☐ Other _____

Please circle the number that best describes your frequency of participation with the following activities.

	Daily	A few times a week	Once a month	Occasionally	Almost never	Don't know
14. I pray...	5	4	3	2	1	8
15. I read the Bible...	5	4	3	2	1	8
16. I use a devotional book or on-line/mobile device devotional...	5	4	3	2	1	8
17. I strive to help a neighbor/co-worker/ friend in need...	5	4	3	2	1	8

Part II: Information about your Connection with Others in the Congregation

Please circle the number that best describes your strength of agreement with the following statements.

	Almost Always	Regularly	Sometimes	Seldom/ Never	Don't Know
18. People in this church are welcoming.	4	3	2	1	8
19. People in this church greet me and know me by name.	4	3	2	1	8
20. There are people in this church who help me cope with daily struggles or difficult times in my life.	4	3	2	1	8
21. I feel comfortable approaching others in this church and having conversations with them.	4	3	2	1	8

22. I feel comfortable asking other church members to help me or pray for me.

4 3 2 1 8

Please circle the number that best describes your strength of agreement with the following statements.

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Disagree nor Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Don't Know
23. I have friends in this church.	5	4	3	2	1	8
24. I come to worship services and other activities to be with people.	5	4	3	2	1	8
25. I feel connected to others in this church.	5	4	3	2	1	8
26. I feel that I can trust several people in this church.	5	4	3	2	1	8

Part III: Information about this Congregation's Connection in the Community with You and Others
--

Please mark one choice per question.

27. The reputation our congregation has in our community and surrounding area is...

- ☐ 4 Very positive reputation
- ☐ 3 Mostly positive reputation
- ☐ 2 Somewhat negative reputation
- ☐ 1 Very negative reputation
- ☐ 8 Don't Know

28. Our congregation encourages me and others to care for the welfare of those in our community who are elderly, disabled, poor, or in need of some kind of support.

- ☐ 4 On a regular basis (monthly)
☐ 3 On a semi-regular basis (3 to 4 times a year)
☐ 2 Occasionally (once or twice a year)
☐ 1 Seldom/Never
☐ 8 Don't Know

29. I have participated in community service projects.

- ☐ 4 On a regular basis (monthly)
☐ 3 On a semi-regular basis (3 to 4 times a year)
☐ 2 Occasionally (once or twice a year)
☐ 1 Never
☐ 8 Don't Know

30. Being a part of our congregation helps me to feel at home in our community.

- ☐ 4 Very helpful
☐ 3 Somewhat helpful
☐ 2 Rarely helpful
☐ 1 Not helpful at all
☐ 8 Don't Know

31. I am greeted by and have conversations with other church members in several other locations and occasions throughout our community.

- ☐ 4 Quite often (weekly)
☐ 3 Occasionally (2 to 3 times a month)
☐ 2 Not that often (once every few months)
☐ 1 Never
☐ 8 Don't Know

<p>Part IV: Activities that Strengthen Your Sense of Belonging with this Congregation</p>
--

Please circle the number that best describes the strength of your agreement to the following statements.

Strength of Agreement						
Very High					Very Low	Do not know
5	4	3	2	1	8	

32. Worship strengthens my sense of belonging with others in this congregation.

5	4	3	2	1	8
---	---	---	---	---	---

	Strength of Agreement					Do not Know
	Very High 5	4	3	2	Very Low 1	
33. Fellowship in between or after services strengthens my sense of belonging with others in this congregation.	5	4	3	2	1	8
34. Bible studies or women's/men's groups strengthen my sense of belonging with others in this congregation.	5	4	3	2	1	8
35. My children's church activities strengthen my sense of belonging with others in this congregation.	5	4	3	2	1	8
36. Volunteering my time and talents strengthens my sense of belonging in this congregation.	5	4	3	2	1	8
37. Participating in special church activities or services strengthens my sense of belonging with this congregation.	5	4	3	2	1	8
38. Receiving the church newsletter, e-mails, or other letters strengthens my sense of belonging with this congregation.	5	4	3	2	1	8
39. Social Media (Facebook) and the church's website strengthen my sense of belonging in this congregation.	5	4	3	2	1	8

Part V: Evaluating our Congregation's Sense of Connectedness with Each Other and Community

Color in one circle for each question that best represents your evaluation of Tree of Life Lutheran.

	I feel that Tree of Life is ...	
	Strongly agree Neutral Strongly Agree	
40. An integrated, woven together family	<input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/>	A group largely made up of several cliques
41. Very closely connected to one another	<input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/>	Very disconnected from one another
42. An open-minded body of people who are willing to listen to others	<input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/>	A body of closed-minded people who are not willing to listen to others
43. People who practice what they believe by loving and caring	<input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/>	People who tend to say one thing but do the opposite
44. A body of believers who care deeply about our community and world.	<input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/>	A body of believers who tend to care only about themselves.

45. Please share any comments regarding Tree of Life's connectedness upon which you wish to expand or you feel has not been addressed in this questionnaire.

Thank you for your participation and completing this questionnaire!

End-Line Questionnaire

This questionnaire was the same as the baseline with the addition of these questions:

Please check yes or no.

46. Did you participate in either “God’s Work, Our Hands” projects?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

47. Did you participate in the New Member/Mentor Pairs?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

48. Did you participate in the Sunday Half-Time Conversations (1 person from 8 and 1 person from 10:15 paired together)?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

49. Were you one of the younger families interviewed by Pastor Sarah or the research team?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

50. Did you participate in any of the 100th Anniversary Monthly celebrations (i.e. Balloon launch in November, Nativities or caroling in December, Oldest members worship and reception, 100 person anniversary choir, 100 Cross for Fellowship Hall, etc.)

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

51. Did the previously listed activities help you feel better connected with one another in our congregation?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

52. I feel better connected with our congregation because ...

- a. I had conversation with others.
 - ☐ Yes
 - ☐ No
- b. I felt listened to by others.
 - ☐ Yes
 - ☐ No
- c. Another person took interest in me and/or my family.
 - ☐ Yes
 - ☐ No
- d. I know others' names better now.
 - ☐ Yes
 - ☐ No
- e. I have deepened my relationships in our congregation and have a sense of how I belong with others.
 - ☐ Yes
 - ☐ No
- f. We talked about our faith and encouraged one another.
 - ☐ Yes
 - ☐ No

Other reasons: (Please list)

Check all that apply.

53. Overall, I feel better connected with our congregation because ...

___ I was able to network with others in the congregation whom I also got to see around the community and at various events.

___ Belonging to our congregation has helped me discover more ways that I can serve and volunteer in my community.

___ I was able to have conversations that encouraged me to participate in helping my neighbors and others in need in our community.

___ Other: (Please list.)

54. The most important thing(s) I learned through these activities is: (Please list below.)

55. Were there any other congregational activities during the last year that strengthened your sense of connectedness with others? (Please list.)

56. I would be interested in participating in more activities that build our congregation's sense of connectedness in the future. (**Mark one.**)

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Don't know

Thank you for your participation and completing this questionnaire!

APPENDIX D

INFORMED CONSENT FORM FOR QUALITATIVE PROTOCOLS

You are invited to be in a research study, which will examine and seek to grow the connectedness of Tree of Life Lutheran Church with one another and our community. You were selected as a possible participant because you represent a particular age category and you are involved in the life of the congregation. 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, Pastor Sarah Cordray, 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: first, measure our congregation's sense of connectedness with one another and our community; secondly, participate in intervening activities to strengthen our connectedness; and lastly, reevaluate our sense of connectedness after these activities.

Procedures:

If you agree to be in this study, we would ask you to do the following things.

- Participate in intentional acts of conversation and listening as asked.
- Share in a focus group after the activity by answering questions provided in written form.
- Give approximately two hours for each activity.

Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study:

The study has no direct risks. You are free to drop out of the study at any time.

There is no direct benefits to participating in this research study, but indirect benefits include deepening your relationships with others in the congregation and community, establishing a stronger sense of belonging with others, and helping your congregation to grow in deepening their sense of community with one another and our town.

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 home; only my advisors, Dr. Craig Van Gelder and Dr. Alvin Luedke, and I will have access to the data and, if applicable, any tape or video 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 due to the small number to be studied.

Tape recordings of interviews and focus groups will be made for the purpose of data collection. Only my advisors and I will have access. I will only use a direct quotation from you if I have your signed permission. If you give such permission and if I use a direct quotation from you, I will use a pseudonym for you

Raw data from this study will be destroyed by May of 2020.

Voluntary Nature of the Study:

Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Luther Seminary or with the congregation. 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 Sarah Cordray. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you may contact me.

Phone: XXX.XXX.XXXX or pastorsarah@xxxxxxxxxx.xxx.

You may contact my advisors with any questions you may have.

My advisor, Dr. Craig Van Gelder, may also be contacted at xxxxxxxx@luthersem.edu.

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 _____

Signature of investigator _____ Date _____

I consent to be audiotaped:

Signature _____ Date _____

I consent to allow use of my direct quotations in the published thesis document.

