The Spirit's Playground: How God Speaks Through Scripture to Develop Contagious Missional Imagination

Sarah Birkedal Nye

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THE SPIRIT’S PLAYGROUND:
HOW GOD SPEAKS THROUGH SCRIPTURE TO DEVELOP
CONTAGIOUS MISSIONAL IMAGINATION

by

SARAH BIRKEDAL NYE

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ABSTRACT

*The Spirit’s Playground: How God Speaks Through Scripture to Develop Contagious Missional Imagination*

by

Sarah Birkedal Nye

This mixed method Action Research project sought to answer the question: *How might an AR intervention involving engaging Scripture playfully expand missional imagination?* The study documented play in the engagement of Scripture within worship services, Bible study, and board meeting devotions. Appreciative Inquiry interviews and a congregational event provided insight into the growth of missional imagination in this congregation. Lenses employed include those of the theology of play, narrative imagination, the Bible as metanarrative, the creative Word made flesh, playful passages, and participation in the perichoretic relationship of the triune God. Missional leadership is imagined as perichoretic play.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

One way to measure the progression of this thesis has been in the growth of my children. My son was born just as the first proposal for this project was being drafted. I now have a delightful two-year-old crawling on my lap as I write the final words of this thesis. What has happened in between is the result of the help of a whole team of people. I am so thankful for my family, the colleagues in my cohort, my professors, and the congregations I have served for being willing to play with me, encourage me, and make all of this possible! There is no way to list all of the ways in which your kindnesses big and small have contributed to making this possible. All I can say is THANK YOU!
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<tr>
<td>AC</td>
<td>Axial Code</td>
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<tr>
<td>AI</td>
<td>Appreciative Inquiry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DNA</td>
<td>Deoxyribonucleic Acid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ELCA</td>
<td>Evangelical Lutheran Church in America</td>
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<tr>
<td>FC</td>
<td>Focused Code</td>
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<tr>
<td>LEAD</td>
<td>Living Everyday As Disciples</td>
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<tr>
<td>NRSV</td>
<td>New Revised Standard Version</td>
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<tr>
<td>AR</td>
<td>Action Research</td>
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

This research project is born out of an observation and a wondering. In the course of my career as a pastor in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), I have made the informal observation that some congregations seem, in their very existence, to exude a sense of missional identity. These are congregations with an open imagination for what God is doing in their midst and in their wider communities. These congregations are bold in their willingness to experiment and risk for the sake of joining God in the wild and passionate mission that is God’s love for the world. The members of these congregations seem acutely aware of God working in their lives. They look for God’s presence and movement in the world around them. Unfortunately, not all congregations are like this. Not all congregations seem to have missional imagination built into their DNA. Some congregations have a history of conflict. Some congregations are struggling just to survive. Some congregations are happy with the way that things are, just as they are. Missional imagination does not seem to come naturally for these congregations. I wonder. Is there still hope for these congregations? Is there hope that missional imagination might grow?

At the core of this question is identity. How is identity shaped? For the Christian church, an argument can be made that our identity is formed by the story of God’s activity on our behalf. From the first pages of Scripture, we see God on the move. This God is one who hovers over the waters of chaos and sees within it the potential for a
grand creation. This God is the God who plays in the dirt and takes the risk of breathing into it life—in all its forms—to be in relationship with God’s self. This is a God who saw fit to create us in God’s own image. As such we exist in relationship with one another as mirrors and invitees into the divine relationship that is God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

When the relationship between this prodigal God and the good creation was wrecked, this God sent God’s own self—first to defeat sin and death, and then to indwell and empower so that no separation between God and creation would ever need to be feared again. Now this triune God sends us into relationship with one another, that through these relationships we might experience the creative act of reconciliation that God is all about. This is where missional imagination begins.

**The Research Question**

Since missional imagination begins with who God is and what God has done on our behalf, as Scripture bears witness, then it is worth exploring how Scripture is being engaged in congregational life. Particularly, how is Scripture being engaged in ways that lead to life-giving imagination for what God is up to in these worshiping communities and in the surrounding world? While there are many avenues through which scriptural engagement may be studied, what I am most fascinated by is the way in which our engagement of Scripture mirrors the playful, creative nature of God. This leads me to the research question at the heart of this thesis:

_How might an Action Research intervention involving engaging Scripture playfully expand missional imagination?_
Variables

The primary independent variable in this research project is the AR intervention itself, which involves the playful engagement of Scripture in a variety of formats within congregational life. The primary dependent variable is the effect of this intervention on missional imagination. For the purposes of this study, missional imagination is defined according to the following capacities:\(^1\)

- The capacity to name God’s action in the past;
- The capacity to recognize/wonder about God’s activity now; and
- The capacity to dream with others about God’s “preferred and promised future.”\(^2\)

Intervening variables among the population participating in this research include such factors as age, gender, amount and type of previous exposure to the biblical story, attendance at worship and opportunities for Bible study associated with this playful intervention, as well as individuals’ personal play personalities.\(^3\) Questions to assess the impact of these variables appeared on the baseline and end line census surveys of the congregation. One unanticipated intervening variable that arose during the course of this project is discussed further in chapter four. This intervening variable was an additional opportunity for missional engagement that became available to this congregation mid-study.

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1 This is based on Stephanie Speller’s idea that spiritual capacity yields missional practice. Stephanie Spellers, “Missional Leadership Cohort Presentation, Session #4: Spiritual Formation for Missional Leadership” (Luther Seminary, Mustang Island, TX).


3 Stuart Brown identifies eight “play personalities,” each with a distinct preference for a different kind of play. Stuart L. Brown and Christopher C. Vaughan, Play: How It Shapes the Brain, Opens the Imagination, and Invigorates the Soul (New York: Avery, 2009), 65-70.
Importance of this Research

The question of how engaging Scripture playfully might expand missional imagination is personally important to me. Not only am I a pastor, but I am also a mother. In both capacities, one of my greatest joys is to see God’s Spirit stirring up a living faith in my children and in those with whom I am engaged in ministry. There is a joy that comes with believing that God is actively moving in our lives and in our world that opens up all kinds of possibilities for the future. I have seen that joy on the faces of children and adults alike when Scripture comes alive for them—when they hear in God’s Word the story of God’s movement in their own lives. The promise is fresh for them. God’s presence is palpable in those moments.

In stark contrast, I have also seen many opportunities go by without that engagement. Scripture is treated as if it is something too complicated to be understood. The Bible is revered to the point of being left on the shelf as a gold-embossed dust collector. Far from being alive and enlivening for us today, God’s Word is relegated to rust-colored scribbles meant for someone else of some other time and place.

What would it be like if congregations engaged the Bible in ways that mirrored the playful, extravagant, creative, life-giving nature of God’s triune self? How might God speak? How might God use those experiences to expand our imagination for what God is doing among us and around us for the sake of the whole world?

For the congregation that I am currently serving, this research question was part of an ongoing experiment to see how this might be the case. We are in a context in which there is a history of fear and separation between this congregation and the surrounding community. Could playfully engaging Scripture open our hearts and minds to live into
the future with the expectation that God is present and active even here and even outside these doors? 

This question is not unique to this congregation. It is an expedition for the sake of the wider church as well. Could playfully engaging Scripture be a means through which God speaks and opens our hearts and minds to new ideas and new possibilities for ministry in this changing world? Is it possible that playing together as a congregation, grounded in God’s Word, might help us to face the uncertainty of life in a new reality? These are the questions addressed in this study.

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4 The details of this congregation’s history are not addressed at length in this study. That is intentional. This congregation is like many in that it struggles to nurture relationships between the church and broader community. While there are certainly circumstances that are unique to this congregation and its relationship with the surrounding community, the more important point to note is that many congregations (for one reason or another) struggle with missional imagination. This study was not particularly related to the circumstance of how this congregation found itself stuck in a rut. What is important is the fact that the congregation was stuck—as are many congregations today.
When my husband and I were first married, we lived near a major airport. We often watched the planes coming and going and imagined stories about where those planes were headed and who was onboard. When our oldest daughter was born, we welcomed another participant into the guessing game. Once in a while we would spot a plane further out from the airport and not be quite sure whether the plane was coming or going. The mind can play tricks with our senses. Consider the figure above, for example. The depiction is one of many optical illusions found in the book *Thinkertoys* by Michael Michalko. The airplane can be seen as either coming toward the viewer or going away. Michalko counsels:

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6 Ibid., 106.
Study it again; can you make it switch direction? If you can’t see the plane coming toward you, imagine yourself looking down on it from above. If you can’t see it flying away, imagine yourself under it watching it fly off to your left. Chances are that when you first looked at it, you saw it moving in one direction only. It took a few moments, but after some concentration, you experienced a new perception, a new way of looking at the plane. It is the same with ideas.  

Perception matters. If we were standing under this plane watching it take off with a loved one onboard, that would inspire a very different emotional response than say watching this same plane land as it successfully delivers much needed supplies to the survivors of a natural disaster. How we perceive the world around us shapes both our attitudes and our actions.

Watching the movement of a plane is not so unlike watching trends in our society. We watch and make judgments about what is happening. We take action when appropriate. Perception matters. In recent years, the prevailing perception has been that biblical literacy in America is declining. Hilton writes, “All kinds of evidence tells us that biblical literacy is low and declining—both in the wider culture and in churches.”

As a pastor, I have been on the front lines of seeing the effects of a decline in knowledge of the biblical story. It is not just my perception, though, that this is the case. Research backs up such pastoral experience.

Twenty-five years ago, in 1991, 45 percent of U.S. adults told Barna they read the Bible at least once a week. In 2009, 46 percent reported doing so. These percentages were remarkably consistent over the course of nearly two decades. In the intervening years, however, Bible reading has become less widespread, especially among the youngest adults. As more and more Millennials join the adult population, the national average continues to decline. Today, about one-

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7 Ibid., 107.
third of all U.S. adults report reading the Bible once a week or more. The percentage is highest among elders (49%) and lowest among Millennials (24%).

This same 2016 Barna study suggests that although most Americans still retain some level of familiarity with the Bible, they do not necessarily consider Scripture meaningful for their lives.

If Scripture (as witness to our risky, playful, innovating God) is the cornerstone to our own faith stories, then a lack of biblical literacy—and a lack of identification with God’s Story as also being our story—is of great concern to those of us who are interested in seeing missional imagination thrive in our congregations. Could it be that losing the central story of our faith is impacting our capacity to imagine God’s presence in the world around us?

Perhaps that is true, but there are some interesting historical considerations to take into account before we jump into bemoaning the state of biblical literacy today. For example, why is it that just when popular surveys by Christian groups are revealing a lack of biblical knowledge, Hollywood is producing more and more movies with biblical themes? Christians are not the only ones watching these movies. According to a six-year cumulative study by the Barna Group, movies such as Noah and Exodus drew audiences in roughly equal proportions across all faith segments.

We see more and more youth and congregation members coming through our churches without the expected knowledge of the narrative of the Bible, and yet we find biblical references in popular television shows and music videos.

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10 Ibid., 48.

One study, conducted by Matthew Collins from the University of Chester, focused on the television show *Lost* and the behaviors of its viewers. Within the television show are a myriad of biblical references and allusions. Viewers talked about engaging with these shows to the extent that they felt less like viewers and more like “participants.” These participants, then, were drawn also into biblical engagement.

Not only does the programme’s extensive use of the Bible appear to reflect an admirable degree of biblical literacy on the part of the writers, it also actively encourages it on the part of the audience. Regardless of whether or not a biblically literate audience is anticipated, the evidence of the online fan discussion would appear to suggest that it is, in end effect, nevertheless produced. The enthusiasm of viewers to engage with the show translates (via the wealth of explicit and implicit allusion) to enthusiasm to engage with the biblical text.

This led Collins to conclude that it is important for us to rethink the ways in which the Bible is being engaged and how we define biblical literacy.

While comparisons of biblical literacy in the nineteenth and twenty-first centuries may suggest an ostensible decline, it is clear that rumours of the Bible’s ‘loss’ to modern society are greatly exaggerated. It may no longer play such an explicitly prominent role in daily life, yet nevertheless continues to saturate our culture and heritage. Biblical literacy may likewise function somewhat differently in our postmodern digital age, yet it remains. Our examination of explicit and implicit biblical allusion in *Lost* confirms ‘the degree to which biblical narratives have shaped the ways in which Western culture tells its stories’... We may, therefore, recognize a plurality of ‘ways of knowing’ about the Bible, acknowledging that at least one of the places biblical literacy can most certainly be *found* is in *Lost*.

This observation Collins makes about the biblical narrative influencing the storytelling of the Western culture is a key point in understanding the shift happening in biblical literacy today. To follow current research on biblical literacy is to see that the Bible has moved

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13 Ibid., 89.

14 Ibid., 90. Italics in the original.
out of the realm of faith into the arena of story and play. Western culture is using the biblical narrative less as a basis for belief and more for entertainment and pleasure. The biblical narrative is being *played with* on a cultural level.

In 2016, among non-Christian Millennials, “story” is the key descriptor of the Bible. Though Barna Group interprets this as an “ambivalent” and perhaps even “antagonistic” view of Scripture, I would suggest that perhaps we are being called to look more closely at how the Bible is being engaged, even among this most distant segment of the population. *Story* may actually be an important, and quite positive, point for future engagement. Katie Edwards, in the introduction to the edited volume *Rethinking Biblical Literacy*, writes,

> This is a contradictory picture. Popular culture, then, is in a constant state of retelling, reinterpreting and re-appropriating biblical stories, characters and figures, and yet annual reports from Christian organizations repeatedly warn us of a steep decline in biblical literacy. Could the situation be more complex than the quantitative research has reported to date?

The answer to Edwards’ question is a resounding yes. The situation is more complex than most quantitative research to date has taken into consideration because we cannot simply ask whether biblical literacy is declining or increasing. The important question to be asking is *how the biblical narrative is influencing our story*—culturally and personally.

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15 I will argue later in this thesis that there is biblical and theological rationale for understanding that these are actually not separate, but all part of the same playground. It is precisely because the triune God plays that we too can play and find our faith deepened in the process. This research project attempted to reunite these fields into a faith forming experience of Scripture, play, and story.


17 Millennials are identified by Barna as less religious and more skeptical than older Americans. Ibid., 87.

Changing Times

A key question asked throughout Edwards’ volume is whether or not changing times call for a change in how we define and view biblical literacy. The preface to The Bible in America Barna Group study itself acknowledges that we are facing major change.

These are important times. This phrase has been uttered for centuries, if not millennia. It would be the height of chronological snobbery to assume that our current circumstances are more important than anything in the past. And yet we do seem to be at a unique juncture.19

Phyllis Tickle has named this juncture “The Great Emergence” in recognition that approximately every 500 years there is a “great” upheaval in faith and life. She shares a creative image of these times of monumental change:

The Right Reverend Mark Dyer, an Anglican bishop known for his wit as well as his wisdom, famously observes from time to time that the only way to understand what is currently happening to us as twenty-first-century Christians in North America is first to understand that about every five hundred years the Church feels compelled to hold a giant rummage sale. And, he goes on to say, we are living in and through one of those five-hundred-year sales. . . . That is, as Bishop Dyer observes, about every five hundred years the empowered structures of institutionalized Christianity, whatever they may be at that time, become an intolerable carapace that must be shattered in order that renewal and new growth may occur. When that mighty upheaval happens, history shows us there are always at least three consistent results or corollary events. First, a new, more vital form of Christianity does indeed emerge. Second, the organized expression of Christianity which up until then had been the dominant one is reconstituted into a more pure and less ossified expression of its former self. . . . The third result is of equal, if not greater, significance, though. That is, every time the incrustations of an overly established Christianity have been broken open, the faith has spread—and been spread—dramatically into new geographic and demographic areas, thereby increasing exponentially the range and depth of Christianity’s reach as a result of its time of unease and distress.20


The image of a giant garage sale can be both disturbing and delightful. To say goodbye to long cherished relics is difficult, but it also means that there is space for the new to take root. The question of how biblical engagement fares in this giant garage sale requires us to examine our perspective. Remember that plane? Was it taking off or landing? Well, the answer is yes. It can be seen as both. The same could be argued for biblical literacy. Yes, biblical literacy as it has been traditionally defined can be seen as declining. At the same time, however, it seems that something new may just be taking off.\footnote{We are living in a tumultuous time of unprecedented paradigm shifts in every fundamental aspect of life on earth: ecological, political, financial, technological, moral, social, and religious. . . . An understanding of literacy must necessarily evolve parallel to the developments in the sources of information available. The digital online environment characterized by an emphasis on the instantly obtainable and visual: the moving image, animated graphics, and seamless merging of trivia and profundity, the soundbite, the vitriolic commentary alongside endless free views of scholarly articles demands an altogether expanded understanding of literacy and a different set of literary skills to navigate competently.” Edwards, \textit{Rethinking Biblical Literacy}, 111.}

How we engage the Bible is changing. It can no longer be assumed that the average person has the same degree of familiarity with the details of the biblical narrative as they may have had in generations past. This does not, though, indicate an unwillingness to engage the Bible. Rather, our society seems to be inviting a playful approach to engaging Scripture.

An Invitation to Play

Steven Johnson argues in \textit{Wonderland: How Play Made the Modern World} for a shift in the perspective of how we tell the story of history. Play, he asserts, has largely been ignored in the standard telling of history, but is often at the forefront of major historical breakthroughs. This, he says, is “because play is often about breaking rules and
experimenting with new conventions.”22 Play is the “seedbed for many innovations that ultimately develop into much sturdier and more significant forms.”23 While institutions point to what is currently going on in society, it is how people spend their free time that points to the breakthroughs of tomorrow. In play, the future becomes accessible. New technologies are tested and their possibilities creatively explored. New ways of being find initial expression and then wiggle their way into daily life until they no longer reside at the boundaries of our shared experiences but take up their place at the center of accepted societal practice.24

As we look at the trends of biblical engagement in society today, it is notable that the way in which the Bible is being engaged is increasingly playful.25 Movies, music, television shows, and other media platforms are providing a form of biblical engagement that gives people the space to explore the Bible in unpredictable and creative ways. As we have already seen with the statistics on who shows up to participate in these playful experiences, the playful engagement of Scripture is appealing not only to Christians, but to those outside the church as well. This would suggest an important missional opportunity. If our broader society is willing to play with Scripture, are we in the church willing to do so too?


23 Ibid.

24 “‘Each epoch dreams the one to follow, creates it in dreaming,’ the French historian Michelet wrote in 1839. More often than not, those dreams do not unfold within the grown-up world of work or war or governance. Instead, they emerge from a different kind of space: a space of wonder and delight where the normal rules have been suspended, where people are free to explore the spontaneous, unpredictable, and immensely creative work of play. You will find the future wherever people are having the most fun.” Ibid.

Playing with the Bible

The very concept of *playing with Scripture* raises a fundamental question. Can one play with Scripture and still regard it as sacred? We might find ourselves hesitating at the thought. *Isn’t there something disrespectful or belittling about play?* No. That is the answer that Björn Krondorfer arrives at in *Body and Bible: Interpreting and Experiencing Biblical Narratives*. In fact, playfully engaging Scripture is exactly the sort of engagement that is needed in this time of rapid change. Play, he argues, “provides spaces in which the modern human is in search of meaning or, to adapt a Jungian phrase, ‘in search of a soul.’”

Krondorfer’s is one voice that speaks to the importance of combining play and the Bible. His is certainly not the only one. Krondorfer himself points to other scholars and clergy who have begun to “play with therapeutic and dramatic elements, and have developed methods variously called bibliodrama, Bible-theater, or mimesis.” Another variation of an experiential method of engaging Scripture was proposed by Hilton in *Cultivating Sent Communities*. He asks, “How will we help our people learn Scripture in a way that forms them missionally?” His article describes a method of experiential Bible study that has opened up possibilities for missional imagination in his context.

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26 Krondorfer’s argument includes the observation that play is actually an important model for postmodernity. “For better or worse, the twentieth century has procured more playful modes of living. As individuals and communities, we have played with new forms of experiencing ourselves in relation to our traditions, cultures, and realities. . . . We truly are, as twentieth-century literature has emphasized, *homo ludens*, the playing human; or, as others have said, a *bricoleur*, the post-modern human who playfully rearranges the world from fragments and debris of the past without truth or origin.” Björn Krondorfer, *Body and Bible: Interpreting and Experiencing Biblical Narratives* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press, 1992), 2.

27 Ibid., 1.

I am proposing that we need to go further. We need not just one, but a wide variety of playful ways to engage the Bible. This new time in which we find ourselves begs for us to be engaging Scripture playfully in all kinds of ways—in worship, in study, in our educational classes, in every possible venue. The goal of this is not rote knowledge of the Bible’s details, but a connection with the heart of the biblical story through which the Holy Spirit creates new life.

**Theoretical Lenses**

This research drew upon two key theoretical perspectives: play and narrative imagination. Both of these theoretical lenses provided the opportunity to think about engaging Scripture in ways that open up new possibilities for the Spirit’s stirring.

**Play**

The study of play has a long and varied history of its own. Johan Huizinga has argued that play is older than culture itself.\(^{29}\) Play has alternatingly been seen as the privilege of adult men and the foolishness of children.\(^{30}\) Far from being limited to humans, play has been observed and described as an essential behavior of animals.\(^{31}\) Language even portrays the characteristics of play being extended to other aspects of nature as well. We can talk about how light *plays*.\(^{32}\) Play has been described both as the means through which humans confirm the existence of objective truth and as the process

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\(^{31}\) Brown and Vaughan, *Play: How It Shapes the Brain, Opens the Imagination, and Invigorates the Soul*.

through which humanity wrestles with post-modern ambiguity (in which humanity is always inventing and reinventing truth). Yet for all these deep theories, and even conflicting definitions, play remains something that even the smallest child understands through experience. Play is fun. This thesis will rely upon a definition of playfulness that takes to heart the joy inherent in the experience of play. Further expanding upon this experience, this lens will be engaged to explore the possibility that play is a means through which we are opened to the possibilities of creativity, innovation, and engagement with the Other.

Narrative Imagination

Arthur W. Frank writes, “We need stories to live.” Stories not only tell about the past, but they also open possibilities for the future. Stories are “living things” that “often shape, rather than simply reflect, human conduct.” Narrative is a primary means through which human identity is shaped and reshaped. The stories that we are told (and tell ourselves) have the capacity to limit or expand what we dream of being possible for the future. Scripture is the narrative in which God’s people find their identity both grounded in God’s action in the past as well as anticipating the possibilities of God’s present and future activity. Using narrative imagination as a theoretical lens allowed me to explore how narrative functions as a source of identity and creator/limiter of future possibilities both in individuals and in the life of a congregation.

33 Krondorfer, Body and Bible: Interpreting and Experiencing Biblical Narratives, 14.


35 Ibid., 22-23.
**Biblical Lenses**

This thesis also draws upon key biblical perspectives. These lenses are the Bible as metanarrative, the creative Word made flesh, and playful passages.

**The Bible as Metanarrative**

While diverse disciplines have pointed to the importance of narrative in the formation of personal identity, I argue it is the narrative of Scripture that provides the formative story for God’s people. In essence, the Bible functions as a metanarrative that shapes identity and vision.

**The Creative Word Made Flesh**

This study considers the triune communication of God through the Gospel of John. It observes that God’s creative Word, God’s own act of communication, opens up the possibility for a rich missional imagination.

**Playful Passages**

The Bible is inherently playful. This thesis explores a reading of Scripture that draws attention to its playful elements and what this reveals about God’s activity. Our triune God plays!

**Theological Lenses**

In addition to the above biblical lenses, two key theological lenses are examined. These theological lenses include those of play and participation in the perichoretic relationship of the triune God.
Play

Play is not a concept to be explored only theoretically, but also theologically. This study explores the elements of freedom and liberation present in Jürgen Moltmann’s theology of play and particularly how the play of the gospel is transformative. Also explored in this lens is the image of God as jazz musician proposed by Robin Stockitt. Stockitt argues powerfully for an understanding of the triune God that marvels in God’s beautiful, creative, improvisational, and invitational nature. She compares the give and take of jazz musicians’ improvisation to the movement of the Father, Son, and Spirit within God’s triune self. This movement also creates space for all of creation to join in the play of God.\(^3^6\) Play as a theological lens opens our imagination to new ways of perceiving God and God’s activity among us.

Participation in the Perichoretic Relationship of the Triune God

The theological image of perichoresis is that of the whirling, circulating triune God.\(^3^7\) Dwight Zscheile writes:

> In God’s life, difference and otherness are the basis of unity, not the cause of division. The divine community is a community of mutual sharing, exchange, indwelling, and interdependence not closed in on itself but generative, creative, and outward-reaching. God creates the world for community.\(^3^8\)

\(^3^6\) “To inhabit the kingdom is to enter a world of play which God himself inhabits. This ‘purposeless’ activity is the cause of delight and joy. As a by-product it opens the space for imaginative creativity and engagement with others. This is why ‘play’ or ‘playfulness’ are terms which may legitimately permit us to reimagine God. . . . It lies in the sublime beauty and mystery of the Trinitarian God whose ways are not our ways and who constantly engages in the surprising, the dramatic, the unexpected and the playful, in order to bring about the final unity and reconciliation of all things in and through the eternal incarnate Logos.” Robin Stockitt, *Imagination and the Playfulness of God: The Theological Implications of Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s Definition of the Human Imagination*, Distinguished Dissertations in Christian Theology; 6. (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2011), 175-176.


\(^3^8\) Ibid.
The beautiful diversity that is God’s self invites us to join as community in the play of creation. Here is where we find missional imagination’s outward expression. To join in the play of the triune God is to find ourselves ever drawn into community with God and with the Other.

**Methodology**

The primary social science research approach utilized in this study was Action Research (AR). This methodology was chosen because the aim of AR is not only to create knowledge, but also to effect change within an organization. In this case, the change that was sought was the expansion of missional imagination within the life of a particular congregation.

This action research project employed mixed methods. The quantitative portion of this project was transformative with baseline and end line surveys made available to the entire adult population of the congregation. The questionnaires were distributed electronically via SurveyMonkey and also in paper format at two consecutive weeks of worship services. Prior to this, however, these instruments were field tested for improving their validity and reliability with nine members of another congregation. This quantitative portion of the project was aimed at measuring the change that resulted from the intervention of playfully engaging Scripture and determining statistical significance. SPSS software was utilized in analyzing these quantitative data. A paired t-test was

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39 See appendices B and C for copies of these questionnaires.


41 IBM SPSS Statistics, Ver. 24.
conducted for those respondents who completed both the baseline and end line surveys.\footnote{Questions designed for pairing anonymous baseline and end line survey responses include birthdate, gender, and play style.} An independent t-test was conducted on all responses.

The intervention itself consisted of playfully engaging Scripture in a variety of formats within congregational life. Because worship is the central gathering time for the congregation, this was the primary focus for the playful engagement of Scripture. Other times that smaller groups of the congregation gather include Bible studies and board meetings.\footnote{Detailed information about the intervention can be found in chapter four of this thesis.} These were also included as opportunities for the playful engagement of Scripture. In addition to the baseline and end line surveys measuring the change that occurred during the intervention, I kept a journal and collected notes about what I saw happening within the congregation.

During the intervention phase of this project, qualitative research also took place. This was a concurrently nested Appreciative Inquiry into the stories of participants in this congregation’s life. This Appreciative Inquiry focused on the role of Scripture as a formative story both within the life of the congregation and in the life of the particular individual. Individuals were invited to indicate on the initial quantitative survey their willingness to participate in this qualitative inquiry. From those who indicated their willingness, ten individuals were chosen to be interviewed on the basis of a diversity of age, gender, background, and participation levels.\footnote{See appendix K for the interview protocol.} These interviews were recorded,
transcribed, and then analyzed according to Charmaz’s process of coding. NVivo software was used as a tool in this data analysis.

A final piece of this research project was a congregational event in which the entire congregation was invited to share their stories in response to several of the Appreciative Inquiry interview questions and to discern the themes that were present in the stories. It was a widely inclusive process resulting in what Watkins, Mohr, and Kelly call a “provocative proposition” based on the themes that emerged from the Appreciative Inquiry. This provocative proposition was one opportunity through which participants expressed a collective missional imagination.

Other Matters

Definition of Key Terms

*Playful*—A descriptor of the nature of God that also gifts us with joy, freedom, and the rich potential for creativity. Playfulness liberates us from the entrapments associated with our own effort. Freed from our own import, we are opened to the endless possibilities of the Spirit’s stirring.

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45 Kathy Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory* (Los Angeles: Sage, 2014). This process of coding and refining included initial word-by-word, line-by-line, and incident-by-incident coding to obtain *in vivo* codes. These *in vivo* codes were then clustered by shared concepts into *focused codes* to condense and sharpen the data gathered as well as reveal comparisons between initial codes. These focused codes were then integrated into *axial codes* to show relationships between corresponding ideas. *Theoretical codes* were then used to “lend form” to the axial codes and “add precision and clarity” to the data.

46 NVivo for Mac Edition 11.4.0. QSR International.

*Scripture*—In this study, Scripture refers to the sixty-six canonical books of the Protestant Christian Bible, which convey the grand story of God’s activity on behalf of all creation.

*Missional Imagination*—This concept is defined here as being composed of three capacities: the capacity to name God’s action in the past, the capacity to recognize/wonder about God’s activity now, and the capacity to dream with others about God’s preferred and promised future.

*Biblical Literacy*—While usually defined as an individual’s ability to demonstrate a given level of proficiency in biblical knowledge, this is now being redefined to focus more on what role the Bible plays in daily life—including the role that it plays in unconventional formats within society and popular culture.

*Narrative*—“A rich mixture of memories, of visual, auditory, and other cognitive images, all laced together by emotions to form a mixture that far surpasses mere words and visual images in their ability to capture context and meaning.”

Narratives are stories both public and private that not only shape the ways in which we experience our past and present realities but also give rise to our visions about what is possible in the future.

*Perichoretic Relationship*—Perichoresis is a Greek word meaning “whirl” or “rotation.” The communal relationship among the persons of the Trinity is extended to God’s beloved creation. As Dwight Zcheile writes, “In God’s life, difference and otherness are the basis of unity, not the cause of division. The divine community is a community of mutual sharing, exchange, indwelling, and interdependence not closed in

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on itself, but generative, creative, and outward-reaching. God creates the world for community.”49

Ethical Considerations

This research was conducted in compliance with Luther Seminary’s ethical standards and under the oversight of this institution’s Institutional Review Board. Confidentiality was guarded throughout this research project. All names of participating individuals and organizations have been replaced with pseudonyms and all identifying information has been redacted. Those who participated did so voluntarily, without compensation or repercussion for choosing to participate or declining such invitation.

A unique aspect of Action Research is the dual role of researcher and participant. I was aware of this dual role and its potential bias throughout my research. Using the method of coding outlined by Charmaz helped to increase objectivity in the analysis of qualitative data.

Access to research materials was limited to myself as well as to my thesis advisors. The only exceptions were written transcripts of the interviews conducted as part of the Appreciative Inquiry process, in which the goal of that process is the sharing of stories with one another. Even within this process, however, no names were connected with interview responses. Respondents were fully informed that the transcripts of their interviews (redacted for identifying information) would be presented for consideration by the large group.

49 Zscheile, Agile Church: Spirit-Led Innovation in an Uncertain Age, 50.
All electronic data are stored in password-protected files on my personal computer. Other research materials will be stored in a locked file in my home office for a period of three years, after which they will be destroyed.

This project sought survey and interview responses from those over the age of 18. Because all adult members of the congregation were invited to respond, it is possible that participants included those who are elderly, disabled, impoverished, or otherwise considered part of a vulnerable population. Given the nature of this research, there were unlikely to be any negative effects even for these special populations. Should it have become evident, though, that any of the participants did not understand the purpose of the research or revealed information that could be damaging to themselves or to others, that information would have been removed from the study and destroyed. If necessary, referrals would have been made to local social service agencies and counselors.

The benefits of participating in this study far outweighed the potential for risk. Through this study, participants were invited to play. This playful engagement of Scripture not only brought enjoyment but also the possibility that our missional imagination was expanded—our understanding of God’s activity deepened.

**Summary**

This thesis project asks the research question: *How might an Action Research intervention involving engaging Scripture playfully expand missional imagination?* This project sought to explore this question through the playful engagement of Scripture in a variety of aspects of congregational life, paying attention to the expansion of missional imagination as defined by:

- The capacity to name God’s action in the past;
• The capacity to recognize/wonder about God’s activity now; and
• The capacity to dream with others about God’s “preferred and promised future.”

Chapter one of this thesis introduced the research question. It provided an overview of the project and its importance for this congregation and others who similarly find themselves stuck with a lack of missional imagination. This chapter dared to ask the question of what our congregations would be like if we engaged the Bible in ways that mirror the playful, extravagant, creative, life-giving, relational nature of God’s triune self. Also discussed in this chapter is the changing landscape of biblical engagement within the wider society. Society’s willingness to playfully engage Scripture seems to be an invitation for our congregations to consider how we too are being invited to play in these times of rapid cultural change.