Signature _____ Date _____

Created 07/24/2015

APPENDIX E

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOR BASELINE INTERVIEWS

1. When did you become a member of Tree of Life Lutheran?
2. Share with me the primary reasons why you became a member of Tree of Life Lutheran.
3. Tell me about your past and current involvement in the congregation.
4. Name two-to-three experiences with this congregation that initially helped you feel connected with others.
 - a. What was it within these experiences that helped you connect to others?
 - b. If you did connect, when did you begin to have a sense of belonging at Tree of Lutheran?
5. How connected do you feel the members of this congregation are with one another?
 - a. Why do you feel this way?
6. Name any experiences that have hindered you from feeling like you belong in this congregation?
7. Tree of Life Lutheran is seeking to help its members become more connected together by listening and having conversations with one another. For example,

we will be having pairs, one from the 8 and one from 10:15 service, meet together, mentors for new members, home visits, etc.

- a. How might you benefit from participating in these conversations and listening exercises?
 - b. Which particular groups in the congregation do you feel are disconnected and would benefit from these conversations?
8. What might it look like if the members of Tree of Life Lutheran became more connected to each other in the congregation?
9. What might we do to become more connected to our community?
10. Describe how being a part of this congregation helps you feel at home in this community.
 - a. If it does not, why?
 - b. If it does, how does the congregation help you feel at home in this community compared to other community clubs or groups?
11. What is there that we have not talked about that you feel would be helpful for me and our action team to know as we begin/conclude this project?

APPENDIX F

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOR END-LINE INTERVIEWS

1. Share with me the reasons why you have stayed a member of Luther Memorial.
2. Tell me about your past and current involvement in the congregation. (To be used with two new end-line interview people.)
3. Name two-to-three experiences with this congregation that at this point has helped you feel connected with others.
 - a. What was it within these experiences that helped you connect to others?
 - b. If you did connect, when did you begin to have a sense of belonging at Luther Memorial?
4. How connected at this point do you feel the members of this congregation are with one another?
 - a. Why do you feel this way?
5. Name any experiences including this last year that have hindered you from feeling like you belong in this congregation?

6. Luther Memorial sought to help its members become more connected together by listening and having conversations with one another through several activities during this last year. For example, we had pairs, one from the 8 and one from 10:15 service, meet together, mentors for new members, home visits, another God's Work, Our Hands Day, and several anniversary celebrations.
 - a. Which of these activities did you participate in?
 - b. What other congregational activities other than these did you participated in?
 - c. How did you benefit from this participation?
 - d. What might have been done differently to improve making connections?
 - e. Which groups in the congregation appear to have benefitted most from these activities?
7. What would it look like if the members of Luther Memorial became more connected to each other in the congregation?
8. What should we do to become more connected to our community?
9. Describe how being a part of this congregation helps you feel at home in this community.
 - a. If it does not, why?

- b. If it does, how does the congregation help you feel at home in this community compared to other community clubs or groups?

10. What is there that we have not talked about that you feel would be helpful for me and our action team to know as we begin/conclude this project?

APPENDIX G

QUALITATIVE FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL

Participants will respond to the questions both in writing and in conversation with one another after each intervention of the PAR.

1. What were some of the main topics discussed in your visit with one another?
2. What did you learn about yourself in taking the time to have a conversation and carefully listen to another?

(Alternate question adapted for God's Work, Our Hands intervention)-

In what ways did engaging in this project create an opportunity for conversation and listening with those around you?

- a. To what extent did this surprise you?
 - b. What would you consider doing different because of it?
 - c. How might this help shape your future interactions with others in the congregation?
3. In what ways, if any, did this experience of conversation and listening strengthen your sense of belonging with this congregation?

(Alternate question adapted for God's Work, Our Hands intervention)-

In what ways, if any, did this experience of serving strengthen your sense of belonging with this congregation?

- a. What did you appreciate most about your conversational partner/those working around you?
 - b. What did they seem to appreciate about you?
4. In what ways, if any, did you find difficult about this experience?
5. How might you use this experience to strengthen your relationships with others in the community?
6. Would you want to participate in more experiences similar to this one in the future?
 - a. Why or why not?
7. What have we not talked about which would be helpful for me to know regarding your experience with this?

APPENDIX H

INTERVENTION ONE AND THREE CONVERSATION STARTERS

Mentoring Groups for Newer Members
Half-Time Conversations (Two members from two different worship services)
Tree of Life Lutheran, Small-town, Nebraska

Conversation #1: Noticing One Another

1. What is your name and were you named after anyone?
2. Who is a part of your immediate family? Do you have any other family in the area?
3. Where/When did you attend school and/or college?
4. What is your favorite hobby?
5. What is your profession?
6. What has been your biggest success up until now? What has been your biggest challenge until now?
7. If you could do anything you wanted right now, what would it be?
8. Where do you most want to travel, but have never been?
9. What is your favorite memory of attending worship or another church activity?
10. Why did you begin attending Tree of Life Lutheran?
11. What is your favorite thing about this congregation? What is your least favorite?
12. When someone has given you a compliment saying, “You are really good at ...”
What have they told you?
13. What does your perfect day look like?

14. What is the one thing that should be taught in school that isn't already?
15. What one thing would you change if you had to do it over?
16. If you could go back in time, what year would you travel to?
17. What does your life say about you?
18. Why is faith a part of your family life?
19. How would your friends describe you?
20. When should we get together next?

Conversation #2: Noticing the World Around Us

1. Check in with one another. What has been your highlight (your blessing) since you last met? What has been your challenge (your bummer)?
2. Every time you turn on the news, look at facebook posts, listen to the radio, etc., what keeps catching your attention and why? Does this topic matter or not to you? Why?
3. Every time you attend work, school, or your place of volunteering, what keeps catching your attention and why? Does this topic matter or not to you? Why?
4. Every time you observe our life together in this congregation and/or community, what keeps catching your attention and why? Does this topic matter or not to you? Why?
5. If you could change one or two things about what you have noticed in these places, what would it/they be?
6. What do you believe gets in the way of anything being done to help make the changes needed?
7. What are some of the positive things you do notice that are promoting growth or change in these areas listed above?

8. Does being a person who believes in God change how you look at these things that you notice around you? If not, why? If yes, why?
9. What kind of group of people will it take to help impact our community, congregation, and society for creating necessary change? Do you see yourself as part of the problem or the solution?
10. God uses the small often in order to make great changes. What small part could our congregation and/or your family play in creating positive change for the common good?

Conversation 3: Noticing Our Part in God's Work

1. Check in with one another. What has been your highlight (your blessing) since you last met? What has been your challenge (your bummer)?
2. What is your favorite way to work—with your head or your hands? Give an example.
3. Share about a time that you were part of a project or group that really made a difference for someone else.
4. How do you think that Tree of Life is doing God's work with our hands? How do you think they can improve?
5. Tree of Life is celebrating 100 Years together. If you could see into the future in the next 100 years, what would you hope our congregation did or was a part of in caring for other peoples' lives?
6. Are there any areas or people in our community that you see need God's care?
7. Are there any areas or people in our world that you see need God's care?
8. Just dream for a bit, how could Tree of Life be a part of God's care for these people?
9. What skills or gifts do you feel you have that you could contribute?

10. When Tree of Life is part of God's work in our community and world, how do you think it impacts our life together as a congregation? What transforms or changes in us?
11. What excites you about this? What challenges you about this?
12. When are we next getting together?

Conversation 4: Noticing Why We Need the Church and God Needs the Church

1. Check in with one another. What has been your highlight (your blessing) since you last met? What has been your challenge (your bummer)?
2. Have someone read out loud the article, "Why I Go To Church Even When I Don't Feel Like It."¹
3. Share what really caught your attention in this article. Why did it catch your attention? Is this a comfort or a challenge to you?
4. How has "going to church" felt like to you before? A "have-to," a moral obligation, a social connection, something to appease your spouse...?
5. Below is how the author describes what "going to church" is for her now as she has come back to attending worship. What is "going to church" for you now?

It was more like a refuge where all sorts of people could gather to remind each other of the story we were all in—the one about how God loves us, and is renewing our world and our souls in spite of all the damage that's been done. It was more like a school for conversion where we were all stumbling through basic lessons on how to

¹ Trudy Smith, "Why I Go to Church Even When I Don't Feel Like It: What Leaving and Returning Taught Me About Church," *Relevant Magazine* (2016), <http://www.relevantmagazine.com/god/church/why-i-go-church-even-when-i-dont-feel-it> (accessed January 16, 2016).

love. Going to church can be about holding this space in which to experience the grace of God together, learn together, fail and forgive and stumble forward together.²

6. If there was one thing that you could change about “going to church” for you, what would it be?
7. What/who encourages you to attend worship and participate in the life of the congregation?
8. What/who encourages you to be a person of faith?
9. Tree of Life Lutheran has three *God-sized dreams*:
 - A church outside our building
 - A contagious sense of joy
 - Deepen our sense of community with God, one another, and our community

Pick a dream. Where do you think you are part of this dream coming to reality?
10. Help each other think through a niche, a place for you to find a sense of belonging and connection in the congregation. When you find this niche, how would you like to participate within the congregation and as a part of the congregation reaching out into the community?

² Ibid.