Chapter two explores in further depth the theoretical lenses of play and narrative imagination. Various philosophies and definitions of play are discussed with an emphasis on the importance of understanding playfulness in the context of this study. Playfulness leads to creativity, innovation, and openness to the Other. Narrative imagination is also discussed from a variety of theoretical perspectives, including Narrative Psychology, Socio-Narratology, and Narrative Leadership. At the heart of this discussion is the understanding that personal and collective narratives are key for making sense of our experiences and what we imagine is possible for the future.

Chapter three addresses the biblical and theological lenses utilized in this research. Biblical lenses include consideration of the Bible as metanarrative, the creative

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50 Keifert and Rooms, *Forming the Missional Church: Creating Deep Cultural Change in Congregations*, 7.
Word made flesh, and playful passages. Play is discussed as a theological lens as is participation in the perichoretic relationship of the triune God.

Chapter four provides a detailed explanation of the methodology utilized in this research project. Also presented in this chapter are the details of the intervention itself: the playful engagement of Scripture in worship, playful Bible study, playful devotions in board meetings, Appreciative Inquiry interviews, and the Appreciative Inquiry congregational event.

Chapter five presents the results and analysis of the data collected through baseline and end line surveys, Appreciative Inquiry interviews, the Appreciative Inquiry congregational event, and observations throughout the study. This chapter also presents the triangulation of these data in order to begin answering the question of how engaging Scripture playfully might expand missional imagination.

Chapter six provides a summary of the findings of this study and explores its significance through the theoretical, biblical, and theological lenses employed in the earlier chapters. This chapter also includes a discussion of the limits of these findings as well as questions for future research that grow out of this study.
CHAPTER 2
LITERATURES AND THEORETICAL LENSES

The previous chapter introduced the research question: How might an Action Research intervention involving engaging Scripture playfully expand missional imagination? This chapter develops the lenses of play and narrative imagination as theoretical lenses through which to engage this topic of study.

Play as a Theoretical Lens

“When the world surprises us with something, our brains are wired to pay attention.”

Figure 2. Surprise!

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2 This is a picture of my son at the time of writing this thesis. I am reminded daily of the sense of
In his description of how play has shaped the world, Steven Johnson points to the surprise of play as an important driver of history. He writes,

Countless studies of newborn infants have shown that before we can crawl or grasp or communicate, we seek out surprising phenomena in our environment. But it wasn’t until the 1990s that scientists first recognized that the surprise instinct is heavily regulated by the neurotransmitter dopamine. . . . A new theory proposes that dopamine release creates a “novelty bonus” that accompanies the perception of some new phenomenon or fact about the external world. By heightening your mental faculties, making you more alert and engaged, the “novelty bonus” encourages you to learn from new experiences. . . . The surge of dopamine that accompanies a novel event sends out a kind of internal alarm in your mind that says: *Pay attention. Something interesting is happening here.*

We are wired to pay attention to the new and strange. We are drawn to these experiences by virtue of how our brains work. Johnson says that we underestimate the significance of this pull “at our peril.” The appeal of the new and surprising begins as something interesting and personally intriguing. By definition, its novelty is outside of the realm of our daily experience and the serious stuff of life. These experiences hardly seem more than mere diversion. It is through just such playgrounds, however, that our lives are changed. Johnson chronicles the path from the novelty of today to the revolutions of tomorrow:

The drive for novelty puts us into unexpected situations, or exposes us to new materials: taverns, coffeehouses, rubber balls and magic lanterns. Once exposed, we end up using those spaces and those devices as platforms for the ideas and revolutions of traditional history. Toys and games, as Charles Eames said, are the prelude to serious ideas. So many of the wonderlands of history offered a glimpse

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4 Ibid., 283.
of future developments because those were the spaces where the new found its way into everyday life: first as an escape from our “lawful callings and affairs,” and then as a key element in those affairs.⁵

Play is essential to life—individually and communally. Play is an expression not only of our present experience, but it also gives rise to future possibilities. Play provides a language through which we learn, we interact, we risk, and we worship. Play, as unlikely as it may seem, undeniably shapes us.

The Philosophy of Play

In their introduction to a collection of essays on the philosophy of play, Ryall, Russell, and MacLean observe that play is rarely the object of study in and of itself. It is often subjects who play that are studied rather than play itself.⁶ When it is studied, however, play is revealed as an important element in everyday life. “It is in this sense of the ordinary that the philosophical investigation of the richness and diversity of lived experience may be opened up.”⁷

Play, like art, is an experience.⁸ It is rightly the subject of study, Gadamer argues, apart from the consciousness of those who play. Just as art changes those who experience

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⁵ Ibid., 283-284.

⁶ Ryall, Russell, and MacLean give a justification for this. “It is not work, which offends the sensibilities of industrial moralities; furthermore it is widely seen as the activity of children or at least childlike, which places it either in the context of learning or diversion, meaning that it is paradoxically justified (for children) and condemned (for children and adults) in instrumentalist terms. Both of these approaches place play beyond the norms that determine those things that are important, meaning that even when play is admitted to the legitimate realm of study it is often as the object of study, the subjects being those who play while on a path to somewhere else (be that adulthood or a state of being that is relieved of the stress caused by life in the modern world). When play becomes the subject of study, however, it takes on a new hue that allows it to be seen as an element of the everyday, the ordinary, the mundane and the taken-for-granted, or what, following Henri Lefebvre (1991:86), we may consider to be ‘the simple moments and the highest moments of life.’” Emily Ryall, Wendy Russell, and Malcom MacLean, eds., The Philosophy of Play (New York: Routledge, 2013), 1. Italics in original.

⁷ Ibid., 1-2.

⁸ Gadamer, Truth and Method, 106.
it, play does as well. To Gadamer, this is why play is so significant. “For play has its own essence, independent of the consciousness of those who play.”

When we speak of play as a subject, we are considering that which Johan Huizinga has argued is older than culture itself. Beyond belonging to any particular culture, play is a universal experience that cannot be denied. Huizinga observes, “We find play present everywhere as a well-defined quality of action which is different from ‘ordinary’ life.”

While the existence of play may be undeniable, how it is to be defined has certainly been debatable. Tracing popular philosophies of play throughout history, Randoph Feezell has identified no less than five differing approaches to play: play as behavior or activity; play as motive, attitude or state of mind; play as form or structure; play as meaningful experience; and play as an ontologically distinctive phenomenon. These arise out of philosophical questions such as “What is play? Can it be defined? How is it recognized? Is it good?” The list goes on.

Play, throughout history, has alternatingly been seen as the privilege of adult men and the foolishness of children. Far from being limited to humans, play has been observed and described as an essential behavior of animals. Language even portrays the

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9 Ibid., 107.
11 Ibid., 3-4.
13 Ibid., 11.
15 Brown and Vaughan, *Play: How It Shapes the Brain, Opens the Imagination, and Invigorates the Soul*. 
characteristics of play being extended to other aspects of nature as well. We can talk about how light plays.\textsuperscript{16} Play has been described both as the means through which humans confirm the existence of objective truth and as the process through which humanity wrestles with the post-modern ambiguity in which humanity is always inventing and reinventing truth.\textsuperscript{17}

Yet for all these varying theories, and diverse definitions, play remains something that even the smallest child understands through experience. Play is fun. Brown writes, “I hate to define play because it is a thing of beauty best appreciated by experiencing it. Defining play has always seemed to me like explaining a joke—analyzing it takes the joy out of it.”\textsuperscript{18}

Defining Play

Defining play, though, is necessary in order to talk about what is meant by the playful engagement of Scripture referred to in this research. Of the many available definitions, Huizinga’s is both widely accepted and captures the elements necessary for this conversation. Huizinga defines play by these characteristics:

It is an activity which proceeds within certain limits of time and space, in a visible order, according to rules freely accepted, and outside the sphere of necessity or material utility. The play-mood is one of rapture and enthusiasm, and is sacred or festive in accordance with the occasion. A feeling of exaltation and tension accompanies the action, mirth and relaxation follow.\textsuperscript{19}

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{Gadamer, \textit{Truth and Method}, 108.}
\footnote{Krondorfer, \textit{Body and Bible: Interpreting and Experiencing Biblical Narratives}, 14.}
\footnote{Brown and Vaughan, \textit{Play: How It Shapes the Brain, Opens the Imagination, and Invigorates the Soul}, 16.}
\footnote{Huizinga, \textit{Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture}, 132.}
\end{footnotes}
For our purposes it is important to return also to Gadamer’s observations of play. Gadamer finds in language evidence of this important distinction—“play is not to be understood as something a person does.”20 Play connotes a back and forth movement that is essential to its definition.

If we examine how the word “play” is used and concentrate on its so-called metaphorical senses, we find talk of the play of light, the play of the waves, the play of gears or parts of machinery, the interplay of limbs, the play of forces, the play of gnats, even a play on words. In each case what is intended is to-and-fro movement that is not tied to any goal that would bring it to an end. Correlatively, the word “Spiel” originally meant “dance,” and is still found in many word forms (e.g., in Spielmann, jongleur). The movement of playing has no goal that brings it to an end; rather it renews itself in constant repetition. The movement backward and forward is obviously so central to the definition of play that it makes no difference who or what performs this movement . . . . The play is the occurrence of the movement as such.21

The back-and-forth movement of play is an essential characteristic that will be expanded upon further in this research. It is in this back-and-forth movement of play, this dance of relationship, that the playful engagement of Scripture may become

perichoretic.22

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21 Gadamer laments that the subject of play, alluded to even in our linguistics, is often missed. “Thus we speak of the play of colors and do not mean only that one color plays against another, but that there is one process or sight displaying a changing variety of colors . . . . This linguistic observation seems to me an indirect indication that play is not to be understood as something a person does. As far as language is concerned, the actual subject of play is obviously not the subjectivity of an individual who, among other activities, also plays but is instead the play itself. But we are so accustomed to relating phenomena such as playing to the sphere of subjectivity and the ways it acts that we remain closed to these indications from the spirit of language.” Ibid., 108-109.

22 The perichoretic nature of play will be expanded upon more fully in chapter three of this thesis.
Expanding Definitions: Deep and Playful Play

As we consider definitions of play, it is helpful to note that many who have written on the topic have found it necessary to qualify the type of play of which they are speaking. Diane Ackerman, for example, writes of “deep play.” This is a deeper form of play, akin to rapture and ecstasy, that humans relish, even require to feel whole. . . . Deep play always involves the sacred and holy, sometimes hidden in the most unlikely or humble places—amid towering shelves of rock in Nepal; crouched over print in a dimly lit room; slipping on AstroTurf; wearing a coconut-shell mask. We spend our lives in pursuit of moments that will allow these altered states to happen. . . . The spirit of deep play is central to the life of each person, and also to society, inspiring the visual, musical, and verbal arts; exploration and discovery; war; law; and other elements of culture we’ve come to cherish (or dread). Swept up by the deepest states of play, one feels balanced, creative, focused. Deep play is a fascinating hallmark of being human; it reveals our need to seek a special brand of transcendence, with a passion that makes thrill-seeking explicable, creativity possible, and religion inevitable.23

Ackerman goes on to define this deep play as the realm where religion finds its place within the world of play. She describes the elements of play that are found in rituals of dance, worship, music, and decoration. She talks about ecstatic experiences of worship that include intense feelings of being absorbed into the experience and rejuvenated by it. Prayer itself is even an aspect of play, she observes. Having derived its name from the Latin precarius it implies that something dangerous, uncertain, and even risky is taking place. “Will the entreaty be answered? Life or death may be the outcome.”24

While this “deep play” is certainly present in worship, the playful engagement of Scripture I am referring to is not necessarily synonymous with Ackerman’s deep play, although deep play may be a result of this engagement and certainly is an experience of

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23 Diane Ackerman, Deep Play (New York: Random House, 1999), 12-17.

24 Ibid., 17-18.
many in worship. It is not the feeling of rapture or ecstasy that is our goal.\textsuperscript{25} Rather, it is the depth of play that Gadamer describes as opening up oneself to meaningful engagement with the Other.

Similar to Ackerman’s description of deep play, Gadamer observes that play, like art, can catch us up in the experience. We might get carried away. We might lose ourselves in the game. When this happens, we find ourselves being influenced by something wholly other. When we play, we allow for the possibility that we may be changed.\textsuperscript{26}

Vilhauer expands upon this part of Gadamer’s concept of play. She articulates that this possibility of transformational engagement with “the Other” is a key piece of understanding Gadamer’s theory and essential to understanding play.\textsuperscript{27} The ability of play to be transformative—to the point where it opens us up to engagement with the Other—is exactly what this research project seeks to explore.

\textsuperscript{25} Although the enrapturing “deep play” described by Ackermann is not the goal of the playful engagement of Scripture explored in this research project, there is a place in which the “absorbing” aspect of deep play will enter our conversation. In chapter three of this thesis, perichoretic play will be discussed. It is in the perichoretic relationship of God and human community that we find ourselves caught up in the flow of relationship that may well be defined as deep play. This, however, is not our doing. It is the gift of God that we find ourselves caught up in such relationship!

\textsuperscript{26} Monica Vilhauer, \textit{Gadamer's Ethics of Play: Hermeneutics and the Other} (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2010), 39.

\textsuperscript{27} “‘Play’ elucidates the very process of understanding \textit{in general}—the understanding which stretches through all our hermeneutic experience, including our encounters with art, with text, with tradition in all its forms, with others in dialogue, and which even constitutes our very mode of being-in-the-world. Grasping Gadamer’s notion of understanding as play is the key for appreciating his unique vision of understanding as a dynamic process that requires participants to approach each other with a comportment of ‘openness’ to success. This ‘openness’ is characterized by a willingness to truly listen to what the Other has to say and to be transformed by it.” Ibid., xiii.
The transformative nature of play is picked up on by Bateson’s and Martin’s understanding of play as well. They define a subcategory of play that they call “playful play.”

Playful play (as distinct from the broader biological category of play) is accompanied by a particular positive mood state in which the individual is more inclined to behave (and, in the case of humans, think) in a spontaneous and flexible way.\textsuperscript{28}

Playful play is play that is the precursor to creativity (the generation of new ideas) and ultimately to innovation (their successful implementation and adoption by others).\textsuperscript{29}

Play involves breaking rules. Playful play involves having fun while doing so. From play may emerge a new perspective or cognitive tool that might be used at a later date, possibly in combination with other perspectives or tools, to solve a new challenge. In their different ways, both of these consequences of play are creative.\textsuperscript{30}

It is the \textit{playfulness} that leads to creativity and innovation that is of particular interest as we consider the possibilities of engaging Scripture in ways that lead to contagious missional imagination.

Play Personalities

When we begin discussing what is \textit{fun}, however, it becomes quickly apparent that what is fun to one person may not be to another. Stuart Brown has identified what he calls eight different “play personalities.” These are:


\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., 65.

\textsuperscript{30} Ibid., 57. Though Huizinga and others would identify play as containing its own set of freely accepted rules, play is even by these definitions free from the constraints of necessary behavior. Play breaks us out of required molds of behavior. Rules, if they are to be, must be created and are voluntarily submitted to. The normal rules of necessary behavior do not apply within play. This frees us for the possibility of creativity. The suspension of life as normal gives rise to the possibility of life as it might be imagined.
The Joker—The most basic and extreme player throughout history is the joker. A joker’s play always revolves around some kind of nonsense.

The Kinesthete—Kinesthetes are people who like to move, who—in the words of Sir Ken Robinson—“need to move in order to think.” … While kinesthetes may play games, competition is not the main focus—it is only a forum for engaging in their favorite activity.

The Explorer—Exploring can be physical—literally, going to new places. Alternatively, it can be emotional—searching for a new feeling or deepening of the familiar, through music, movement, flirtation. It can be mental: researching a new subject or discovering new experiences and points of view while remaining in your armchair.

The Competitor—The competitor is a person who breaks through into the euphoria and creativity of play by enjoying a competitive game with specific rules, and enjoys playing to win. He’s the terminator. She’s the dominator. The competitor loves fighting to be number 1.

The Director—Directors enjoy planning and executing scenes and events…. They are born organizers. At their best, they are the party givers, the instigators of great excursions to the beach, the dynamic center of the social world. At worst, they are manipulators.

The Collector—The thrill of play for the collector is to have and to hold the most, the best, the most interesting collection of objects or experiences. Coins, toy trains, antiques, plastic purses, wine, shoes, ties, video clips of race-car crashes, or pieces of the crashed cars themselves, anything and everything is fair game for the collector.