APPENDIX I

INTERVENTION TWO CONVERSATION STARTERS

1. Have everyone in your work area share names, professions, and/or grades in school.
Also share how long you have been a member of Tree of Life Lutheran.
2. Share about your family members that live together in your home. Share about where and when you grew up if you are older.
3. Why did you sign up to be a part of “God’s Work, Our Hands-Part Two?
4. When you are a part of services days like this, what do you enjoy the most? What do you like the least?
5. Why do you believe a service day like this is part of God’s work?
6. What other ways do you like to be part of God’s work in your daily lives?
7. What happens to us as Jesus’ church when we reach out to care for our neighbors?
8. What happens to our neighbors when we reach out to them?
9. How do you think God is moving Tree of Life Lutheran in loving and caring for our neighbors here in our town? In the world?

APPENDIX J

INTERVENTION FIVE CONVERSATION STARTERS

Home Visits with Younger, Less Active Families

1. When and why did you become a member of Luther Memorial?
2. What ministries and activities of LMC are important for you and your family?
3. What are your best memories with others at LMC?
4. If you have ever experienced a frustrating time with LMC, what was it and how did it affect you?
5. Is the worship, activities, and Christian education meaningful to you and your family? If so, why? If not, why?
6. Many young families responded to a survey Pastor Sarah conducted a year and a half ago. Those who responded shared that home is where they develop their sense of identity, purpose, and meaning of their lives. Would you agree with this and why?
7. In what ways can LMC help you grow in your sense of identity, purpose, and meaning in your lives?
8. On a scale from 1 to 10 (1 as low and 10 as high), rate how LMC helps you:
 - a. Find satisfaction in participating?
 - b. Strengthens your faith and makes connections with Christ?

- c. Challenges you to grow as a person?
 - d. Help you make a difference in your life, the community, and the world by participating?
9. Can you think of anything that the church can do or change to make it easier/better/more meaningful for you to participate in worship or in the church community?
10. Anything else that you would like to share that I have not asked you?

APPENDIX K

RESULTS FOR OVERALL SENSE OF CONNECTEDNESS

Table K.1. Paired t-test Results for Overall Sense of Connectedness

Q25, Q40-Q44 Overall Sense of Connectedness	$\bar{x}_b (N_b)$	$\bar{x}_e (N_e)$	df	t-value	p
Q25 I feel connected to others in this church.	4.23 (64)	4.19 (64)	63	.652	.517
Q40 Integrated Family or Group Made Up of Several Cliques	4.90 (63)	5.03 (63)	62	-.580	.564
Q41 Very Closely Connected or Very Disconnected	5.10 (63)	5.35 (63)	62	-1.754	.084
Q42 Open-minded People Who Listen or Close-minded People Who Do Not Listen	5.13 (63)	5.41 (63)	62	-1.638	.107
Q43 Practice What They Believe or Tend to Say One Thing and Do Opposite	5.38 (63)	5.65 (63)	62	-1.955	.055
Q44 Care Deeply About Community/World or Care Only About Themselves	5.59 (63)	5.90 (63)	62	-2.281	.026

Q25 Circle the number that best describes your strength of agreement from (5) Strongly Agree to (1) Strongly Disagree.

Q40-Q44 Color in the circle of agreement that best represents your evaluation of Tree of Life from (7) High Community, (4) Neutral), to (1) Low Community.

APPENDIX L

RESULTS FOR OVERALL PERCEPTION OF CONGREGATIONAL CONNECTEDNESS

Table L.1. Independent t-test Results for Overall Perception of Congregational Connectedness for Q18-Q22

Perception of Connectedness	$\bar{x}_b (N_b)$	$\bar{x}_e (N_e)$	df	t-value	p
Q18 People are welcoming.	3.27 (114)	3.32 (87)	199	-.517	.606
Q19 People greet me and know me by name.	3.38 (114)	3.37 (86)	198	.048	.962
Q20 People help me cope with daily struggles or difficult times in my life.	2.30 (107)	2.42 (81)	186	-.878	.381
Q21 I feel comfortable approaching others in this church and having conversation.	3.13 (113)	3.14 (87)	198	-.044	.965
Q22 I feel comfortable asking other church members to help or pray for me.	2.15 (109)	2.21 (85)	192	-.424	.672

Circle the number that best describes your strength of agreement: Almost Always (4), Regularly (3), Sometimes (2), Seldom/Never (1), Don't Know (8)

Table L.2. Paired t-test Results for Overall Perception of Congregational Connectedness for Q18-Q22

Perception of Connectedness	$\bar{x}_b (N_b)$	$\bar{x}_e (N_e)$	df	t-value	p
Q18 People are welcoming.	3.34 (65)	3.26 (65)	64	.897	.373
Q19 People greet me and know me by name.	3.43 (65)	3.40 (65)	64	.270	.788
Q20 People help me cope with daily struggles or difficult times in my life.	2.30 (63)	2.81 (63)	62	-2.395	.020
Q21 I feel comfortable approaching others in this church and having conversation.	3.09 (64)	3.14 (64)	63	-.574	.568
Q22 I feel comfortable asking other church members to help or pray for me.	2.32 (63)	2.32 (63)	62	.000	1.000

Circle the number that best describes your strength of agreement: Almost Always (4), Regularly (3), Sometimes (2), Seldom/Never (1), Don't Know (8)

APPENDIX M

RESULTS OF PAIRED T-TEST OF CONNECTEDNESS COMPARING AGE GROUPS

Table M.1. Paired t-test Results of Connectedness Comparing Age Groups

Q25, Q40-Q44 Sense of Connectedness	$\bar{x}_b (N_b)$	$\bar{x}_e (N_e)$	df	t-value	p
Q25 I feel connected to others in this church.					
Younger (Ages 19-39)-	3.93 (14)	4.00 (14)	13	-.434	.671
Middle-Age (Ages 40-64)-	3.94 (36)	4.11 (36)	35	-1.063	.295
Older (Ages 65-93)-	4.47 (15)	4.60 (15)	14	-1.468	.164
Q40 Integrated Family or Group Made Up of Several Cliques					
Younger (Ages 19-39)-	4.50 (14)	5.36 (14)	13	-2.917	.012
Middle-Age (Ages 40-64)-	5.09 (35)	4.80 (35)	34	.913	.373
Older (Ages 65-93)-	4.86 (14)	5.29 (14)	13	-.945	.362
Q41 Very Closely Connected or Very Disconnected					
Younger (Ages 19-39)-	5.07 (14)	5.71 (14)	13	-3.798	.002
Middle-Age (Ages 40-64)-	4.97 (35)	5.20 (35)	34	-1.016	.317
Older (Ages 65-93)-	5.43 (14)	5.36 (14)	13	.268	.793

Table M.1. Paired t-test Results of Connectedness Comparing Age Groups (cont.)

Q42 Open-minded People Who Listen or
Close-minded People
Who Do Not Listen

Younger (Ages 19-39)-	5.21 (14)	5.50 (14)	13	-.939	.365
Middle-Age (Ages 40-64)-	5.17 (35)	5.34 (35)	34	-.702	.487
Older (Ages 65-93)-	4.93 (14)	5.50 (14)	13	-1.421	.179

Q43 Practice What They Believe or
Tend to Say One Thing
and Do Opposite

Younger (Ages 19-39)-	5.36 (14)	5.43 (14)	13	-.322	.752
Middle-Age (Ages 40-64)-	5.31 (35)	5.69 (35)	34	-1.680	.102
Older (Ages 65-93)-	5.57 (14)	5.79 (14)	13	-1.147	.272

Q44 Care Deeply About
Community/World or
Care Only About
Themselves

Younger (Ages 19-39)-	5.57 (14)	5.79 (14)	13	-1.147	.272
Middle-Age (Ages 40-64)-	5.49 (35)	5.97 (35)	34	-2.115	.042
Older (Ages 65-93)-	5.86 (14)	5.86 (14)	13	.000	1.000

Q25 Circle the number that best describes your strength of agreement from (5) Strongly Agree to (1) Strongly Disagree.

Q40-Q44 Color in the circle of agreement that best represents your evaluation of Tree of Life from (7) High Community, (4) Neutral, to (1) Low Community.

APPENDIX N

RESULTS OF T-TESTS OF CONNECTEDNESS COMPARING INCOME LEVELS

Table N.1. Independent t-test Results of Connectedness Comparing Income Levels

Q25, Q40-Q44 Sense of Connectedness	$\bar{x}_b (N_b)$	$\bar{x}_e (N_e)$	df	t- value	p
Q25 I feel connected to others in this church.					
\$40,000 or Less-	4.46 (13)	4.36 (11)	22	.327	.747
\$40,001-\$80,000-	4.00 (42)	4.00 (25)	65	.000	1.000
\$80,001 or More-	4.16 (38)	4.30 (33)	69	-.822	.414
Q40 Integrated Family or Group Made Up of Several Cliques					
\$40,000 or Less-	5.00 (13)	5.73 (11)	22	-1.111	.279
\$40,001-\$80,000-	4.61 (41)	4.48 (25)	64	.295	.130
\$80,001 or More-	5.03 (38)	5.24 (33)	69	-.680	.499
Q41 Very Closely Connected or Very Disconnected					
\$40,000 or Less-	5.00 (13)	5.82 (11)	22	-1.418	.170
\$40,001-\$80,000-	5.10 (41)	5.12 (25)	64	-.078	.938
\$80,001 or More-	5.05 (38)	5.45 (33)	69	-1.630	.108
Q42 Open-minded People Who Listen or Close-minded People Who Do Not Listen					
\$40,000 or Less-	5.23 (13)	5.36 (11)	22	-.218	.830
\$40,001-\$80,000-	4.78 (41)	5.04 (25)	64	-.780	.438
\$80,001 or More-	5.37 (38)	5.76 (33)	69	-1.613	.111

Table N.1. Independent t-test Results of Connectedness Comparing Income Levels (cont.)