The Artist/Creator—For the artist/creator, joy is found in making things. Painting, print-making, woodworking, pottery, and sculpture are well-known activities of artist/creators, but furniture making, knitting, sewing, and gardening are also in their purview…. The point is to make something—to make something beautiful, something functional, something goofy. Or just to make something work—the artist/creator may be someone who enjoys taking apart a pump, replacing broken parts, cleaning it, and putting back together a shiny, perfectly working mechanism in effect making it new.

The Storyteller—For the storyteller, imagination is the key to the kingdom of play. Storytellers are, of course, novelists, playwrights, cartoonists, and screenwriters, but they are also those whose greatest joy is reading those novels
and watching those movies, people who make themselves part of the story, who experience the thoughts and emotions of characters in the story.  

Most of us would find ourselves in a combination of these categories. Different times and circumstances may lead us to favor one form of play over another. However, we may also find ourselves gravitating toward certain types of play. This is important to note as we seek to be *playful*, including that portion of the definition that involves having fun.

**Narrative Imagination**

In a fractured age,  
When cynicism is god,  
here is possibly heresy:  
we live by stories,  
we also live in them.  
One way or another we are living the stories  
planted in us early along the way,  
or we are also living the stories we planted—knowingly or unknowingly—in ourselves.  
We live stories that either give our lives meaning  
or negate it with meaninglessness.  
If we change the stories we live by,  
Quite possibly we change our lives.  

Steven Pinker writes, “Language is so tightly woven into the human experience that it is scarcely possible to imagine life without it.” Arthur W. Frank writes, “We need stories to live.” Stories not only tell about our past and present experiences, but they also open possibilities for the future. Stories are “living things” that “often shape, rather

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than simply reflect, human conduct.” In other words, stories shape our imagination. As the poem above imagines, changing the stories that we live by may quite possibly change our lives. This is true both of individuals as well as entire faith communities. The field of narrative psychology and more recently emerging ideas of socio-narratology and narrative leadership explore the integral role of narratives and the imagination that shapes future possibilities.

**Narrative Psychology**

Narrative psychology is “an attempt to study the language, stories and narratives which constitute selves and the implications and permutations of those narratives for individuals and societies.” In other words, narrative is fundamental to identity. Each of us orders our lives according to the story of how we interpret our experiences. The premise of narrative psychology is that the narratives we live by constantly shape our understanding of who we are and the kind of people we are likely to become.  

Narrative construction is inherently social. Communities are purveyors of story. Within community our own narratives are formed and re-formed. Our own private narratives are shaped in large degree by communal narratives. We inherit these narratives through explicit instruction and daily social interactions. From the earliest moments of our childhood we know our place in the world through the stories we are told by our families. Throughout our lives our personal narratives are constantly influenced by interactions with others. As we hear the stories others tell, our own story is influenced.

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35 Ibid., 22-23.


37 Ibid., 10, 21.
We accept, reject, or struggle with others’ narratives and in the process our own is changed. This is a powerful process that changes our understanding of how we relate to the world. As Lee Roy Beach observes, “As we change our narratives, we change our view of reality.”

The power of narrative lies in this ability not only to define the present, but to shape the future. Beech writes about the potential of narrative to help us make “educated guesses about the future.” Beech describes these “forecasts” of the future as falling into two different categories. “Extrapolated forecasts” are projected based on most factors of the present reality staying the same. “Action forecasts” imagine what the future will look like if a change is made. It is this idea of imagination that is key. Imagination is the cognitive tool that allows us to envision transformational possibility.

Socio-Narratology

Not only does imagination shape our stories, but the stories themselves then become shapers of further imagination and action. In his book *Letting Stories Breathe: A Socio-Narratology*, Arthur W. Frank writes,

Stories may not actually breathe, but they can animate. The breath imputed by this book’s title is the breath of a god in creation stories, as that god gives life to the lump that will become human. Stories animate human life; that is their work. Stories work with people, for people, and always stories work on people, affecting what people are able to see as real, as possible, and as worth doing or best avoided. What is it about stories—what are their particularities—that enables them to work as they do? More than mere curiosity is at stake in this question, because human life depends on the stories we tell: the sense of self that those

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39 Ibid., 33.

40 Ibid., 36.
stories impart, the relationships constructed around shared stories, and the sense of purpose that stories both propose and foreclose.\textsuperscript{41}

Stories accomplish something. They become actors in our lives.\textsuperscript{42} Stories breathe life into individuals’ perceptions of themselves and their possibilities for the future. Stories also shape individuals into groups that assemble around telling and believing certain stories. Frank points out that after stories animate, they instigate.\textsuperscript{43} Stories have the power to shape future behavior and the outcomes of future relationships.

Frank argues that stories themselves have capacities. Among these capacities is the capacity for shaping imagination. In a list of stories’ capacities, Frank culminates with this:

Finally but perhaps most significant, \textit{Imagination}. Stories have the capacity to arouse people’s imaginations; they make the unseen not only visible but compelling.\textsuperscript{44}

People think with stories guiding their thoughts.\textsuperscript{45} The capacity of stories to arouse imagination influences how people interact with their experiences and how they perceive possibilities for the future. Frank points to the autobiographical example of Jerome Bruner crossing the sea with passengers fleeing the Nazis on the eve of World War II. He quotes Bruner saying,

The Book of Exodus shaped my way of telling myself the story of those fleeing souls on the Shawnee, and telling myself that story shaped my very experience of

\textsuperscript{41} Frank, \textit{Letting Stories Breathe: A Socio-Narratology}, 3. Emphasis in the original.

\textsuperscript{42} Ibid., 13.

\textsuperscript{43} Ibid., 3.

\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., 41. Emphasis in the original.

\textsuperscript{45} Ibid., 47.
that transatlantic crossing. And so it is with narrative plights. They become templates for experience.46

This capacity of stories to shape human imagination and conduct is the core premise of socio-narratology.47

Narrative Leadership

Each of us, as individuals, makes sense of our lives through story. Congregations, also, make sense of their experience through story. Diana Butler Bass asserts that, in this time of rapid change, there is a particular need for narrative leadership in congregations:

One of the most dramatic cultural shifts of the last thirty years is the role storytelling plays in our lives; story has become a primary path to meaning-making. Sociologist Anthony Giddens claims that our identity is found “in the ongoing story about the self” and further asserts that “each of us not only ‘has’ but lives a biography.” Moral philosopher Charles Taylor says that we understand life as an “unfolding story” in which “we grasp our lives as narrative.” Put simply, we become ourselves as we tell our stories. We cannot know ourselves apart from our stories—stories in which we are both author and actor. When these philosophical principles are expanded beyond the individual to congregation, the power of narrative leadership is easily grasped and naturally enacted. To lead is to create story and to act in concert with the tale.48

Narrative leadership as defined by Diana Butler Bass is “a deceptively simple principle: know your story and live it.”49 In a three-year study of vital mainline churches, she discovered that stories were essential to the life of healthy congregations and leaders, both lay and ordained, who embodied the capacity for congregational renewal we might call missional imagination.

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46 Ibid., 22.

47 Ibid.


49 Ibid., 152.
Some people know stories and tell them well but live without intentional connection to those stories; others simply experience quotidian life with no reflection on larger stories of meaning. In vital mainline churches, leaders knew their stories and lived them—thus turning the power of narrative into a source of and resource for change.\textsuperscript{50}

Diana Butler Bass articulates four “pathways of practice” from her observations that help develop the idea of narrative leadership for those who are looking at the importance of narrative in the life of congregational change. “They include: (1) story shapes leadership; (2) leaders shape stories; (3) narrative leadership is character and context driven; and (4) leadership is based on charisma, not celebrity.”\textsuperscript{51} Of particular interest to this study are the first two pathways: story shapes leadership and leaders shape stories.

\textit{Story shapes leadership}. Imagine the difference of being a leader aboard the \textit{Titanic} and someone in a similar position on the \textit{Mayflower}. In this example, Diana Butler Bass illustrates the power that stories have to shape the way in which our congregations order our experience. Which story best serves our understanding of this particular time of change for mainline congregations?

If we think of churches as the \textit{Titanic}, that has serious implications for leadership—our bishops, conference ministers, pastors, and priests are required to rescue us. Throw people in lifeboats. Fix the big hole in the ship. Save whoever—and whatever—can be saved. From this perspective, leadership is an emergency rescue operation, heroic but hopeless. We all know the end of the story. The ship will sink. The best our leaders can do is to save a few—and maybe themselves. No wonder so many pastors are anxious and depressed. Who wants to lead in this scenario?

But what if the \textit{Titanic} is not the story? A better story—and perhaps more accurate in our current circumstances—may be that of the \textit{Mayflower}. In this story, a boat of Pilgrims finds itself in uncharted seas, blown off course by a

\textsuperscript{50} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{51} Ibid.
storm and heading to an unnamed country. Like the *Titanic* story, there is a sense of urgency, confusion, and fear. But the ship is intact as it sails off course from the intended colony of Virginia. Here, leaders are not trying to patch the hull or load lifeboats. They are not praying for a miracle. Instead, they look for land. They keep calm while providing focus, vision, and direction, while they navigate the choppy—if unfamiliar—seas of the north Atlantic. Once they do reach land, leaders envision a way to structure the new community and take part in building a new life.\(^52\)

Framing our experience in the church today as a *Mayflower* moment rather than a *Titanic* tragedy changes our expectations and expands our imagination for what being church together looks like in this day and age. The stories that we tell shape our experience and expand future possibilities.

*Leaders shape stories.* Diana Butler Bass observes that “these days, one of the primary capacities of good leadership is to enable people to understand change, interpret chaos, and make sense of a seemingly meaningless world.”\(^53\) Stories do this. As people of faith, we have resources to tell stories that connect our experience of the world to the reality of God’s presence and provision.

Throughout my research on vital mainline churches, both clergy and congregational leaders were storytellers. They knew their own faith stories, they knew the stories of their congregations, they knew their tradition’s stories, and they knew the larger Christian and biblical stories. They exhibited ease and comfort in sharing these stories and invited others into a variety of stories in natural and authentic ways. In the process, they opened paths for other people to learn and tell stories of faith. And they ably moved between personal, congregational, and biblical stories to create a world of spiritual and theological meaning. They intuited the power of story to rearrange people’s lives—using story in much the same way as Jesus did—and to open windows to spiritual realities and alternative paths that sometimes escape life’s more mundane interpretations.

And, of course, storytelling leaders have the ability to change the story in which they exercise leadership! Scripts can be rewritten. A good leader will be able to

\(^{52}\) Ibid., 153.

\(^{53}\) Ibid., 154.
move a congregation away from deadening and fear-filled stories, like that of the *Titanic*, toward life-giving possibilities of faithful adventure.\textsuperscript{54}

The stories that we hear and tell about ourselves not only have the power to shape our own personal identity, but they shape the identity of our congregations as well. Just as imagining a new story opens up possibilities in our personal lives, connecting with the stories that ground our Christian faith open up possibilities for us to imagine that we are, indeed, on a faithful adventure led by our wild and wonderful triune God!

**Summary**

This chapter presented the theoretical lenses of play and narrative imagination. These lenses were explored in order to begin addressing the research question: *How might an Action Research intervention involving engaging Scripture playfully expand missional imagination?*

While there are a wide variety of philosophies and definitions of play, this chapter articulated an understanding of *playfulness* that takes to heart the joy inherent in the experience of play. It also explored the understanding that play is a means through which we are opened to the possibilities of creativity, innovation, and engagement with the Other.

Narrative imagination was explored through a brief introduction to the fields of narrative psychology, socio-narratology, and narrative leadership. Each of these perspectives enriches an understanding of story as integral to both self and community as well as to expanding our imaginations of what is possible for the future.

\textsuperscript{54} Ibid.
While these lenses have been explored here from a theoretical perspective, there are clearly theological implications to be explored as well. The following chapter will address these biblical and theological dimensions.
CHAPTER 3
BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES AND LENSES

The previous chapter of this thesis explored the theoretical worlds of play and narrative imagination. This chapter moves to explore key biblical and theological perspectives important to this study. The first biblical lens to be employed is that of The Bible as Metanarrative. In the theoretical discussion of narrative above, an argument was made that we are narrative beings. Here the argument is made that the Bible—God’s story—is also the framework within which we understand our own lived experience. Indeed God’s Word is not a static, distant thing, but rather the living Word in whom “we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28).¹ This leads to the exploration of The Creative Word Made Flesh as a second biblical lens. Also considered are Playful Passages—stories within the biblical narrative that point to the playfulness of God. This will be the third biblical lens to be explored in this chapter.

The second half of this chapter explores theological considerations. The first of these is Play as a Theological Lens. The argument will be made that God is by nature playful. Moreover, as those who are made in the image of God, we too are invited into

playful relationship with God and with one another. This is explored as the theological lens of *Participation in the Perichoretic Relationship of the Triune God*.

### Biblical Perspectives and Lenses

#### The Bible as Metanarrative

The argument was made in the previous chapter that we are narrative beings. We understand who we are as individuals and as communities through the stories that we tell. In such an environment, stories have great power. They not only describe our current understandings of who we are but also open up or close down possibilities for the future. Immersing ourselves in a particular story changes the possibilities of who and what we become.

This is something that should catch our attention. It should particularly grab the attention of us as people of faith. We have been entrusted with the most powerful of all stories. In the Holy Scriptures we find the story that shapes us as children of God. It is a story that describes who we are—those in need of God’s grace—as well as how it is that we have come to be so bold as to claim God’s favor.2

Rolf Jacobson argues that we *need* the biblical story to counteract the inadequacy of the stories that would otherwise define us:

> If it is true that we understand reality as a story, that we are our own continually rewritten stories, and that we make sense of reality through stories, if we are both the narrator and a character in our own stories, and that we invite others into our stories by telling them—if all this is true—we come face-to-face with a very

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2 “Increasingly, representatives of diverse disciplines have come to a significant consensus about human identity. Each of us constructs and lives in a narrative that is, in fact, us. If this is the case, we will need an outside source to construct a narrative that is both good and true—one to which and in which we can give our lives. Such a story is given us in Holy Scripture and in the collective memory of the church.” Rolf A. Jacobson, “We Are Our Stories: Narrative Dimension of Human Identity and Its Implications for Christian Faith Formation,” *Word & World* 34, no. 2 (2014): 123.
troubling and dark truth. And that truth is this: *We are finite, fallible human sinners who are not capable either of knowing the whole truth or of telling the truth when we do know it.* Because we are in bondage to sin and are finite creatures, as authors who write our own stories about ourselves, we will lie. We will twist the truth to make ourselves look better. We will tell our stories from our own perspectives, which by definition means we cannot see far enough or straight enough to know the truth. We will try to make ourselves look better to ourselves and to our neighbors. . . . We are our stories, but our stories—both from a theological and an ethical perspective—are inevitably inadequate. What then?³

Jacobson continues on to point to a “different story”—a “better story”—the biblical story to “tell the truth about us and thereby kill us, but also raise us from the dead.”⁴

What other people’s stories highlight their sins and imperfections? Rather than cover up their warts and blemishes, the Bible goes to quite a length to tell the hard-to-hear truth about human sin. Most cultures tell stories about their heroes or ancestors that glorify them: I cannot tell a lie, I chopped down the cherry tree with my little hatchet. If a story is uncomfortable, it is usually excised from the canon and the culture actively denies the story. But the Bible is different in this regard—the Bible goes out of the way to tell some of the hard stories. The Bible can do this because it has another word to speak: Your wife shall have a son. I will be your God and you will be my people. Unto us a child is born. He is risen. In these stories and in the biblical story writ large, God the great storyteller comes alongside of us and offers us a better story. A story that tells us who we really are and makes promises that bestow a new identity on us.⁵

The Bible functions as such a metanarrative. It is the story not only large enough to bear witness to past and present experience, but also to give shape to a vision of the future that is God’s continued activity in our lives and in all of creation. Indeed, the metanarrative of the Bible is large enough to expand our understanding of God’s “preferred and promised future.”⁶

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³ Ibid., 124, 126. Italics in the original.

⁴ Ibid., 126.

⁵ Ibid., 127.

As we have seen argued from a theoretical perspective, narrative has the power to shape not only our present experience but our imagination for future possibilities as well. The biblical narrative does this for the community of faith. As Robin Stockitt affirms, “Biblical stories invite the reader to accept them as his or her story.” The biblical narrative with its witness to God’s activity in the world—from the first word of creation to the new creation of redemption and reconciliation—shapes our identity as the people of God.