Q43 Practice What They Believe or
Tend to Say One Thing and Do Opposite

\$40,000 or Less-	5.62 (13)	6.00 (11)	22	-.917	.369
\$40,001-\$80,000-	5.10 (41)	5.32 (25)	64	-.665	.508
\$80,001 or More-	5.32 (38)	6.03 (33)	69	-3.242	.002

Q44 Care Deeply About
Community/World or
Care Only About Themselves

\$40,000 or Less-	5.77 (13)	6.00 (11)	22	-.559	.582
\$40,001-\$80,000-	5.56 (41)	5.96 (25)	64	-1.380	.172
\$80,001 or More-	5.53 (38)	5.94 (33)	69	-1.974	.052

Q25 Circle the number that best describes your strength of agreement from (5) Strongly Agree to (1) Strongly Disagree.

Q40-Q44 Color in the circle of agreement that best represents your evaluation of Tree of Life from (7) High Community, (4) Neutral, to (1) Low Community.

APPENDIX O

RESULTS OF TESTS OF CONNECTEDNESS COMPARING EDUCATIONAL LEVELS

Table O.1. Independent t-test Results of Connectedness Comparing Educational Levels

Q25, Q40-Q44 Sense of Connectedness	$\bar{x}_b (N_b)$	$\bar{x}_e (N_e)$	df	t-value	p
Q25 I feel connected to others in this church.					
High school Graduate or Less-	4.23 (26)	4.08 (12)	36	.746	.460
Tech., Assoc., or College Graduate-	4.00 (51)	4.24 (41)	90	-1.350	.181
master's or Doctorate-	4.19 (21)	4.21 (28)	47	-.127	.900
Q40 Integrated Family or Group Made Up of Several Cliques					
High school Graduate or Less-	5.20 (25)	5.00 (10)	33	.372	.712
Tech., Assoc., or College Graduate-	4.66 (50)	4.90 (41)	89	-.705	.482
master's or Doctorate-	4.77 (22)	5.32 (28)	48	-1.374	.176
Q41 Very Closely Connected or Very Disconnected					
High school Graduate or Less-	5.12 (25)	5.00 (10)	33	.237	.814
Tech., Assoc., or College Graduate-	5.04 (50)	5.34 (41)	89	-1.292	.200
master's or Doctorate-	5.00 (22)	5.54 (28)	48	-1.790	.080
Q42 Open-minded People Who Listen or Close-minded People Who Do Not Listen					
High school Graduate or Less-	5.40 (25)	5.10 (10)	33	.633	.531
Tech., Assoc., or College Graduate-	5.10 (50)	5.32 (41)	89	-.875	.384
master's or Doctorate-	4.82 (22)	5.64 (28)	48	-2.687	.010

Table O.1. Independent t-test Results of Connectedness Comparing Educational Levels (cont.)

Q43 Practice What They Believe or Tend to Say One Thing and Do Opposite						
High school Graduate or Less-	5.56 (25)	5.40 (10)	33	.406	.687	
Tech., Assoc., or College Graduate-	5.28 (50)	5.66 (41)	89	-1.592	.115	
master's or Doctorate-	4.95 (22)	5.93 (28)	48	-3.462	.001	
Q44 Care Deeply About Community/World or Care Only About Themselves						
High school Graduate or Less-	5.88 (25)	5.70 (10)	33	.444	.660	
Tech., Assoc., or College Graduate-	5.50 (50)	5.90 (41)	89	-1.898	.061	
master's or Doctorate-	5.36 (22)	6.00 (28)	48	-2.305	.026	

Q25 Circle the number that best describes your strength of agreement from (5) Strongly Agree to (1) Strongly Disagree.

Q40-Q44 Color in the circle of agreement that best represents your evaluation of Tree of Life from (7) High Community, (4) Neutral, to (1) Low Community.

APPENDIX P

RESULTS OF TESTS OF CONNECTEDNESS COMPARING CHILDHOOD CHURCH BACKGROUND

Table P.1. Independent t-test Results of Connectedness Comparing Childhood Church Background

	Q25, Q40-Q44 Sense of Connectedness	$\bar{x}_b (N_b)$	$\bar{x}_c (N_c)$	df	t-value	p
Q25 I feel connected to others in this church.						
	Other Than Lutheran-	3.98 (45)	4.23 (31)	74	-1.274	.208
	Lutheran-	4.25 (68)	4.22 (55)	121	.253	.801
Q40 Integrated Family or Group Made Up of Several Cliques						
	Other Than Lutheran-	4.64 (45)	5.03 (29)	72	-1.038	.303
	Lutheran-	4.99 (67)	5.07 (55)	120	-.324	.746
Q41 Very Closely Connected or Very Disconnected						
	Other Than Lutheran-	5.00 (45)	5.24 (29)	72	-.920	.360
	Lutheran-	5.15 (67)	5.38 (55)	120	-1.153	.251
Q42 Open-minded People Who Listen or Close-minded People Who Do Not Listen						
	Other Than Lutheran-	4.98 (45)	5.45 (29)	72	-1.597	.115
	Lutheran-	5.21 (67)	5.31 (55)	120	-.472	.637

Table P.1. Independent t-test Results of Connectedness Comparing Childhood Church Background (cont.)

Q43 Practice What They Believe or Tend to Say One Thing and Do Opposite						
Other Than Lutheran-	5.20 (45)	5.72 (29)	72	-1.896	.062	
Lutheran-	5.33 (67)	5.62 (55)	120	-1.509	.134	
Q44 Care Deeply About Community/World or Care Only About Themselves						
Other Than Lutheran-	5.58 (45)	5.93 (29)	72	-1.400	.166	
Lutheran-	5.61 (67)	5.85 (55)	120	-1.401	.164	

Q25 Circle the number that best describes your strength of agreement from (5) Strongly Agree to (1) Strongly Disagree.
Q40-Q44 Color in the circle of agreement that best represents your evaluation of Tree of Life from (7) High Community, (4) Neutral), to (1) Low Community.

Table P.2. Paired t-test Results of Connectedness Comparing Childhood Church Background

Q25, Q40-Q44 Sense of Connectedness	$\bar{x}_b (N_b)$	$\bar{x}_e (N_e)$	df	t-value	p
Q25 I feel connected to others in this church.					
Other Than Lutheran-	4.13 (24)	4.13 (24)	23	.000	1.000
Lutheran-	4.30 (40)	4.23 (40)	39	.902	.372
Q40 Integrated Family or Group Made Up of Several Cliques					
Other Than Lutheran-	4.96 (24)	5.08 (24)	23	-.323	.750
Lutheran-	4.87 (39)	5.00 (39)	38	-.483	.632
Q41 Very Closely Connected or Very Disconnected					
Other Than Lutheran-	5.13 (24)	5.54 (24)	23	-2.095	.047
Lutheran-	5.08 (39)	5.23 (39)	38	-.771	.446

Table P.2. Paired t-test Results of Connectedness Comparing Childhood Church Background (cont.)

Q42 Open-minded People Who Listen or Close-minded People Who Do Not Listen						
Other Than Lutheran-	5.08 (24)	5.46 (24)	23	-1.519	.142	
Lutheran-	5.15 (39)	5.36 (39)	38	-.964	.341	
<hr/>						
Q43 Practice What They Believe or Tend to Say One Thing and Do Opposite						
Other Than Lutheran-	5.38 (24)	5.83 (24)	23	-2.114	.046	
Lutheran-	5.38 (39)	5.54 (39)	38	-.863	.393	
<hr/>						
Q44 Care Deeply About Community/World or Care Only About Themselves						
Other Than Lutheran-	5.58 (24)	6.04 (24)	23	-2.114	.046	
Lutheran-	5.59 (39)	5.82 (39)	38	-1.270	.212	

Q25 Circle the number that best describes your strength of agreement from (5) Strongly Agree to (1) Strongly Disagree.

Q40-Q44 Color in the circle of agreement that best represents your evaluation of Tree of Life from (7) High Community, (4) Neutral, to (1) Low Community.

APPENDIX Q

RESULTS OF TESTS OF CONNECTEDNESS COMPARING LENGTH OF CONGREGATIONAL MEMBERSHIP

Table Q.1. Independent t-test Results of Connectedness Comparing Length of Congregational Membership

Q25, Q40-Q44 Sense of Connectedness	$\bar{x}_b (N_b)$	$\bar{x}_e (N_e)$	df	t-value	p
Q25 I feel connected to others in this church.					
Member for 20 Years or Less-	3.93 (45)	4.05 (37)	80	-.605	.547
Member for 21 to 40 Years-	4.25 (36)	4.37 (30)	64	-.834	.408
Member for 41 Plus Years-	4.30 (30)	4.32 (19)	47	-.091	.928
Q40 Integrated Family or Group Made Up of Several Cliques					
Member for 20 Years or Less-	4.58 (45)	5.03 (36)	79	-1.155	.252
Member for 21 to 40 Years-	4.83 (35)	4.97 (30)	63	-.393	.696
Member for 41 Plus Years-	5.17 (30)	5.28 (18)	46	-.307	.760
Q41 Very Closely Connected or Very Disconnected					
Member for 20 Years or Less-	4.91 (45)	5.36 (36)	79	-1.661	.101
Member for 21 to 40 Years-	5.11 (35)	5.33 (30)	63	-.932	.355
Member for 41 Plus Years-	5.27 (30)	5.28 (18)	46	-.033	.974
Q42 Open-minded People Who Listen or Close-minded People Who Do Not Listen					
Member for 20 Years or Less-	4.98 (45)	5.36 (36)	79	-1.310	.194
Member for 21 to 40 Years-	5.09 (35)	5.37 (30)	63	-1.044	.300
Member for 41 Plus Years-	5.37 (30)	5.33 (18)	46	.097	.923

Table Q.1. Independent t-test Results of Connectedness Comparing Length of Congregational Membership (cont.)

Q43 Practice What They Believe or Tend to Say One Thing and Do Opposite						
Member for 20 Years or Less-	5.04 (45)	5.72 (36)	79	-2.762	.007	
Member for 21 to 40 Years-	5.23 (35)	5.53 (30)	63	-1.063	.292	
Member for 41 Plus Years-	5.73 (30)	5.72 (18)	46	.038	.970	
Q44 Care Deeply About Community/World or Care Only About Themselves						
Member for 20 Years or Less-	5.33 (45)	5.89 (36)	79	-2.283	.025	
Member for 21 to 40 Years-	5.51 (35)	5.87 (30)	63	-1.556	.125	
Member for 41 Plus Years-	6.07 (30)	5.89 (18)	46	.626	.537	
<i>Q25 Circle the number that best describes your strength of agreement from (5) Strongly Agree to (1) Strongly Disagree.</i>						
<i>Q40-Q44 Color in the circle of agreement that best represents your evaluation of Tree of Life from (7) High Community, (4) Neutral, to (1) Low Community.</i>						

Table Q.2. Paired t-test Results of Connectedness Comparing Length of Congregational Membership

	Q25, Q40-Q44 Sense of Connectedness	$\bar{x}_b (N_b)$	$\bar{x}_e (N_e)$	df	t-value	p
Q25 I feel connected to others in this church.						
Member for 20 Years or Less-		4.14 (29)	3.97 (29)	28	1.307	.202
Member for 21 to 40 Years-		4.26 (23)	4.35 (23)	22	-1.000	.328
Member for 41 Plus Years-		4.42 (12)	4.42 (12)	11	.000	1.000
Q40 Integrated Family or Group Made Up of Several Cliques						
Member for 20 Years or Less-		4.54 (28)	4.71 (28)	27	-.468	.644
Member for 21 to 40 Years-		4.91 (23)	5.26 (23)	22	-1.358	.188
Member for 41 Plus Years-		5.75 (12)	5.33 (12)	11	.767	.459

Table Q.2. Paired t-test Results of Connectedness Comparing Length of Congregational Membership (cont.)

Q41 Very Closely Connected or Very Disconnected					
Member for 20 Years or Less-	4.86 (28)	5.14 (28)	27	-1.247	.223
Member for 21 to 40 Years-	5.04 (23)	5.57 (23)	22	-3.425	.002
Member for 41 Plus Years-	5.75 (12)	5.42 (12)	11	.771	.457
Q42 Open-minded People Who Listen or Close-minded People Who Do Not Listen					
Member for 20 Years or Less-	4.96 (28)	5.32 (28)	27	-1.441	.161
Member for 21 to 40 Years-	5.09 (23)	5.52 (23)	22	-2.328	.030
Member for 41 Plus Years-	5.58 (12)	5.42 (12)	11	.266	.795
Q43 Practice What They Believe or Tend to Say One Thing and Do Opposite					
Member for 20 Years or Less-	5.14 (28)	5.57 (28)	27	-1.844	.0766
Member for 21 to 40 Years-	5.35 (23)	5.65 (23)	22	-1.576	.129
Member for 41 Plus Years-	6.00 (12)	5.83 (12)	11	.561	.586
Q44 Care Deeply About Community/World or Care Only About Themselves					
Member for 20 Years or Less-	5.32 (28)	5.82 (28)	27	-2.049	.050
Member for 21 to 40 Years-	5.57 (23)	6.00 (23)	22	-2.647	.015
Member for 41 Plus Years-	6.25 (12)	5.92 (12)	11	1.173	.266

Q25 Circle the number that best describes your strength of agreement from (5) Strongly Agree to (1) Strongly Disagree.

Q40-Q44 Color in the circle of agreement that best represents your evaluation of Tree of Life from (7) High Community, (4) Neutral, to (1) Low Community.

APPENDIX R

RESULTS OF TEST OF CONNECTEDNESS COMPARING AVERAGE WORSHIP ATTENDANCE

Table R.1. Independent t-test Results of Connectedness Comparing Average Worship Attendance

Q25, Q40-Q44 Sense of Connectedness	$\bar{x}_b (N_b)$	$\bar{x}_e (N_e)$	df	t-value	p
Q25 I feel connected to others in this church.					
Every Week-	4.33 (57)	4.29 (49)	104	.320	.750
2 to 3 Times Per Month-	4.06 (31)	4.22 (27)	56	-1.102	.275
Once a Month or Less-	3.81 (26)	3.80 (10)	34	.026	.979
Q40 Integrated Family or Group Made Up of Several Cliques					
Every Week-	4.96 (56)	5.19 (47)	101	-.783	.435
2 to 3 Times Per Month-	4.94(32)	4.93 (27)	57	.029	.977
Once a Month or Less-	4.52 (25)	4.90 (10)	33	-.592	.558
Q41 Very Closely Connected or Very Disconnected					
Every Week-	5.18 (56)	5.38 (47)	101	-.928	.356
2 to 3 Times Per Month-	5.06 (32)	5.37 (27)	57	-1.077	.286
Once a Month or Less-	5.00 (25)	5.10 (10)	33	-.224	.824

Table R.1. Independent t-test Results of Connectedness Comparing Average Worship Attendance (cont.)

Q42 Open-minded People Who Listen or
Close-minded People Who Do Not Listen

Every Week-	5.23 (56)	5.49 (47)	101	-1.130	.261
2 to 3 Times Per Month-	5.28 (32)	5.37 (27)	57	-.306	.761
Once a Month or Less-	4.68 (25)	4.80 (10)	33	-.232	.818

Q43 Practice What They Believe or
Tend to Say One Thing and Do Opposite

Every Week-	5.50 (56)	5.89 (47)	101	-2.102	.038
2 to 3 Times Per Month-	5.22 (32)	5.74 (27)	57	-1.936	.058
Once a Month or Less-	4.92 (25)	4.40 (10)	33	1.029	.311

Q44 Care Deeply About
Community/World or
Care Only About Themselves

Every Week-	5.73 (56)	6.15 (47)	101	-2.271	.025
2 to 3 Times Per Month-	5.66 (32)	5.67 (27)	57	-.040	.968
Once a Month or Less-	5.28 (25)	5.30 (10)	33	.050	.960

Q25 Circle the number that best describes your strength of agreement from (5) Strongly Agree to (1) Strongly Disagree.

Q40-Q44 Color in the circle of agreement that best represents your evaluation of Tree of Life from (7) High Community, (4) Neutral), to (1) Low Community.

APPENDIX S

RESULTS OF TESTS OF CONNECTEDNESS COMPARING USE OF TECHNOLOGICAL DEVICE, TELEVISION, RADIO, AND/OR COMPUTER

**Table S.1. Independent t-test Results of Connectedness Comparing Use of
Technological Device, Television, Radio, and/or Computer**

Q25, Q40-Q44 Sense of Connectedness	$\bar{x}_b (N_b)$	$\bar{x}_e (N_e)$	df	t-value	p
Q25 I feel connected to others in this church.					
Less Than 2 Hours-	4.15 (40)	4.13 (24)	62	.150	.881
2 to 5 Hours-	4.07 (57)	4.28 (57)	112	-1.451	.150
6 to 10 Hours-	4.35 (17)	4.00 (5)	20	.900	.379
Q40 Integrated Family or Group Made Up of Several Cliques					
Less Than 2 Hours-	4.59 (39)	5.17 (24)	61	-1.665	.101
2 to 5 Hours-	4.86 (57)	5.05 (56)	111	-.631	.529
6 to 10 Hours-	5.47 (17)	5.00 (5)	20	.437	.683
Q41 Very Closely Connected or Very Disconnected					
Less Than 2 Hours-	4.87 (39)	5.46 (24)	61	-2.353	.022
2 to 5 Hours-	5.19 (57)	5.29 (56)	111	-.418	.677
6 to 10 Hours-	5.35 (17)	5.60 (5)	20	-.417	.681
Q42 Open-minded People Who Listen or Close-minded People Who Do Not Listen					
Less Than 2 Hours-	5.03 (39)	5.75 (24)	61	-2.828	.006
2 to 5 Hours-	5.09 (57)	5.21 (56)	111	-.528	.598
6 to 10 Hours-	5.47 (17)	5.40 (5)	20	.111	.913

Table S.1. Independent t-test Results of Connectedness Comparing Use of Technological Device, Television, Radio, and/or Computer (cont.)