The biblical story, the grand and sweeping narrative of God’s activity on behalf of creation from the beginning of time, is essential to the life of faith and to the missional identity of God’s people. It is in the biblical story that we learn of our wildly creative God and who we are as those delighted over, fashioned as precious companions and endowed with divine image. It is in this story that we come to understand our own limitations and failings as those who have chosen death over life . . . but it is also within this story that we receive the gift of freedom. In Christ’s resurrection we experience our own resurrection and with it the beauty of life without impossibilities. The grandest of all the joys is the improbable reality that we are declared friends of God. We and all of creation find ourselves caught up by the movement of this spectacular triune God. Suddenly our individual stories with their tragedies and foibles are re-cast in divine light. There is no more separation between us and God or us and one another. There is only the delightful invitation to come and play . . . to see what God will do next.

This is the story that needs to be told. As Sandy Sasso says beautifully, “We are not merely descendants recovering the rich tradition of those who came before us. We are

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ancestors bequeathing our search to the next generation.”

We have been invited into God’s story and through the Spirit’s indwelling of our telling, others may also come to recognize their place in it!

The argument has been made, though, that we have lost our connection with the power of Scripture as the formative story for our lives. Our language has become outdated; our methods of sharing the story have become ineffective in this day of rapid change. As Mark Miller observes:

While there are many reasons why the Church in America is in decline, the most striking reason is that people are no longer connecting with the redemptive story of the Bible. We live in a culture that is craving narratives, metaphors, and images—anything that can provide some meaning to their nihilistic lives. The Church has the greatest story ever told. That story, Scripture tells us, is the power of God to transform lives. . . . I desire for the Church to recapture its ability to converse with culture. I long for American Christians to be able to tell the timeless biblical narrative in the language of the times.

Miller’s longing drove him to action. He describes going on a “mission to become bilingual and speak the language of our culture.” That quest led to the development of a communication strategy he calls *Experiential Storytelling*, which emphasizes creating an environment that allows others to experience and participate in the storytelling through

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9 “It has been argued, based on a brief survey of interdisciplinary thinking, that human identity is inherently narrative. We are our stories. . . . If this conclusion is right, then one essential task for an evangelizing, faith-forming, missional church is to do a much better job than we have done in recent decades of telling God’s story. Because there is a crisis. We live in an age that has forgotten God’s story—all the way from Abraham to Moses, to Jesus, to Peter, to Paul, and Mary, and Augustine, Luther, and Joan of Arc and all the grand stories of the church. In such an age, forming faith in others will require that we return to a very intentional telling of God’s story.” Jacobson, “We Are Our Stories: Narrative Dimension of Human Identity and Its Implications for Christian Faith Formation,” 130.


11 Ibid., 6.
sensory interaction. We might recognize this as a means of playfully engaging Scripture.

Play is the language American society speaks when it comes to biblical storytelling!\(^{12}\)

The playful engagement of Scripture is not a new concept. The tradition of Midrash is a method of telling the story in rich and engaging ways that is also ancient.

Midrash is a method and body of literature that fills in the gaps in the biblical text. Grounding itself in the biblical narrative, it retells the ancient story in light of new realities and changing conditions . . . tradition’s story seen through the eyes of the seeker, renewed through the ongoing narratives of the life of its people. It is an imaginative process of narrative construction. What the Bible doesn’t say, the Midrash imagines.\(^{13}\)

Midrash invites hearers into the ancient narrative so that they both learn the community’s story and make that story their own by bringing their own experience to it. It values the power of the story “not simply to inform or entertain, but to transform.”\(^{14}\) It trusts the capacity for wonder and spiritual knowing. Midrash is one means of playfully engaging Scripture used throughout the ages. God speaks through this play so that the biblical story comes alive in our imagination. Suddenly, we recognize our own story echoed in and transformed by God’s Word.

These playful means of engaging Scripture, whether new or old, invite us to hear the Word of God with fresh ears and to find our story caught up in the story of God’s activity throughout time. This is what it means to consider the Bible the metanarrative of our lives. It is the “overarching account or interpretation of events and circumstances that provides a pattern or structure for people’s beliefs and gives meaning to their

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12 See the earlier discussion of biblical literacy in chapter one of this thesis.


14 Ibid.
experiences.” The biblical story is that narrative through which our own stories are shaped by God. By the grace of our triune God we have been invited into the story and transformed by it.

The Creative Word Made Flesh

My own personal identity, that is my story, is one deeply shaped by God’s incarnational presence revealed in Scripture and experienced in daily life. As I write this, we are nearing the celebration of Christmas. The nostalgia of this season is enough to call to mind Christmases past. I remember each year when I was a child my family would carefully set out an olive wood nativity set. My dad would recount the story of how he had brought that particular crèche home with him from his visit to the Holy Land. His dream then was that one day he would have a family to enjoy putting up this scene with

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as he shared the story of Jesus’ birth with his children. Indeed his dream came true. This crèche became, and still remains, an important part of the Christmas celebration in our family.

What my dad might not have predicted was that Baby Jesus, the centerpiece of this nativity, would not stay in the manger very often. Baby Jesus was just the right size to fit in a child’s hand. It was removable from its manger cradle and the silky-smooth back of the figure combined with its childlike expression made it uniquely appealing to small children. In fact, there were many advent seasons when my siblings and I were growing up that Jesus traveled all around the house. He showed up at the dinner table lovingly wrapped by little fingers in tissue and tape. He slept not on the shelf with the other nativity figurines, but right next to our beds . . . occasionally even sharing the pillow. Countless imaginary games and childhood adventures were attended by this Baby Jesus. This was how I first learned the meaning of “God With Us.”

I could not have articulated it then, as I was carrying Baby Jesus around the house with me, but I was learning that God is a playful God. God had come to me. The Word of God had become flesh and plopped down right next to me in my toddler-sized life to eat at the table with me, to sleep next to me, to go on adventures, and to hold close. The story had come alive for me. So, on Christmas Eve, when Jesus rightfully took his place in the manger amongst Mary and Joseph, the amazed shepherds and the dutiful magi, it was my friend that I saw in the manger—and I rejoiced!

Martin Luther says of Scripture, “Here you will find the swaddling clothes and the manger in which Christ lies, and to which the angel points the shepherds [Luke 2:12]. Simple and lowly are these swaddling cloths, but dear is the treasure, Christ, who lies in
Luther’s view of Scripture is a playful one too. He is quoted as having said, “The Bible is alive, it speaks to me; it has feet, it runs after me; it has hands, it lays hold of me.” Through Scripture we are brought into the presence of this playful God who takes up residence with us. The pages of the Bible reveal our God not to be a distant and impassive stranger—but a creative, loving, ever-present friend. In fact, we find in the pages of Scripture the good news that we are invited into the very relationship that is God’s triune joy!

From the perspective of John’s Gospel, it is the Word of God that makes space for life to flourish. It is God’s Word that makes the earth habitable for human beings. All of creation is brought into existence through the Word of God. John 1:1 “begins with God’s Word, his act of communicating.” Craig Koester explains:

A word is a form of address, a means of engagement. To say, “In the beginning was the Word” is to say that in the beginning is God’s act of communication. Without communication God remains unknown and unknowable. For the Gospel to say anything about God means that God must first disclose something of himself.

Koester explores this act of communication revealed in three-fold witness in John’s Gospel. First, the Gospel presupposes God’s communication through Israel’s Scriptures. From the very first line of Genesis, God speaks. John’s Gospel mirrors this with the statement that “in the beginning was the Word” (John 1:1). The second form of

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19 Ibid.
communication comes in Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus is the Word made flesh. “The prologue prepares readers to see the whole story of Jesus as God’s act of communicating through his embodied Word.”\(^{20}\) Third, God continues to communicate through the Holy Spirit’s ongoing teaching and reminding.\(^{21}\)

This three-fold understanding of God’s communication through the gifts of all three persons of God sets the stage for a deeper understanding of the invitation to participation in the relationship that is the triune God. We will explore this theological understanding further in this thesis. For now, it is enough to note that in this opening chapter of John we are told that through the Word life has come into being (John 1:4). From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace (John 1:16).\(^{22}\) That God’s creative Word has been given opens the future for life to be lived in abundance (John 10:10). God’s gift in communicating God’s triune self opens up the possibility for a rich missional imagination.

**Playful Passages**

Robin Stockitt observes, “The language of the story of creation is located in the playroom rather than the workshop.”\(^{23}\) Indeed, the story of creation is inherently playful.

The text of Gen 2 is couched in playful language. A picture is constructed by the storyteller of God taking the dust of the ground, much as a potter or a child would take a lump of modeling clay, and breathing into the human form that had just been shaped. It is the language of the kindergarten yet it is profoundly serious in

\(^{20}\) Ibid., 28.

\(^{21}\) Ibid., 30.

\(^{22}\) Emphasis added.

its intent. The first Adam is taken from the red earth itself and given the gift of life via the very breath of God.\textsuperscript{24}

Here God is an artist, a sculptor, carefully and patiently forming the shape of a human being. God’s imagination runs wild, though. This lump of clay does not stay inanimate. It is given the breath of life and with it God’s own creative potential. Humanity was made in the image of God, with God-like capacity to imagine. “Adam was given the same shaping potentiality, to create something new out of the very fabric of the material world.”\textsuperscript{25}

Humanity was invited into the playfulness of creation. God continued to reach into the mud and sculpt animals of every kind from the ground, bringing them to Adam to see what he would call them (Genesis 2:19). There was a divine game afoot. One might imagine surprise and delight as each animal is brought forward and Adam experiments with the imagination of language in the naming process.

The gift of Adam’s imagination is unlimited. In fact, it is so free in its ability to design that Adam can create the possibility of an alternative to this life God has fashioned.

In Gen 6:5 we read that, “God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination (yetser) of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually” (King James Version). The etymology of this word derives from the same root word ysr as the words for “creation” (yetsirah), “creator” (yotser) and “create” (yatsar). The allusive interplay between God’s creative activity and humankind’s capacity to imagine an alternative future without God is highly significant. The Jewish theologian Eric Fromm frames the context in this way: “The noun ‘yetser’ means ‘form, frame, purpose’ and with reference to the mind,
‘imagination’ or ‘device.’ The term ‘yetser’ thus means ‘imaginings’ (good and evil). The problem of good and evil arises only when there is imagination.\textsuperscript{26}

The ability to imagine and play with the possibility of an alternative future, something other than the one of God’s created goodness, leads humanity into trouble. God, seeing the persistently evil imaginings of the heart, floods the earth to begin again. Not even this act, though, changes humanity’s inclinations. As Stockitt observes, “It is the human imagination that has become distorted and is in need of redemption.”\textsuperscript{27} God, in God’s goodness, continues to use imagination in merciful ways. The flood narrative culminates in God’s promise in aesthetic form. God “restrains” the rain from the heavens and paints in the sky the reoccurring rainbow as a sign of the covenant (Genesis 8:2; 9:13).

This good and merciful playfulness of God echoes throughout Scripture. Consider the call of Moses. Moses is going about his daily life when he encounters a bush that is on fire but not consumed (Exodus 3:2). The surprise interaction suspends the normal rules of nature and captures Moses’ attention. When Moses inquires about the divine name, God’s response here too is playful, using language that refuses finite interpretation in order to shape Moses’ imagination.\textsuperscript{28}

\textsuperscript{26} “In the aftermath of the flood (Gen 8:21) the same term is used, this time in the noun form and is translated as ‘the inclinations’ or the ‘the imaginations’ of the heart which are persistently evil. The sense conveyed is that the shaping capacity of humankind is now distorted from one of gentle beauty, to evil and oppressive purposes. Yet it is fundamentally the same activity of giving form to something that is originally conceived in the mind. The human shaping is a derivative of the divine shaping both requiring the deployment of the imagination.” Ibid., 166-167.

\textsuperscript{27} Ibid., 167.

\textsuperscript{28} “The phrase ‘I AM who I AM,’ formed in the imperfect tense in the original Hebrew, is normally used to indicate an uncompleted action. As such the term can equally well be rendered “I will be who I will be,” as the Hebrew makes no radical grammatical distinction between present and future temporal forms. This suggests that the self-disclosure of God is to be understood as ongoing, being continually renewed and refreshed. The God who calls to Moses from within the burning bush is the One whose character and being is framed in perfect freedom, self-authenticating and self-referential. This divine
This imagination for what God will do in the future is beyond what Moses himself could have had in mind. Finally, in Exodus 15, when Moses stands with all the Israelites at the banks of the sea overlooking God’s victory, they sing. They sing of the blast of God’s nostrils that piled up the waters, the floods that stood in a heap, and the deeps congealed in the heart of the sea (Exodus 15:8).

The sea is a location for God’s playfulness in other passages of Scripture as well. Stockitt references the Psalms. “There go the ships, and the Leviathan that you formed to sport in it” (Psalm 104:26). She points to the sense of God playing with the Leviathan that is present in the Hebrew text. The Leviathan was considered a “huge mythical sea creature greatly to be feared” but the Psalmist takes comfort in the God who has the capacity to play with even this most feared creature. God is all-powerful, and yet God also demonstrates joyful, childlike playfulness.

God’s playfulness is reflected throughout God’s relationship with Israel. It does not take much stretch of the imagination to hear the playfulness in the commands of Deuteronomy 6:7-9. God’s words are to be engaged in every moment, at home and away . . . when rising and lying down . . . binding on hands and forehead. Likewise, in the institution of the Passover observance, an element of playfulness exists. Even in this most serious of remembrances, provisions are made for experiential remembering. Particular

revelation is uncompleted in the sense that at each moment of immanent encounter there is a fresh exposition of his ontology expressed in his agency . . . Prior to the answer given to Moses about the “naming” of God, the text declares, “Then he said, I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob.” The intention is clear. The dialogue refers Moses to a redemptive narrative in which the key player, God, has engaged intimately and powerfully within Moses’ ancestral history . . . It is because of the configuration of the meaning of this narrative that Moses can draw strength and encouragement to engage in future leadership exploits.” Ibid., 2965.

29 Ibid., 140.
foods are to be eaten in a particular way. The experience is an act of remembering that ensures that future generations will know the mighty hand of God that saves (Exodus 13).

The prophets too employ playful elements to draw the hearer into God’s story. The prophet, Nathan, in response to King David’s act of adultery tells a story that Stockitt calls “a cameo portrait of the imagination in action, par excellence.”\footnote{Ibid., 3.} In the telling of the story about two men and a lamb, Nathan conveys a story to David so powerful that reality and fiction blur and David is angered to the point that he is ready to order the execution of the man for his crime. Having drawn David so deeply into the story, Nathan then reveals the impossible, “You are the man!” (2 Samuel 12:7). Nathan, in effect, \textit{plays} with David. He risks kindling the king’s anger therefore endangering his own life. He ventures into the unknown with this creative approach to inspire repentance. It is risky. It is creative. It is effective. His playfully prophetic act brings David to recognize God’s word and to confess his sin.

God’s playful actions are present from the beginning of creation. So it is little wonder, but still gloriously delightful, that God would choose a child to redeem humanity’s imagination. The incarnation—God becoming man and entering the human story as a baby, born in a stable—is both utterly absurd and unspeakably wonderful. What a fantastic surprise! Along with this surprise comes the delightful oddity that as this Messiah grew, he did not engage with military might, but rather told stories.\footnote{“Nowhere is the notion of the imaginative particularity of God more startlingly realized than in the Incarnation itself. Whilst we, with the benefit of hindsight, can draw lines of connection between Old Testament prophecies concerning the coming of a future Messiah and the arrival of Jesus in Bethlehem, for those Jews living in Israel at the time of Christ such fulfillments of the prophetic word would have been far from obvious. The imaginative creativity of God that is so apparent within the created order is demonstrated supremely in the novel, surprising, unexpected, and unpredictable intervention of God in humanity with the Word made flesh in Bethlehem. The element of novelty and surprise that the Incarnation brings to the scene is not just a curiosity but a direct part of God’s story. The words of Isaiah are spoken literally to David and the king of Israel in Babylon, and figuratively to the Jews, and then to the world. This is a critical point. For the Jews, the fulfillment of the prophecy and the arrival of the Messiah would have been startling, but it would have been out of the reach of their imagination. It would have been too good to be true. The Incarnation is too good to be true. The Incarnation is the best of all stories. The Incarnation is the story of God becoming man, acting out of the novel, surprising, unexpected, and unpredictable, and showing us the way to redemption, to God’s story, to the story of our salvation.}$^3$
and every one of these stories, we find ourselves drawn in. We are delighted, confused, and surprised by the twists and turns that proclaim the upside-down nature of the kingdom of God.

I love Barbara Brown Taylor’s playful description of the joy of the incarnation:

God became incarnate and there was no going back. From that point on, the distinction between the sacred and the secular was blurred forever. Nothing was too humble to contain the holy: not a manger, not a stable, not the sweet-smelling body of a Hebrew boy child. The door between heaven and earth was blown off its hinges, and nothing was ever the same again. . . . The child became a man and the man became a preacher whose sermons were full of commonplace things: seeds and nets, coins and fishes, lilies of the field, and birds of the air. Wherever he was, he had a knack for looking around him and weaving what he saw into his sermons, whether it was sparrows for sale in the marketplace, laborers lining up for their pay, or a woman glimpsed through a doorway kneading her family’s bread. . . . “The kingdom of heaven is like this,” he said over and over again, comparing things they knew about with something they knew nothing about and all of the sudden what they knew had cracks in it, cracks they had never noticed before, through which they glimpsed bright and sometimes frightening new realities. . . . Every created thing was fraught with divine possibility; wasn’t that what he was telling them? Every ho-hum detail of their days was a bread crumb leading them into the presence of God, if they would just pick up the trail and follow.32

Surprise was a key aspect of Jesus’ life and ministry. Jesus’ birth was a surprise. The way that he preached and taught was surprising. The manner in which he healed and spoke and with whom he associated—all were surprising. But the biggest surprise of

evokes is surely indicative of the creative playfulness of the Father and Son in their mission. This creative playfulness of Christ in the manner of his teaching has been highlighted by the work of Kenneth Bailey who has drawn attention to the way in which the parables, using symbolic language, are framed through the use of anecdotes, images, and narrative drawn from the cultural milieu of the time. . . . One can witness the way in which the parable depicts Jesus the storyteller deliberately arousing curiosity, surprise, shock, and astonishment in the narration of a tale. Such teaching, drawing upon simple everyday imagery readily understood by his hearers, points to a form of theological expression that was highly imaginative and symbolic in its presentation. The parables of Jesus were intended both to illuminate and confuse, to attract and to deter. They remain an oblique, playful form of speech and as such provoke endless fascination.” Ibid., 152.

them all—the biggest surprise of the whole of God’s story—is the one that comes in Christ’s death and resurrection.

God’s interaction with humanity from the very act of creation has been playful. Playful does not, though, mean safe. Indeed the play of creation was risky. To enter into creation meant to put God’s own life at risk. On the cross, God exposed God’s own self to the danger of death in order to once and for all defeat it.

The greatest surprise is that the defeat of death would come through death. Though death seemed like it would be the end for the Son of God, Christ laughed in its face and rose again. In the most absurd promise of all, Jesus made his own death the path to life for all creation.\footnote{Even in the Incarnation and in the cross and resurrection of Christ one can detect the element of divine playfulness, misleading and overcoming the powers of evil in the liberation of the Son of God from death through the actualization of new life freely granted by the eternal I AM. The victory of the playfulness of God over the deadly serious and seriously deadly powers of evil is celebrated by the \textit{risus paschalis}, the laughter of the Christian church at Easter, joyfully echoing God’s victory over death, the ultimate enemy. This victory opens up new vistas into the life of the kingdom of God, the consummated community of God with his liberated creation when playful enjoyment and joyful celebration will take the place of strenuous work, pain and tears.” Stockitt, \textit{Imagination and the Playfulness of God: The Theological Implications of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's Definition of the Human Imagination}, xi.}

The surprise of the resurrection is continued in the celebration of Pentecost. God’s Spirit could not be contained. The surprising way in which God’s Spirit is given continues to witness to God’s actions since the beginning of creation. God plays. God surprises. In the rush of wind the Spirit comes. Here again is fire that does not burn. This time, rather than engulfing a bush through which God will speak, it rests on the heads of those gathered. Indeed, they will be the ones to speak God’s word. It seems totally absurd. That is until Peter recalls the words of the prophet Joel and the promise, “I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh” (Acts 2:17). It is just like God to work through the surprising!
The expectations of God’s engagement with humankind are constantly confounded. Surprise as a theological category thus possesses the incarnational power of interruption offering a subtle balance of the new together with the continuation of the old. It is through surprise that God awakens humanity from its slumbers with the demand that new paradigms of interpretation are found.  

Theological Perspectives and Lenses

Play as a Theological Lens

Scripture is filled with creativity, imagination, and playful interactions. Reflecting on this, Robin Stockitt asks the question, “Who is this God who engages with his creation in this manner?” It is a good question. Who is this God? Can we rightfully claim that God is intrinsically playful?

34 Ibid., 154.

35 “Can we claim therefore that God is intrinsically imaginative, that imagination is one of his core attributes? And can we go further and claim that this imaginative attribute of God issues forth in a ‘playfulness’ with which he engages with creation? Moltmann has proposed such a description of God…. He asserts that God plays with his own possibilities. Such an imaginative and playful depiction of God
The answer that Stockitt arrives at is the same one that Jürgen Moltmann does—YES! A fundamental attribute of God is that God plays. In fact, one image that we might use to understand the triune God’s interaction with creation is that of a jazz musician. The jazz musician plays within the structure of the style of music, but does so in ways that create ever-new possibilities for expression and relationship. There is innovation in notes combining in new ways and instruments blending with one another. This, Stockitt says, is an apt description of God’s engagement with creation. The way that God plays, and the play that we are invited to join in, is the play that gives “permission to explore possibilities, to experiment with new configurations, to re-draw the boundaries of legitimacy, to allow for freely given and freely accepted forms of inter-relationship.”

The title of this thesis is based on a quote from Jürgen Moltmann’s *Theology of Play*. He writes, “Creation is God’s play, a play of his groundless and inscrutable wisdom. It is the realm in which God displays his glory.” From this perspective, all of creation is God’s playground. We are God’s good creation, the realm in which God displays God’s glory. We are those in whom God delights and who are invited to share in the delight of this creative relationship. As such, we are free—free to live in the joy of God’s playful presence without concern for our own importance. Moltmann writes of being free from “the dreadful questions of existence: For what purpose am I here? Am I...”

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36 Ibid., 174-175.
useful? Can I make myself useful? This takes us “beyond categories of doing, having, and achieving and leads us into the categories of being, of authentic human existence and demonstrative rejoicing in it.”

Freedom is an essential element of play. By definition play occurs “outside the sphere of necessity.” In The Freedom of a Christian, Martin Luther famously writes, “A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.” Being created in the image of God and with benefits conferred upon us by Christ, we are empowered to live joyfully and happily. We are free to serve God “in love that is not constrained.” In other words, because of the freedom that we have in Christ, we are free to play. We are free to join in the playfulness that is God’s presence in creation.

One might ask, though, if believers do not have better things to do than play. Is it not childish? Moltmann asks this question quite pointedly. He also answers it definitively. Play is nothing short of participation in God’s new creation.

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38 Ibid., 19.
39 Ibid., 23.
41 Martin Luther, Timothy F. Lull, and William R. Russell, Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2005), 393.
42 Ibid., 401.
43 “The world is groundless and bottomless, and precisely for that reason a free zone for the liberty of playing creatively with correspondences to the totally-other God. So the stakes in the game are not realizations, successes, and accomplishments but the endless beauties and liberties of the finite concomitants of the infinite joy of the creator. The moral and political seriousness of making history and of historical struggles is then being suspended by a calm rejoicing in existence itself. This does not make seriousness superfluous. Rather it preserves and protects it against the demonic, against despair, against man’s self-deficitation and self-vilification, against the mania of perfection and of despondency in the face of imperfection. . . . I have an idea that laughter is able to mediate between the infinite magnitude of our tasks and the limitations of our strength. . . . Earthbound labor finds relief in rejoicing, dancing, singing, and playing.” Moltmann et al., Theology of Play, 23-24, italics in the original.
Games always presuppose innocence. Only the innocent, namely children, or those liberated from guilt, namely the beloved, are able to play. The guilty man is at odds with himself. He has lost his spontaneity and cannot play well. Because he disagrees with himself, wavering between self-assertion and self-hatred, he is neither a good loser nor a good winner. The guilty man blackmails himself with an image of what he is not. . . . Faith is a new spontaneity and a light heart. In faith we accept ourselves as we are and gain new confidence in ourselves because we have been trusted more than we deserve and ever thought possible. The meaning of Easter lies in liberation from the compelling force of guilt and the compulsion to repeat evil. Easter opens up the boundary-crossing freedom to play the game of the new creation.  

Another objection to play may be made by those who consider play, with all its joyful freedom, somehow dismissing of the fact that God’s kingdom is not yet fully realized. There is so much brokenness yet to mourn. How can we claim play as our role as Christians when there is so much work to be done? With the Psalmist Moltmann questions, “How shall we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?” (Psalm 137:4). With an old black spiritual from slave days, he laments, “How can I play, when I’m in a strange land?”

These are legitimate questions on top of which Moltmann adds one more. “Is it possible that in playing we can anticipate our liberation and with laughing rid ourselves of the bonds which alienate us from real life?” Play is not ignorant of the hard reality of life. Instead, the play of the liberated believer is one that “points critically at the oppressors.”

Only those who are capable of joy can feel pain at their own and other people’s suffering. A man who can laugh can also weep. A man who has hope is able to endure the world and to mourn. Where freedom is near, the chains begin to hurt.

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44 Ibid., 31-32.
45 Ibid., 2.
46 Ibid., 2-3.
47 Ibid., 32.
Where the kingdom of God is at hand, we feel the abyss of God-forsakenness. Where men are able to love because they are loved, they are also able to suffer, accept suffering, and live with the dead. Life as rejoicing in liberation, as solidarity with those in bondage, as play with reconciled existence, and as pain at unreconciled existence demonstrates the Easter event in the world.\textsuperscript{48}

It is the cross of Christ that “makes possible the new game of freedom.”\textsuperscript{49} It is because of the death and resurrection of Jesus that believers are not only free to live in joy, but do so in defiance of evil in order to bring about liberation for the whole world.

He suffered that we may laugh again. He died that we may live as liberated human beings. He descended into the hell of the forsaken to open for us the heaven of freedom. He became a slave of the enslaved, a servant of those in servitude that these may become free lords of all things. Resurrection and Easter freedom have the cross of Christ behind them, and the physical end of the law, of regimentation and death in the world, still before them. So Easter freedom does not permit us to escape from the world or to forget about it. Rather it leads us critically to accept the world situation with its unacceptable moments and patiently to bring about change in the world so that it may become a place of freedom for men. Thus both the laughter of Easter and the sorrow of the cross are alive in liberated men. They are not only laughing with those who laugh and weeping with those who weep, as St. Paul proposes in Romans 12:15, but they are also laughing with the weeping and weeping with the laughing as the Beatitudes of Jesus recommend.\textsuperscript{50}

The freedom that comes through Christ’s death and resurrection opens up the possibility of change in the world. Change comes through the joyful play of those who push back against oppression and guilt. “So the ‘power of the resurrection,’ as St. Paul calls freedom, makes us followers of the crucified and leads us into fellowship with the forsaken whose brother the crucified has become.”\textsuperscript{51}

\textsuperscript{48} Ibid., 31. Italics in the original.
\textsuperscript{49} Ibid., 32.
\textsuperscript{50} Ibid. Italics in the original.
\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., 31.
As with the beginning of creation comes its end. At the end of all things is the delight of play. The play of the believer now foreshadows the play of God’s victory. To play now is to live with anticipation of the future life of rejoicing.

Christian eschatology has never thought of the end of history as a kind of retirement or payday or accomplished purpose but has regarded it totally without purpose as a hymn of praise for unending joy, as an ever-varying round dance of the redeemed in the Trinitarian fullness of God, and as the complete harmony of soul and body. It has not hoped for an unearthly heaven of bodyless souls but for a new body penetrated by the spirit and redeemed from the bondage of law and death. Christian eschatology has never painted the joy of existing in the new, redeemed, and liberated creation in colors of this life damaged by trouble, labor, and guilt, but it has painted it in colors which for all of us—in Ernst Bloch’s beautiful phrase—“shine back into our childhood,” namely the colors of unhindered laughter, devoted vision of the marvelous riches and goodness of God and of new innocence. Christian eschatology has painted the end of history in the colors of aesthetic categories. This does not mean that at the end of his laborious development man reverts back to childhood. Infantilism is no solution for his problems. It does mean, however, that he becomes like a child. . . . The images for the coming new world do not come from the world of struggle and victory, of work and achievement, of law and its enforcement, but from the world of primal childhood trust. . . . The relation of this life to death and to eternal life is understood in the same way. Life is not a struggle but preplay, not preparatory labor but prevision of the future life of rejoicing.52

To return to the image of God as jazz musician, perhaps life should be considered what Jeremy Begbie calls God’s “improvisation in advance.”53

In the 1960s, the musician Derek Bailey experimented with improvising, not on the current chord being played but on the chord that was about to be introduced. The resultant discordance was both disturbing yet compelling. In a similar way, Beethoven was known to introduce a new beginning before a true ending had been resolved. Such improvisation techniques introduce an element of instability yet simultaneously cannot fail to awaken interest. Begbie claims that this is precisely what the Holy Spirit does on the day of Pentecost. “The Spirit is improvising on music the crowd have yet to hear from Peter, and moreover, in a manner which exploits the particularities of the occasion. . . . The crowd asks, ‘what does this mean?’ Peter directs them to the harmony and theme which has

52 Ibid., 34-35. Italics in the original.

produced the improvisation, the story of Jesus. The remarkable togetherness they have heard through their ears is what the Spirit has improvised out of what has happened in Jesus Christ and in such a way that their particularity flourishes.” The giving of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost both disturbed and attracted at the same time. They were the harbinger of a radically new theme played over the existing familiar music, namely the celebration of the day of Pentecost.\(^{54}\)

This “prevision of the future life of rejoicing”—this language of *improvisation* or *play*—does not negate the seriousness of God’s activity.\(^{55}\) Musical language may just be what is necessary to describe the wonder of the triune God and God’s relationship with creation.

God is beauty, one may say, and the interplay of relationships within the Trinity transcends the notion of “goodness” in that these relationships have no other point of reference other than for their own sake. The exchanges are therefore simply “beautiful,” rather than functional, and as such they “sing.” There is a sublime musical quality about them that eternally invites others to freely enter into the divine enjoyment. It is thus akin, writes Jenson, to a divine “fugue,” where more voices and further instrumentation are constantly added. . . . The Three can coexist together in perfect mutual harmony, each remaining distinct and each supporting and “liberating” the others. It is this mutual occupation of the same space that language struggles to articulate adequately. The analogy of music, therefore, offers an alternative mode of hearing and perceiving and the simple experience of hearing a three-note chord illustrates this perfectly. The three notes inhabit the same aural space, producing one sound yet with three distinct and separate tones. . . . This is why “play” or “playfulness” are terms which may legitimately permit us to re-imagine God. . . . It lies in the sublime beauty and mystery of the Trinitarian God whose ways are not our ways and who constantly engages in the surprising, the dramatic, the unexpected and the playful, in order to bring about the final unity and reconciliation of all things in and through the eternal incarnate Logos.\(^{56}\)

It is this playful union of the triune God that previsions the future life of rejoicing that is explored further in the following lens.

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\(^{54}\) Ibid., 132-133.

\(^{55}\) Moltmann et al., *Theology of Play*, 35.

God’s invitation to play both previsions the future life to come and is also the means through which God interacts with us even now. One of God’s wildly extravagant gifts is that we are created in the image of God—created in and for the joy of relationship. The painting above by Margie Thompson plays with this gloriously dynamic relationship. The painting above by Margie Thompson plays with this gloriously dynamic

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58 “The future of the church in God’s new creation is the mutual personal indwelling of the triune God and of his glorified people. . . . Such participation in the communion of the triune God, however, is not only an object of hope for the church, but also its present experience.” Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1998), 128-129.
understanding of God, creation, and personhood. It serves as a visual expression of Volf’s description of “the mutual personal indwelling of the triune God and of his glorified people.” This is an image that stretches our imagination in much needed ways.

Thompsons’s painting is a visual expression of God’s perichoretic nature. Dwight Zscheile describes perichoresis as:

>a Greek word meaning “whirl,” “rotation,” or “circulation around the neighborhood.” In God’s life, difference and otherness are the basis of unity, not the cause of division. The divine community is a community of mutual sharing, exchange, indwelling, and interdependence not closed in on itself, but generative, creative, and outward-reaching. God creates the world for community. The character of that community reflects the interdependence and mutual belonging of God. Humanity is created in the image of God for flourishing in a web of interconnectedness with God and the earth (Genesis 1:27-28).