Q43 Practice What They Believe or
Tend to Say One Thing and Do Opposite

Less Than 2 Hours-	5.15 (39)	5.71 (24)	61	-2.154	.035
2 to 5 Hours-	5.23 (57)	5.64 (56)	111	-1.878	.063
6 to 10 Hours-	5.82 (17)	5.80 (5)	20	.050	.961

Q44 Care Deeply About
Community/World or
Care Only About Themselves

Less Than 2 Hours-	5.49 (39)	5.79 (24)	61	-1.300	.198
2 to 5 Hours-	5.56 (57)	5.89 (56)	111	-1.657	.100
6 to 10 Hours-	6.06 (17)	6.40 (5)	20	-.861	.400

Q25 Circle the number that best describes your strength of agreement from (5) Strongly Agree to (1) Strongly Disagree.

Q40-Q44 Color in the circle of agreement that best represents your evaluation of Tree of Life from (7) High Community, (4) Neutral, to (1) Low Community.

APPENDIX T

RESULTS OF TESTS OF CONNECTEDNESS COMPARING LOCATION OF ONE'S WORK

Table T.1. Paired t-test Results of Connectedness Comparing Location of One's Work

Q25, Q40-Q44 Sense of Connectedness	$\bar{x}_b (N_b)$	$\bar{x}_e (N_e)$	df	t-value	p
Q25 I feel connected to others in this church.					
Work in Town-	4.23 (40)	4.15 (40)	39	.771	.446
Work out of Town-	4.00 (10)	4.00 (10)	9	.000	1.000
Q40 Integrated Family or Group Made Up of Several Cliques					
Work in Town-	4.85 (40)	5.08 (40)	39	-.836	.408
Work out of Town-	5.20 (10)	5.00 (10)	9	.294	.775
Q41 Very Closely Connected or Very Disconnected					
Work in Town-	5.05 (40)	5.48 (40)	39	-2.978	.005
Work out of Town-	5.20 (10)	5.20 (10)	9	.000	1.000
Q42 Open-minded People Who Listen or Close-minded People Who Do Not Listen					
Work in Town-	5.03 (40)	5.50 (40)	39	-2.602	.013
Work out of Town-	5.40 (10)	5.00 (10)	9	.557	.591

Table T.1. Paired t-test Results of Connectedness Comparing Location of One's Work (cont.)

Q43 Practice What They Believe or
Tend to Say One Thing and Do Opposite

Work in Town-	5.33 (40)	5.78 (40)	39	-2.683	.011
Work out of Town-	5.40 (10)	5.30 (10)	9	.208	.840

Q44 Care Deeply About
Community/World or
Care Only About Themselves

Work in Town-	5.60 (40)	6.08 (40)	39	-2.967	.005
Work out of Town-	5.50 (10)	5.60 (10)	9	-.183	.859

Q25 Circle the number that best describes your strength of agreement from (5) Strongly Agree to (1) Strongly Disagree.

Q40-Q44 Color in the circle of agreement that best represents your evaluation of Tree of Life from (7) High Community, (4) Neutral), to (1) Low Community.

APPENDIX U

RESULTS OF TESTS OF CONNECTEDNESS COMPARING LOCATION OF ONE'S SHOPPING PREFERENCES

Table U.1. Independent t-test Results of Connectedness Comparing Location of Shopping Preferences

Q25, Q40-Q44 Sense of Connectedness	$\bar{x}_b (N_b)$	$\bar{x}_c (N_c)$	df	t-value	p
Q25 I feel connected to others in this church.					
Shopping In Town-	4.29 (52)	4.41 (39)	89	-.817	.416
Shopping Out of Town-	4.00 (59)	4.06 (47)	104	-.442	.660
Q40 Integrated Family or Group Made Up of Several Cliques					
Shopping In Town-	5.18 (51)	5.24 (38)	87	-.187	.852
Shopping Out of Town-	4.59 (59)	4.98 (46)	103	-1.285	.202
Q41 Very Closely Connected or Very Disconnected					
Shopping In Town-	5.33 (51)	5.42 (38)	87	-.354	.725
Shopping Out of Town-	4.92 (59)	5.33 (46)	103	-1.962	.052
Q42 Open-minded People Who Listen or Close-minded People Who Do Not Listen					
Shopping In Town-	5.20 (51)	5.55 (38)	87	-1.444	.152
Shopping Out of Town-	5.03 (59)	5.26 (46)	103	-.935	.352

Table U.1. Independent t-test Results of Connectedness Comparing Location of Shopping Preferences (cont.)

Q43 Practice What They Believe or Tend to Say One Thing and Do Opposite						
Shopping In Town-	5.51 (51)	5.95 (38)	87	-2.266	.026	
Shopping Out of Town-	5.08 (59)	5.46 (46)	103	-1.566	.120	
Q44 Care Deeply About Community/World or Care Only About Themselves						
Shopping In Town-	5.71 (51)	6.05 (38)	87	-1.587	.116	
Shopping Out of Town-	5.53 (59)	5.80 (46)	103	-1.501	.136	
Q25 Circle the number that best describes your strength of agreement from (5) Strongly Agree to (1) Strongly Disagree.						
Q40-Q44 Color in the circle of agreement that best represents your evaluation of Tree of Life from (7) High Community, (4) Neutral), to (1) Low Community.						

Table U.2. Paired t-test Results of Connectedness Comparing Location of Shopping Preferences

Q25, Q40-Q44 Sense of Connectedness	$\bar{x}_b (N_b)$	$\bar{x}_e (N_e)$	df	t- value	p
Q25 I feel connected to others in this church.					
Shopping In Town-	4.41 (29)	4.34 (29)	28	.626	.537
Shopping Out of Town-	4.09 (34)	4.06 (34)	33	.297	.768
Q40 Integrated Family or Group Made Up of Several Cliques					
Shopping In Town-	5.14 (28)	5.11 (28)	27	.089	.930
Shopping Out of Town-	4.74 (34)	5.03 (34)	33	-1.261	.216
Q41 Very Closely Connected or Very Disconnected					
Shopping In Town-	5.32 (28)	5.32 (28)	27	.000	1.000
Shopping Out of Town-	4.94 (34)	5.41 (34)	33	-4.144	.000

Table U.2. Paired t-test Results of Connectedness Comparing Location of Shopping Preferences (cont.)

Q42 Open-minded People Who Listen or
Close-minded People Who Do Not Listen

Shopping In Town-	5.11 (28)	5.57 (28)	27	-1.437	.162
Shopping Out of Town-	5.12 (34)	5.32 (34)	33	-1.190	.242

Q43 Practice What They Believe or
Tend to Say One Thing and Do Opposite

Shopping In Town-	5.54 (28)	5.79 (28)	27	-1.097	.282
Shopping Out of Town-	5.24 (34)	5.56 (34)	33	-1.874	.070

Q44 Care Deeply About
Community/World or
Care Only About Themselves

Shopping In Town-	5.57 (28)	5.96 (28)	27	-1.653	.110
Shopping Out of Town-	5.59 (34)	5.88 (34)	33	-1.768	.086

Q25 Circle the number that best describes your strength of agreement from (5) Strongly Agree to (1) Strongly Disagree.

Q40-Q44 Color in the circle of agreement that best represents your evaluation of Tree of Life from (7) High Community, (4) Neutral, to (1) Low Community.

APPENDIX V

RESULTS OF TESTS OF CONNECTEDNESS COMPARING COMMUNITY SERVICE

Table V.1. Independent t-test Results of Connectedness Comparing Community Service Project Participation

Q25, Q40-Q44 Sense of Connectedness	\bar{x}_b (N _b)	\bar{x}_c (N _c)	df	t-value	p
Q25 I feel connected to others in this church.					
Participates in Community Service Projects-	4.18 (103)	4.27 (79)	180	-.749	.455
Does Not Participate-	3.67 (9)	3.71 (7)	14	-.130	.899
Q40 Integrated Family or Group Made Up of Several Cliques					
Participates in Community Service Projects-	4.84 (102)	5.17 (78)	178	-1.449	.149
Does Not Participate-	5.00 (9)	4.14 (7)	14	.892	.387
Q41 Very Closely Connected or Very Disconnected					
Participates in Community Service Projects-	5.13 (102)	5.41 (78)	178	-1.782	.076
Does Not Participate-	4.89 (9)	4.71 (7)	14	.209	.837
Q42 Open-minded People Who Listen or Close-minded People Who Do Not Listen					
Participates in Community Service Projects-	5.08 (102)	5.46 (78)	178	-2.237	.027
Does Not Participate-	5.78 (9)	4.43 (7)	14	1.687	.114

Table V.1. Independent t-test Results of Connectedness Comparing Community Service Project Participation (cont.)