To be invited into the perichoretic relationship of the triune God means to be invited into manifold relationships. Boff describes this well. “If God means three divine Persons in eternal communion among themselves, then we must conclude that we also, sons and daughters, are called to communion. We are image and likeness of the Trinity. Hence, we are community beings.”

The invitation to relationship that the triune God imagines for us as a church and as a whole creation shapes our understanding of what it means to participate in the play

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59 Ibid., 128.

60 “What is the God of faith like? Many Christians imagine God as an infinite Being, almighty, creator of heaven and earth, living alone in heaven with all creation at his feet. He is a kind but solitary God. Others think of him as a merciful father or a harsh judge. But they always think that God is a supreme Being, unique, without possible competitors, in the splendor of his own glory. . . . God is fundamentally alone, because there is only one God. . . . We need to move from the solitude of the One to the communion of the divine Three—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In the beginning is communion among several, wealth of diversity, union as expression of the surrender of one divine Person to the other.” Leonardo Boff, *Holy Trinity, Perfect Community* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000), 1.


that God is up to. We are drawn into the risk and reward of relational life. In relationship with the triune God we are given the grounding point from which freedom in this world can be experienced.

In God’s promise and call we find a new identity—an identity that frees us to be able to risk our very lives, because we have a secure future. God’s promises of grace, unconditional love, the ultimate restoration of community, and eternal life free us to embrace a posture of trial, failure, and experimentation precisely because it isn’t all up to us. We aren’t in charge—in charge of our churches, in charge of Western culture, in charge of our neighborhoods. We don’t know quite where we are going. We have a great deal to learn. God never promises that the path will be straight, direct, or easy. It indeed leads through the valley of the shadow of death, but as the psalmist says, we don’t travel it alone.

In fact, we can even say that the identity we have been gifted through participation in the relationship of the triune God enables us to *play*. Richard Rohr speaks of the trinity as “the flow who flows through everything, without exception, and who has done so from the beginning.” This term “flow” is very often the same word that appears in discussion of play. To participate in deep play, as to participate in the life of the triune God, is to be caught up in *flow*.

The implications of this spiritual paradigm shift, this Trinitarian Revolution, are staggering: every vital impulse, every force toward the future, every creative

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63 “Relationship has always been the wild card, the court jester who appears in the midst of our human agenda and our hallucinations of independent self-sufficiency, revealing by any means that the emperor is naked. When you even skim the edges of relationship, you submit to mystery and lose control. Marriage would be so much easier if there wasn’t another person involved, but then it would be meaningless, too. Relationships are entwined, entrenched, elusive, messy, enabling, enrapturing, maddening, exhilarating, frustrating, exposing, and too beautiful for words. There are moments when we think we might finally have a whisper of control over our world, and then—whooosh!—in comes someone who knocks it completely sideways. Yet it is relationship that provides the backdrop and framing for the art of our lives, apart from which our colors would simply disperse into the darkness formless and void, awaiting the hovering of the Spirit to collect them and—with Her shades and hues—breathe into us to set them free.” William Paul Young, “Foreward,” in *The Divine Dance: The Trinity and Your Transformation* (New Kensington, PA: Whitaker House), 20-21.


momentum, every loving surge, every dash toward beauty, every running toward truth, every ecstasy before simple goodness, every leap of élan vital, as the French would say, every bit of ambition for humanity and earth, for wholeness and holiness, is the eternally-flowing life of the Trinitarian God. \textsuperscript{66}

In this life of relationship, God knows us and loves us “subject to subject, just as the persons of the Trinity know and love one another.” \textsuperscript{67} The shape of this relationship between the subjects of the triune God and humanity takes on the characteristic back-and-forth movement of play. \textsuperscript{68} We might very well call the relationship of the triune God into which we are invited perichoretic play! We are invited into back-and-forth, to-and-fro, reciprocal relationship in which one yields to the other only to be invited to take the lead again. In the dance/play of relationship, we are renewed in the constant motion of being drawn into God’s self and toward the Other.

\textbf{Summary}

This chapter explored biblical and theological lenses to address the research question: \textit{How might an Action Research intervention involving engaging Scripture playfully expand missional imagination?} Presented first was a discussion of the Bible as Metanarrative. As Christians, the story that gives shape to our imagination is God’s. Scripture provides the narrative that forms our sense of identity and our imagination for

\textsuperscript{66} Ibid., 37-38.

\textsuperscript{67} Ibid., 78-79. Emphasis in original.

\textsuperscript{68} This movement of play between God and humanity recalls the movement of play discussed in the theoretical lens discussed in chapter two of this thesis. “If we examine how the word ‘play’ is used and concentrate on its so-called metaphorical senses, we find talk of the play of light, the play of the waves, the play of gears or parts of machinery, the interplay of limbs, the play of forces, the play of gnats, even a play on words. In each case what is intended is to-and-fro movement that is not tied to any goal that would bring it to an end. Correlatively, the word ‘Spiel’ originally meant ‘dance,’ and is still found in many word forms (e.g., in Spielmann, jongleur). The movement of playing has no goal that brings it to an end; rather it renews itself in constant repetition. The movement backward and forward is obviously so central to the definition of play that it makes no difference who or what performs this movement. . . . The play is the occurrence of the movement as such.” Gadamer, \textit{Truth and Method}, 108-109.
God's activity in the future. This was followed by a discussion of The Creative Word Made Flesh. God communicates God’s self through Scripture, through the incarnation in Jesus of Nazareth, and through the Holy Spirit’s witness in our lives. Further exploration included a tour of some of the Playful Passages that abound throughout Scripture as witness to our triune God’s playful nature.

The second half of this chapter turned to theological lenses. Discussed here were Play as a Theological Lens and Participation in the Perichoretic Relationship of the Triune God. The argument was made that God in God’s nature is playful and that we are invited into a relationship of perichoretic play with our triune God.

Chapter four describes in depth the research methodology utilized in this research project. Also presented in this coming chapter are the details of the intervention itself: the Playful Engagement of Scripture in Worship, Playful Bible Study, Playful Devotions in Board Meetings, Appreciative Inquiry Interviews, and the Appreciative Inquiry Congregational Event.
CHAPTER 4
METHODOLOGY

The previous two chapters explored theoretical, biblical, and theological lenses with which to address the key research question being considered in this study.

How might an Action Research intervention involving engaging Scripture playfully expand missional imagination?

This chapter looks more closely at the methodology employed by this study as well as the biblical and theological rationale behind the selection of this methodology. This chapter also explores the various components of the playful engagement of Scripture intervention: Playful Engagement of Scripture in Worship, Playful Bible Study, Playful Devotions in Board Meetings, Appreciative Inquiry Interviews, and Appreciative Inquiry Congregational Event. Finally, this chapter concludes with the discussion of a major intervening variable that arose as this congregation’s missional imagination expanded during this AR intervention.

Action Research

The primary social science research approach utilized in this study was Action Research. In Doing Action Research in your Own Organization, David Coghlan and Teresa Brannick reflect:

Action research expects us to stop just going through the motions, doing what we’ve always done because we’ve done it, doing it the same way because we’ve always done it that way. Action researchers take a close look at what they are doing and act to make things better than they already are. Taking a closer look is action in and of itself and that research, that knowledge creation—any action
taken based on that research—has the potential to transform the work that we do, the conditions that we sweat under and, most importantly, the people who we are.¹

The aim of Action Research, not only to create knowledge but also to effect change within the organization, makes it particularly appropriate for this project. The experimental posture of Action Research might even be described as a *playful* approach to effecting change within an organization. The expansion of missional imagination is change at the heart of who we are as the people of God. Perhaps it will be that, as Coghlan and Brannick state, the working conditions of our congregations change. Perhaps the conditions will change so much that it can no longer be called *work*, but rather must be called *play*.

**Mixed Methods**

This Action Research project utilized mixed methods. Both quantitative and qualitative data were gathered. As Creswell describes, “this ‘mixing’ or blending of data, it can be argued, provides a stronger understanding of the problem or question than either by itself.”²

The *quantitative* portion of this project was transformative with census surveys conducted in November and May as baseline and end line surveys. These questionnaires were made available to the entire adult population of the congregation. Distribution of these questionnaires was in two forms: electronic and paper copy. The electronic version of this questionnaire was presented through SurveyMonkey.³ A link to the questionnaire

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was sent to all members and frequent attenders of the congregation via email. An identical copy of the questionnaire was also made available in paper format at two consecutive weeks of worship services. These instruments were field tested with nine members of another congregation prior to distribution for the purpose of improving their validity and reliability.

This quantitative portion of the project was aimed at measuring the change that resulted from the intervention of playfully engaging Scripture and determining statistical significance. Specifically, these surveys were designed to measure a change in missional imagination—the capacity to name God’s action in the past, the capacity to recognize/wonder about God’s activity now, and the capacity to dream with others about God’s preferred and promised future.

In order to measure this change, most questions that appeared on the baseline questionnaire were repeated on the end line questionnaire. Additional questions were added to ask specifically about the respondent’s experience in worship during the intervention period. Using SPSS software to aid in data analysis, a paired t-test was conducted for those respondents who completed both the baseline and end line surveys. An independent t-test was conducted on all responses. This analysis is described in detail in chapter five of this thesis.

During the intervention phase of this project, qualitative research was also taking place. This was a concurrently nested Appreciative Inquiry into the stories of participants in this congregation’s life. Watkins, Mohr, and Kelly explain the process of Appreciative Inquiry in this way:

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4 Questions designed for pairing anonymous baseline and end line survey responses include birthdate, gender, and play style. IBM SPSS Statistics.
We create the world by the language we use to describe it and we experience the world in line with the images we hold about it. The Appreciative Inquiry process provides human systems with a way of inquiring into the past and present, seeking out those things that are life-giving and affirming as a basis for creating images of a generative and creative future. . . . Appreciative Inquiry suggests that, by focusing on an image of health and wholeness, the organization’s energy moves to make the image real. Indeed, the seeds of the solution are in the images, and therefore it is not unusual to see a system shift directions “at the speed of imagination!”

This Appreciative Inquiry focused on the role of Scripture as a formative story both within the life of the congregation and in the life of the particular individual. Individuals were invited to indicate on the initial quantitative questionnaire, a copy of which is included in appendix B of this thesis, their willingness to participate in this qualitative inquiry. Ten individuals (chosen from among those indicating on the initial questionnaire their willingness to be interviewed) were selected for Appreciative Inquiry interviews. The method of selection took into consideration the desire to obtain a diversity of age, gender, and level of participation in the congregation.

Each of these interviews was recorded and then transcribed. The ten Appreciative Inquiry interviews were then analyzed using the method of coding outlined by Kathy Charmaz. Charmaz writes:

> Our codes arise from the languages, meanings, and perspectives through which we learn about the empirical world, particularly those of our research participants as well as our own. . . . Thus we define what we see as significant in the data and describe what we think is happening. Coding consists of this initial, shorthand defining and labeling; it results from a grounded theorist’s actions and understandings. Nonetheless, the coding process is interactive. We interact with our participants and subsequently interact with them again many times over through studying their statements and observed actions and re-envisioning the scenes in which we know them. As we define our codes and perhaps later refine

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5 Watkins, Mohr, and Kelly, Appreciative Inquiry: Change at the Speed of Imagination, 16.

6 Charmaz, Constructing Grounded Theory.
them, we try to understand the participants’ views and actions from their perspectives.\(^7\)

This process of coding and refining included initial word-by-word, line-by-line, and incident-by-incident coding to obtain in vivo codes. These in vivo codes were then clustered by shared concepts into focused codes to condense and sharpen the data gathered as well as reveal comparisons between initial codes.\(^8\) These focused codes were then integrated into axial codes to show relationships between corresponding ideas. Theoretical codes were then used to “lend form” to the axial codes and “add precision and clarity” to the data.\(^9\) NVivo software was utilized in this process.\(^10\)

According to Watkins, Mohr, and Kelly, the next step of Appreciative Inquiry involves working “with the data in a way that continues the inherent value of conversations focused on what gives life while also developing the ground from which we can build shared images, dreams, and visions of a preferred future.”\(^11\) This involves community involvement in the identification of the themes that are “present in the stories when people are reporting the times of greatest excitement, creativity and reward.”\(^12\)

After the completion of the interviews, the whole congregation was invited to participate in sharing stories with one another and to collectively discern the themes that were

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\(^7\) Ibid., 114-115.

\(^8\) Ibid., 138-140.

\(^9\) Ibid., 150-151.

\(^10\) NVivo for Mac Edition 11.4.0. QSR International.


\(^12\) Ibid., 199.
present in the research.\textsuperscript{13} This was a widely inclusive process. As Watkins, Mohr, and Kelly assert:

Bearing in mind that AI is rooted in the theory that we create our future realities through our current relationships and conversation, the task of pulling themes from interview data is a marvelous opportunity to engage more people in conversations that focus on those things that give life to the organization.\textsuperscript{14}

Although the scope of this research project did not allow for a full Appreciative Inquiry process in its entirety, we went as far with these data as to dream together. We put together what Watkins, Mohr, and Kelly call a “provocative proposition” based on the themes that emerged from the Appreciative Inquiry interviews.\textsuperscript{15} This provocative proposition is one opportunity through which a collective missional imagination is expressed.

Biblical and Theological Grounding for this Research Methodology

The Lutheran tradition, of which my congregation is a part, has a strong heritage of approaching change through the kinds of methods employed in Action Research. Martin Luther’s concern over the abuses he saw in the Roman Catholic Church led him to seek change within the organization. The witness of Scripture and the belief that therein was the good news of salvation by grace through faith was enough to motivate Luther to push back against the constraints of the status quo. The path to change was not clearly drawn out ahead of time, either for Luther or for the church. New ideas were the subject of experimentation and testing. Scripture’s place within the church and within the lives of

\begin{itemize}
  \item Confidentiality will be kept as described in the “Ethical Considerations” portion of my thesis. No names will be associated with the discussion of data.
  \item Watkins, Mohr, and Kelly, \textit{Appreciative Inquiry: Change at the Speed of Imagination}, 201.
  \item Ibid., 218.
\end{itemize}
ordinary people changed. The learning that resulted from Luther’s reflection and experimentation changed the world.

One such world-changing theological concept is the priesthood of all believers. No intermediary is needed for us to participate in the divine community. Our triune God has extended the invitation to all. As such, the stories of each person matter. Each person is gifted and called by God, equipped, and sent.  

Each person’s experience is a gift to the entire community. It makes sense then to invite the stories of each person to be shared in such a way that we can give thanks for what God is doing in this group of people and to discern how God is gifting and calling us forward.

Mark Lau Branson writes of his experience with Appreciative Inquiry that a focus on God’s grace was necessary:

So, the reality of an organization is defined by whatever participants think about, talk about, work on, dream about, or plan. In our committee discussions, it was not uncommon for church meetings and informal conversations to focus on the church’s reasons for discouragement or some of the topics of disagreement. Therefore, the reality in which the church lived its life was often one of discouragement and conflict. AI taught us that, while we did not need to dismiss the serious challenges we faced or the lessons of previous wrong turns, we needed to center our attention in God’s grace and positive stories. Focus has to do with imagination, conversation, efforts, and vision. Simply by refocusing attention, giving energy and priority to positive narratives, we could become a different organization. . . . The research itself—interviewing people, using surveys, seeking opinions, and weighing votes—changes a church by influencing the thinking and conversations and images of participants. Memories, perceptions, and hopes are shaped in the midst of research questions. Change, of one kind or another, begins with the very first questions.  

This investigation was born out of my wonderings surrounding congregations who do not seem to have missional imagination built into their DNA. I wrote about

16 Consider the diversity of gifts in the body of Christ expressed in 1 Corinthians 12.

congregations who have a history of conflict, those who are struggling just to survive, and those who are complacent. I asked whether or not missional imagination might grow in these churches. As a result of that question, I formulated the one that focuses this research project: How might an Action Research intervention involving engaging Scripture playfully expand missional imagination? By designing my Action Research intervention to include an Appreciative Inquiry into the lives and stories of this congregation, I sought to change the narratives that are focused upon within congregational life. I sought to call forward the stories that shape our identities in light of God’s goodness and grace. Focusing on these stories helps develop the capacity to imagine God’s playful presence for us and for others. As Mark Lau Branson continues:

The work of pastors and other leaders is this: bringing a people together around texts (their own stories, biblical stories, narratives from church history, the stories of the church’s context) so the congregation can become more available to the narrative of God’s reign. Every church needs continual conversion; a helpful way to understand conversion is to see it as adopting a different narrative. We are given life narratives by society (such as hard work or careerism, generosity or materialism), by our families (maybe loyalty and love, maybe dysfunction and disintegration), and by our cultures (including values we embody concerning language, place, neighbors, and wisdom). We are also formed by the stories of our local setting (the narratives of fortune or misfortune, of conflicts or coalitions). We inhabit these stories—literally forming habits, practices, and ways of perceiving the world.