Q43 Practice What They Believe or Tend to Say One Thing and Do Opposite						
Participates in Community Service Projects-	5.25 (102)	5.74 (78)	178	-3.079	.002	
Does Not Participate-	5.56 (9)	4.86 (7)	14	.930	.368	
Q44 Care Deeply About Community/World or Care Only About Themselves						
Participates in Community Service Projects-	5.60 (102)	5.96 (78)	178	-2.507	.013	
Does Not Participate-	5.78 (9)	5.14 (7)	14	.996	.336	
Q25 Circle the number that best describes your strength of agreement from (5) Strongly Agree to (1) Strongly Disagree.						
Q40-Q44 Color in the circle of agreement that best represents your evaluation of Tree of Life from (7) High Community, (4) Neutral), to (1) Low Community.						

Table V.2. Paired t-test Results of Connectedness Comparing Community Service Project Participation

Q25, Q40-Q44 Sense of Connectedness	$\bar{x}_b (N_b)$	$\bar{x}_e (N_e)$	df	t- value	p
Q25 I feel connected to others in this church.					
Participates in Community Service Projects-	4.30 (57)	4.23 (57)	56	.942	.350
Does Not Participate-	3.67 (6)	3.83 (6)	5	-.542	.611
Q40 Integrated Family or Group Made Up of Several Cliques					
Participates in Community Service Projects-	4.84 (56)	5.04 (56)	55	-.900	.372
Does Not Participate-	5.33 (6)	4.67 (6)	5	.614	.566
Q41 Very Closely Connected or Very Disconnected					
Participates in Community Service Projects-	5.07 (56)	5.36 (56)	55	-2.211	.031
Does Not Participate-	5.17 (6)	5.00 (6)	5	.170	.872

Table V.2. Paired t-test Results of Connectedness Comparing Community Service Project Participation (cont.)

Q42 Open-minded People Who Listen or
Close-minded People Who Do Not Listen

Participates in Community Service Projects-	5.05 (56)	5.43 (56)	55	-2.468	.017
Does Not Participate-	5.83 (6)	5.00 (6)	5	.752	.486

Q43 Practice What They Believe or
Tend to Say One Thing and Do Opposite

Participates in Community Service Projects-	5.30 (56)	5.66 (56)	55	-2.541	.014
Does Not Participate-	6.00 (6)	5.50 (6)	5	.889	.415

Q44 Care Deeply About
Community/World or
Care Only About Themselves

Participates in Community Service Projects-	5.55 (56)	5.95 (56)	55	-2.739	.008
Does Not Participate-	5.83 (6)	5.50 (6)	5	.598	.576

Q25 Circle the number that best describes your strength of agreement from (5) Strongly Agree to (1) Strongly Disagree.

Q40-Q44 Color in the circle of agreement that best represents your evaluation of Tree of Life from (7) High Community, (4) Neutral, to (1) Low Community.

APPENDIX W

RESULTS OF TESTS OF CONNECTEDNESS COMPARING TREE OF LIFE'S BONDING CAPITAL

Table W.1. Independent t-test Results of Tree of Life's Bonding Capital

Tree of Life's Bonding Capital	$\bar{x}_b (N_b)$	$\bar{x}_e (N_e)$	df	t-value	p
Q23 I have friends in this church.	4.54 (115)	4.54 (87)	200	-.013	.990
Q24 Come to worship and activities to be with others	3.90 (115)	3.95 (86)	199	-.454	.650
Q26 I feel that I can trust several people in this church.	4.35 (115)	4.33 (87)	200	.142	.887
<i>Please circle the number that best describes your strength of agreement with the following: (5) Strongly Agree, (4) Agree, (3) Neither Disagree nor Agree, (2) Strongly Disagree, (1) Strongly Disagree, (8) Don't Know</i>					

Table W.2. Paired t-test Results of Tree of Life's Bonding Capital

Tree of Life's Bonding Capital	$\bar{x}_b (N_b)$	$\bar{x}_e (N_e)$	df	t-value	p
Q23 I have friends in this church.	4.55 (65)	4.52 (65)	64	.469	.641
Q24 Come to worship and activities to be with others	4.09 (64)	3.92 (64)	63	1.842	.070
Q26 I feel that I can trust several people in this church.	4.37 (65)	4.31 (65)	64	.753	.454
<i>Please circle the number that best describes your strength of agreement with the following: (5) Strongly Agree, (4) Agree, (3) Neither Disagree nor Agree, (2) Strongly Disagree, (1) Strongly Disagree, (8) Don't Know</i>					

APPENDIX X

MEANINGFUL CONVERSATIONS AND LISTENING ORIENTATION MATERIAL

A Place to Start...

Meaningless Conversations VS. Meaningful Conversations With Listening for the Sake of the Other

What are we seeking to change?

Creating deeper connections with God, one another and our community, where the fabric that connects us has become thin.

“Change begins when a few people start talking with one another about something they care about.”—Margaret Wheatley

Meaningless Conversations:

- Filled with polarities—black vs. white, your way vs. my way, left wing vs. right wing, Republican vs. Democratic, etc.
- Carries along our sense of “overwhelmness”
- Brings easy disappointment
- Lack of trust for one another
- Cynicalness
- Lack of commitment to one another
- Others dominate the conversation
- Problem focused

“No sane person wants to participate in yet another meeting or get involved with yet another problem-solving process, because these will only increase our frustration and impotence.”—Margaret Wheatley

Meaningful Conversations:

- How we naturally self-organize to think together with gathering together in circle, listening to one another, and sharing about possibilities rather than problems
- Ignites innovation
- Discovering together what we care about
- All are equals in connecting despite age, experience, gender, etc.
- Being attentive without judgment

- Open-ended questions and other questions that ignite creativeness
- Not necessarily neat thoughts, clear categories, but grass-roots

Listening

- To pay attention, take an interest, care about, take to heart, validate, acknowledge, be moved, appreciate the other
- Respect for the other
- Poor listening—listener operates according to their own agenda, preconceived notions/expectations, or defensive emotional reactions. Also poor listening comes from us preparing our response (own story or comeback) before speaker is finished.
- We empty our filled-filters of their agendas, what we have to get done later, own preconceived notions.

“We let go of our own needs or what is on our mind so that we may concentrate on the speaker and what he/she is saying.”—Pr. Sarah Cordray

“Most people aren’t really interested in your point of view until they become convinced that you’ve heard and appreciated theirs.”—Michael Nichols

“One who listens is fundamentally open. Without such openness to one another there is no genuine human bond. Belonging together always means being able to listen to one another.”—Gadamar

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Ammerman, Nancy Tatom, and Arthur Emery Farnsley. *Congregation & Community*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997.
- Bailey, Mark L. "The Parable of the Mustard Seed." *Bibliotheca Sacra* 155 - (October-December 1998): 449-459.
- Baldwin, Christina and Ann Linnea. *The Circle Way: A Leader in Every Chair*. San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc., 2010.
- Baldwin, Christina, and Ann Linnea. *The Circle Way: A Leader in Every Chair*. San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2010.
- Bass, Diana Butler. *Christianity after Religion: The End of Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening*. New York: HarperOne, 2012.
- Battle, Michael. *Reconciliation: The Ubuntu Theology of Desmond Tutu*. Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2009.
- Bell, Daniel M. *The Economy of Desire: Christianity and Capitalism in a Postmodern World*. The Church and Postmodern Culture. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012.
- Bellah, Robert N. *The Good Society*. New York: Random House, 1991.
- "The Belmont Report." <http://hhs.gov/ohrp/humansubjects/guidance/belmont.html> (accessed September 4, 2015).
- "Belonging." <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/belonging> (accessed December 16, 2015).
- Bennis, Warren G., and Burt Nanus. *Leaders: Strategies for Taking Charge*. 2nd ed. New York, NY: HarperBusiness, 1997.
- Block, Peter. *Community: The Structure of Belonging*. San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2008.

- Bolman, Lee G., and Terrence E. Deal. *Reframing Organizations: Artistry, Choice, and Leadership*. 5th ed. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2013.
- Born, Paul. *Deepening Community: Finding Joy Together in Chaotic Times*. San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc., 2014.
- Branson, Mark Lau. *Memories, Hopes, and Conversations: Appreciative Inquiry and Congregational Change*. Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2004.
- Brown, David L., and Kai A. Schafft. *Rural People and Communities in the 21st Century: Resilience and Transformation*. Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2011.
- Brown, Juanita. *The World Cafe: Shaping Our Futures through Conversations That Matter*. San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc., 2005.
- Charmaz, Kathy. *Constructing Grounded Theory*. 2nd ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2014.
- Cline, Benjamin J. "The Science and Sanity of Listening." *ETC: A Review of General Semantics* 70, no. 3 (July 2013 2013): 247-259.
- Cnann, Ram A., Stephanie C. Boddie, Gaynor I. Yancey. "Bowling Alone but Serving Together." Chap. 2 In *Religion as Social Capital: Producing the Common Good*, edited by Corwin Smidt. Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2003.
- Coghlan, David, and Teresa Brannick. *Doing Action Research in Your Own Organization*. 3rd ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2009.
- Coleman, John A. "Religious Social Capital: Its Nature, Social Location, and Limits." In *Religion as Social Capital: Producing the Common Good*, edited by Corwin Smidt, 33-48. Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2003.
- Colon, Gaspar F. "Incarnational Community-Based Ministry: A Leadership Model for Community Transformation." *The Journal of Applied Christian Leadership* 6, no. 2 (Fall 2012).
- "Community." <http://www.merriam-webster/dictionary/community> (accessed November 7, 2015).
- "Community Network Show." <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1439629/> (accessed November 7, 2015).
- Creswell, John W. *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*. 4th ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2014.

- Curry, Janel. "Social Capital and Societal Vision: A Study of Six Farm Communities in Iowa." Chap. 9 In *Religion as Social Capital: Producing the Common Good*, edited by Corwin Smidt. Waco, TX: Baylor Press University, 2003.
- Flora, Cornelia Butler, and Jan L. Flora. *Rural Communities: Legacy and Change*. 4th ed. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2013.
- "Full Trend Report." <http://www.elca.org/tools/FindACongregation.org> (accessed June 12, 2015).
- Gadamer, Hans-Georg. *Truth and Method*. 2nd ed. New York, NY: Crossroad, 1989.
- Greenwood, Davydd J., and Morten Levin. *Introduction to Action Research: Social Research for Social Change*. 2nd ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2007.
- Harris, Wendell V. "Adam Naming the Animals: Language, Contexts, and Meaning." *Kenyon Review* 8, no. 1 (1986): 1-13.
- Hatch, Mary Jo. *Organization Theory: Modern, Symbolic, and Postmodern Perspectives*. Oxford; New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2013. Repr. 3rd Edition.
- Heifetz, Ronald A., and Martin Linsky. *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive through the Dangers of Leading*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 2002.
- Hinsey, Ellen. "On a Panel of Adam Naming the Animals." *Southern Review* 37, no. 2 (2001): 291-292.
- IBM SPSS Statistics for Macintosh Version 23. IBM Corp, Armonk, NY.
- Inskeep, Kenneth W. "Priorities in Context: Sustainability and Membership Growth: A Background Paper for the Future Directions Table." *Office of the Presiding Bishop*. Research and Evaluation, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, January 2016.
- "Interrelate." <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/interrelate> (accessed July 7, 2015).
- Janusik, Laura Ann. "Building Listening Theory: The Validation of the Conversational Listening Span." *Communication Studies* 58, no. 2 (June 2007 2007): 139-156.
- Keifert, Patrick R. *We Are Here Now: A New Missional Era, a Missional Journey of Spiritual Discovery*. Eagle, ID: Allelon Publishing, 2006.
- Kinnaman, David, and Aly Hawkins. *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians Are Leaving Church and Rethinking Faith*. Grand Rapids, MI: BakerBooks, 2011.

- Kittel, Gerhard, Geoffrey William Bromiley, and Gerhard Friedrich. "Alpha-Gamma." In *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 10 vols. Vol. I. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964.
- . "Lambda-Nu." In *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 10 vols. Vol. IV. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964.
- . "Xsi-Pi." In *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 10 vols. Vol. V. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964.
- Klouda, Sheri L. "The Dialectical Interplay of Seeing and Hearing in Psalm 19 and Its Connection to Wisdom." *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 10, no. 2 (2000): 181-195.
- "Listen." <http://merriam-webster.com/dictionary/listen> (accessed July 7, 2015).
- Luther, Martin, Jaroslav Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann. "Word and Sacrament." In *Luther's Works*, 55 vols. Vol. 37. Saint Louis, MO: Concordia Pub. House, 1955.
- Moltmann, Jürgen. "Perichoresis: An Old Magic Word for a New Trinitarian Theology." In *Trinity, Community, and Power: Mapping Trajectories in Wesleyan Theology*, edited by Douglas Meeks, 111-125. Nashville, TN: Kingswood Books, 2000.
- . *The Trinity and the Kingdom: The Doctrine of God*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993.
- Nancy, Jean-Luc, and Charlotte Mandell. *Listening*. 1st ed. New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2007.
- Nardi, Peter M. *Doing Survey Research: A Guide to Quantitative Methods*. Third Edition. ed. Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2014.
- Neff, David. "Small Is Huge: Why Jesus Favors Mustard Seed-Sized Ministry." *Christianity Today* (February 2006): 73-75.
- Nichols, Michael P. *The Lost Art of Listening: How Learning to Listen Can Improve Relationships*. 2nd ed. New York, NY: Guilford Press, 2009.
- "Nokia Slogan: The Connecting People." <http://brandongaille.com/nokia> (accessed November 7, 2015).
- Northouse, Peter Guy. *Leadership: Theory and Practice*. 7th ed. Los Angeles, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2015.

- Olson, Dennis. "Commentary on Genesis 2:18-24." *Working Preacher*: October 4, 2009. (accessed September 3, 2015).
- Ornish, Dean. *Love & Survival: The Scientific Basis for the Healing Power of Intimacy*. New York, NY: HarperCollins, 1998.
- Owen, Harrison. *Open Space Technology*. 3rd ed. San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc., 2008.
- Perry, Aaron. "The Phenomenological Role of Listening in Shaping the Church into a Leading Community." *Wesleyan Theological Journey* 47, no. 2 (2012): 165-178.
- Putnam, Robert D. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2000.
- Putnam, Robert D., Lewis M. Feldstein, and Don Cohen. *Better Together: Restoring the American Community*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2003.
- Rendle, Gilbert R., and Alice Mann. *Holy Conversations: Strategic Planning as a Spiritual Practice for Congregations*. Bethesda, MD: Alban Institute, 2003.
- Roxburgh, Alan J. *Missional: Joining God in the Neighborhood*. Allelon Missional Series. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011.
- Roxburgh, Alan J., and Fred Romanuk. *The Missional Leader: Equipping Your Church to Reach a Changing World*. Leadership Network Series. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006.
- Safford, Victoria. "The Small Work in the Great Work." Chap. 5 In *The Impossible Will Take a While*, edited by Paul Rogat Loeb, 224-230. Philadelphia, PA: Basic Books, 2014.
- "Shama." <http://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/hebrew/nas/shama.html> (accessed December 10, 2015).
- Smith, Trudy. "Why I Go to Church Even When I Don't Feel Like It: What Leaving and Returning Taught Me About Church." *Relevant Magazine* (2016). <http://www.relevantmagazine.com/god/church/why-i-go-church-even-when-i-dont-feel-it> (accessed January 16, 2016).
- "Sociology." <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/sociology> (accessed November 7, 2015).
- Stassen, Glen. "Incarnational Discipleship and Recovery of a Historically Realistic Jesus: An Incarnational Theory of the Cross as Compassion, Confrontation, and Deliverance." *Baptistic Theologies* 4, no. 2 (2012): 67-80.

- “Stats About All Us Cities.” <http://www.city-data.com> (accessed December 14, 2016).
- “SurveyMonkey.” Palo Alto, CA: SurveyMonkey Inc., www.surveymonkey.com.
- Tönnies, Ferdinand, and Charles Price Loomis. *Community and Society = Gemeinschaft Und Gesellschaft*. Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2002.
- Van Gelder, Craig. “The Hermeneutics of Leading in Mission.” *Journal of Religious Leadership* 3, no. 1 & 2 (Spring 2004 & Fall 2004): 139-171.
- . “Method in Light of Scriptures and in Relation to Hermeneutics.” *Journal of Religious Leadership* 3, no. 1 and 2 (Spring 2004 & Fall 2004): 43-73.
- . *The Ministry of the Missional Church: A Community Led by the Spirit*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007.
- Van Gelder, Craig, and Dwight J. Zscheile. *The Missional Church in Perspective: Mapping Trends and Shaping the Conversation*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic 2011.
- Volf, Miroslav. *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity*. Sacra Doctrina. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1998.
- . *A Public Faith: How Followers of Christ Should Serve the Common Good*. Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2011.
- Wheatley, Margaret J. *Finding Our Way: Leadership for an Uncertain Time*. San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2005.
- . *Leadership and the New Science: Discovering Order in a Chaotic World*. 3rd ed. San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler, 2006.
- . *Turning to One Another: Simple Conversations to Restore Hope to the Future*. 2nd ed. San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2009.
- Wimberly, Anne Streaty. “Called to Listen: The Imperative Vocation of Listening in Twenty-First Century Faith Communities.” *International Review of Mission* 87, no. 346 (July 1998): 331-341.
- Wuthnow, Robert. “Can Religion Revitalize Civil Society?”. Chap. 12 In *Religion as Social Capital: Producing the Common Good*, edited by Corwin Smidt. Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2003.
- . *Loose Connections: Joining Together in America's Fragmented Communities*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998.

———. “Religious Involvement and Status-Bridging Social Capital.” *Journal for Scientific Study of Religion* 41, no. 4 (2002): 669-684.

———. *Small-Town America: Finding Community, Shaping the Future*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013.

Zizioulas, Jean. *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church*. Contemporary Greek Theologians no 4. Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985.

Zscheile, Dwight J. *The Agile Church: Spirit-Led Innovation in an Uncertain Age*. Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 2014.