Alongside these narratives (societal, cultural, local, personal), Christians adopt (and are adopted into) the Jesus story as transmitted in numerous traditions, embodied in congregations, and quickened by the Holy Spirit. But—as was already true during the writing of the New Testament—the congregational narratives get separated from the gospel. Those who lead churches must then help a people rediscover the stories that most likely indicate God’s presence and actions. When a church assumes stories without retelling and reentering them,

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18 This is a list reminiscent of the seven churches addressed in the opening chapters of the book of Revelation. There, the creative images from John’s vision become the means through which these congregations, and ones who share such common characteristics today, are invited into the presence of God. “Is This the Time? Interpreting the Mystery of Revelation,” in Bible Series (St. Paul, MN: Luther Productions, 2003).
there is little energy to power congregational life, and there are no resources for raising a new generation or loving neighbors. When cultural and societal stories overshadow stories of God’s initiatives and a church’s narratives of faithfulness and fruitfulness, identity is at risk and priorities are skewed. When a church becomes encumbered with practices and programs that have been separated from their meanings, then narratives must be reclaimed and futures must be reimagined so that congregational life can be reshaped.\(^{19}\)

This Action Research intervention sought to play with the story of Scripture and the narratives within the life of this congregation. The hope was that we might just be surprised by the ways in which our imagination would be reshaped by the mission of our triune God.

Research Design and Intervention

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\(^{19}\) Branson, Memories, Hopes, and Conversations: Appreciative Inquiry, Missional Engagement, and Congregational Change, 63-64.
Figure 4 illustrates the design of this mixed methods AR—including the quantitative census surveys conducted as a baseline and end line. Also included on the timeline is a sketch of the other components of the AR intervention: Playful Engagement of Scripture in Worship, Playful Bible Study, Playful Devotions in Board Meetings, Appreciative Inquiry Interviews, and the Appreciative Inquiry Congregational Event.

Playful Engagement of Scripture in Worship

The intervention itself consisted of playfully engaging Scripture in a variety of formats within congregational life. Because worship is the central gathering time for the congregation, this was the primary focus for the playful engagement of Scripture. Appendix D presents details about the Scripture passages that were engaged in each worship service and the method of playful engagement utilized.\textsuperscript{20} The aim of this intervention was to incorporate at least one playful element into worship every week.\textsuperscript{21} Often this was a part of the sermon for the day.

As was noted in chapter two, what is playful to one person may not be playful to another. An effort was made, therefore, to design engagements with Scripture that appealed to a variety of different play personalities throughout the course of the intervention.

\textsuperscript{20} This congregation had previously decided to use the Narrative Lectionary as a means of teaching the overarching biblical narrative both in educational settings as well as during worship. This study continued to use the assigned Narrative Lectionary texts for the Sundays within the scope of this intervention.

\textsuperscript{21} A careful review of the calendar in appendix D will reveal the absence of information for several Sundays during the intervention time period. These were Sundays in which the intervention was not conducted due to vacation or continuing education time.
**Playful Bible Study**

While the bulk of the playful engagement of Scripture undertaken in this study was conducted during worship, there was also the opportunity to experiment with the playful engagement of Scripture in a separate Bible study setting. This five-session Bible study on the book of Revelation was conducted on Monday evenings, from 6:30-7:30pm, between November 7th and December 12th, 2016.

The choice to playfully engage the book of Revelation came from a variety of factors. First of all, this was a topic of interest to the congregation. After a sermon on Revelation several months earlier, a number of individuals had expressed an interest in learning more. There was energy in the congregation for this study. A second factor in choosing the book of Revelation is that it is a personal favorite of mine. The rich imagery and ever-unfolding opportunities to dig deeper intrigue the part of my play personality that is a biblical explorer. The chance to delve into a book that is often misunderstood—or worse, feared—and find there instead the gems of God’s gift of life and hope is one of the greatest adventures I know! Finally, the decision to engage the book of Revelation harkens back to Moltmann’s description of the heart of Christian eschatology. At the end of all things is the delight of play.

Christian eschatology has never thought of the end of history as a kind of retirement or payday or accomplished purpose but has regarded it totally without purpose as a hymn of praise for unending joy, as an ever-varying round dance of the redeemed in the trinitarian fullness of God, and as the complete harmony of soul and body. It has not hoped for an unearthly heaven of bodyless souls but for a new body penetrated by the spirit and redeemed from the bondage of law and death. Christian eschatology has never painted the joy of existing in the new, redeemed, and liberated creation in colors of this life damaged by trouble, labor, and guilt, but it has painted it in colors which for all of us—in Ernst Bloch’s beautiful phrase—“shine back into our childhood,” namely the colors of unhindered laughter, devoted vision of the marvelous riches and goodness of God and of new innocence. Christian eschatology has painted the end of history in the
colors of aesthetic categories. This does not mean that at the end of his laborious development man reverts back to childhood. Infantalism is no solution for his problems. It does mean, however, that he becomes like a child. . . . The images for the coming new world do not come from the world of struggle and victory, of work and achievement, of law and its enforcement, but from the world of primal childhood trust. . . . The relation of this life to death and to eternal life is understood in the same way. Life is not a struggle but preplay, not preparatory labor but prevision of the future life of rejoicing.  

What better fodder could there be for a playful Bible study to unwrap the gift of such a life of joy than a book that challenges and amazes, causes us to dream and to wonder, and ultimately leads us into the presence of God?

Although the limitations of scheduling put this study during the busy holiday season, there were twenty-eight people who attended all or part of the five-week study.  

These individuals represented a variety of backgrounds, including everyone from long-time members of the congregation to potential new members. The oldest participants were over 80 years of age. The nursery was also busy, however, and oftentimes children poked their head in to see what fun their parents and grandparents were having without them!

Though the playful aspect of this Bible study was unique, the theological content of the study was not. Heavily drawn upon were resources by Dr. Craig Koester and Marva Dawn. We used Dr. Koester’s video series *Is This the Time? Interpreting the*

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22 Moltmann et al., *Theology of Play*, 34-35., italics in the original.

23 At the time of this Bible study, the average weekly worship attendance of this congregation was 103, making the attendance at this Bible study roughly 27% of the entire worshipping congregation. One intervening variable that occurred during this study was that there was inclement weather on several of the evenings. This, combined with illness and family emergencies, affected a number of the potential participants. Several weeks after the Bible study ended, a group of individuals came to me asking if this Revelation Bible study could be offered again. There were others who wanted to participate, and who were hearing about it from their friends, but were not able to come on those Monday evenings due to these circumstances.
Mystery of Revelation.\textsuperscript{24} Quotes from his book Revelation and the End of All Things as well as Marva Dawn’s Joy in Our Weakness: The Gift of Hope from the Book of Revelation were helpful additions to the Bible study.\textsuperscript{25}

Before the first session began (as well as at the start of each subsequent session for those who were joining in for the first time) letters of informed consent were distributed and signed.\textsuperscript{26} Participants were also given a booklet of handouts to use throughout the study.\textsuperscript{27}

Appendix F outlines each of the five Bible study sessions. Each session took place in the fellowship hall of the church with tables arranged in a large U-shape with participants’ chairs set up on the outer edge of the U. The tables were set with the playful supplies for the night spread out—ready and waiting for participants to arrive—so as to invite everyone to come and play. As can be seen in appendix F, all the senses were engaged in this playful Bible study!

Playful Devotions in Board Meetings

The original design of my research called for using the devotions at board meetings as another opportunity for the playful engagement of Scripture. When this research project was first begun, this congregation had seven boards—six of which were meeting monthly in addition to a full council meeting. By January, however, right around

\textsuperscript{24}“Is This the Time? Interpreting the Mystery of Revelation.”


\textsuperscript{26}See appendix E.

\textsuperscript{27}See appendix H.
the time that the playful devotions were about to begin, it became evident that the way that these boards were functioning had started to change.

Independently of one another, each of the boards began to rethink their meeting frequency, times, locations, and/or agendas. One of the boards began meeting at an alternative location, often at a local restaurant or recreational area. Several of the boards decided that having a two-hour long meeting every month was no longer the best use of their time. Those boards began using a variety of formats of online communication to take care of needed decisions and spent their face-to-face time working on outreach and service projects instead. These boards had informal meetings while cooking Lenten suppers or sorting food for the food pantry. One of the boards decided that every other month meetings would be sufficient in order to free up time and energy for more engaged ministry.

Could it be that, as our congregation grew in playfulness, our imagination for how the ministry of the church could be carried out also grew? Perhaps it is coincidental that each of the boards came to the conclusion that ministry could be done in less burdensome ways. Or, perhaps, this is one sign that our missional imaginations were being stretched by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. In either case, the result was that a slight adjustment was needed to the research design of this project. Rather than having multiple opportunities to engage in playful devotions at formal board meetings, I focused on leading playful devotions at each of the board meetings once during the period of January through April. Appendix I includes the details of each of these devotions.

28 Due to the times and locations of Board of Church Properties and Board of Evangelism meetings, I was unable to meet with these groups to conduct a playful devotion with them as part of this study within the time allowed for this portion of the research intervention.
Appreciative Inquiry Interviews

Ten Appreciative Inquiry interviews were conducted between March 30th and April 19th. These interviews encouraged participants to share stories of positive experiences and formative narratives within the congregation’s life as well as with their own personal engagement with Scripture. A full list of the questions asked during these interviews can be found in appendix K.

Table 1 gives an overview of the participants interviewed. From those who volunteered to be interviewed on the baseline questionnaire, these ten were selected to represent a diversity of backgrounds, particularly with regard to age, gender, length of membership at this congregation, and participation levels.29

Participants were given the choice of being interviewed at home, at the church, or at their place of work. All participants consented to being audio and/or videotaped. While many participants expressed a degree of initial concern that they may not be able to contribute much to the research, they were assured that their stories and experiences were what was being sought and that sharing these would be helpful. In general, the mood of these interviews was light, positive, and enjoyable. This did not mean, however, that serious topics were not discussed. In fact, the opposite was the case. Even though I asked only about positive experiences, this did not prevent participants from discussing times of difficulty along with times of joy. These findings are discussed further in chapter five of this thesis.

29 Most of those who volunteered to be interviewed were of similar Northern European ethnic background. An effort was made, however, to choose several participants whose families are bi-cultural (those whose spouses, parents, children, and/or grandchildren identify themselves as Hispanic or another ethnic background).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Length of Membership</th>
<th>Participation</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age Range</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>10+ Years</td>
<td>Attends Every Week, Non-Leadership Role</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>70-79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>10+ Years</td>
<td>Attends Every Week, Non-Leadership Role</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>60-69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>4-9 Years</td>
<td>Attends Every Week, Leadership Role</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>70-79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Non-Member or Less Than 4 Years</td>
<td>Attends Every Week, Leadership Role</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>50-59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Life-Long</td>
<td>Attends Every Week, Non-Leadership Role</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>80-89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Life-Long</td>
<td>Attends 2-3 Times/Mo., Non-Leadership Role</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>50-59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>4-9 Years</td>
<td>Attends Every Week, Non-Leadership Role</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>60-69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>10+ Years</td>
<td>Attends Every Week, Leadership Role</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Under 45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Non-Member or Less Than 4 Years</td>
<td>Attends Every Week, Leadership Role</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Under 45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Life-Long</td>
<td>Attends 2-3 Times/Mo., Non-Leadership Role</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>80-89</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Appreciative Inquiry Congregational Event**

The Appreciative Inquiry congregational event was held during the worship service on Holy Humor Sunday, April 23rd. There were a number of factors that went into the decision to include this as a part of worship. One of the most significant factors in the decision was the high importance of including as much of the congregation as possible. The busy spring schedules of families in the congregation meant that in order to have the broadest possible contribution to this conversation, it was necessary to make use of the worship gathering.

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30 128 people attended this Appreciative Inquiry congregational event.
Another reason for incorporating the Appreciative Inquiry congregational event into this particular worship service was the richness of the assigned Scripture reading of the day for consideration by this congregation. There are some rich parallels between the Emmaus Road story (Luke 24:13-35) and this congregation’s history. There was a time when this congregation was very much like the disciples on the road to Emmaus. Rather than recognizing Jesus’ living presence among them, they “stood still, looking sad” (Luke 24:17). This story became an opportunity to connect this congregation’s current missional posture with those in the story who were transformed from being stuck in grief to running to share the good news of Jesus’ life and presence.

After the reading of this Gospel story, each worshipper was invited to gather with two or three others to share their own stories. The first question they were asked to consider together was: “When have you been surprised or delighted by an interaction with a stranger?” The purpose for asking this question was to help each individual identify a “bright spot” in which God has blessed an interaction with someone that they did not know well or at all. In this congregation’s case, there is deep fear and suspicion of the community, even as there is also love for it. This has led to the congregation

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31 One of the details of this congregation’s history that was expressed during the Appreciative Inquiry interviews was deep grief over the congregation needing to relocate after acts of racially motivated violence against members of the congregation. Though this move took place decades ago, the feelings of uneasiness with regard to a mix of love for and suspicion of the community remain. My pastoral sense is that this congregation responded quite naturally to such traumatic experiences by gathering in together. Like disciples huddled in the upper room or the two on the road standing still and looking sad, this congregation has responded like those in grief. The question being asked now, however, is whether or not it is time for the good news of God’s presence to propel us back into the community and the experience of resurrection.

32 This question was one of the questions asked of individuals in the ten Appreciative Inquiry interviews.

becoming somewhat insular. To identify bright spots of interactions with strangers is an opportunity to identify that there are times when God has blessed interactions with those that we do not know well. We have been surprised and delighted in these interactions. Perhaps, just as in the Gospel story, we too will find ourselves encountered by our risen Lord through an interaction with a stranger.

The second question that worshipers were asked to discuss was: “Imagine you are taking a hot air balloon ride three years into the future. From above the treetops you can look down on our church building and its surroundings. What do you see? What do you hear, smell, taste, feel?” In the individual Appreciative Inquiry interviews it was this question that garnered the most energy and imaginative responses. These interview responses were shared with the congregation so that they could be considered by the whole group along with the new ideas lifted up.

This question was also chosen based on the fact that it helped bridge the divide between concrete, immediate observations and imagining what the future might look like. It was a means for us to begin talking about imagining God’s desire for our future in a way that we could wrap our minds around. This question became even more important than I originally anticipated because earlier that week the congregation’s council took the first steps to begin contemplating the lease or sale of the land surrounding the church.

This storytelling event took place right at the start of a larger conversation about how the

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34 As this question was being introduced to the congregation, the observation was made that there is a lot of movement in the story of the Emmaus Road. There is the slow trudge that took all day, the encounter with the risen Jesus, the quick return back to Jerusalem—all of this taking place three days after Jesus’ death. The congregation was asked to consider three years into the future as a way of imagining the movement that will have taken place within and around this congregation in that amount of time. Participants were invited to jot their ideas down on an insert in their bulletin. This insert is included in appendix L.
land that we have should be used and what role it might play in connecting with the larger community.

The final question asked of the congregation was aimed at beginning to formulate a provocative proposal for the future: “How would you describe this congregation seven years from now? (Describe it as if you are seeing it around you today.)” Mark Lau Branson defines a provocative proposal as “an imaginative statement about the future, crafted as if it were already experiential and generative.” Participants were invited both to share their stories aloud as well as to write notes on the bulletin insert. The Appreciative Inquiry congregational event closed with a prayer and worship then continued with the hymn of the day.

**Intervening Variable: The Missional River**

Over the course of the AR intervention, this congregation underwent some dramatic changes. One of the most significant changes to occur during this six month time period is the fact that the congregation voted to join in the synod’s Missional River process. This invitation to join in an intentional process of missional discernment first became available to the congregation nearly a year earlier. The year spent considering

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35 The congregation was asked to observe in the story of the Emmaus Road how the disciples, after recognizing Jesus, got up and that very hour ran seven miles back to Jerusalem. We imagined together that along the way they might have been thinking ahead to how they would possibly explain what they had witnessed. The congregation was asked to think ahead not seven miles, but seven years. If this very hour we were to think ahead seven years, what would we say about what God is doing?

36 Branson, *Memories, Hopes, and Conversations: Appreciative Inquiry, Missional Engagement, and Congregational Change*, 95, 99. Branson gives examples of provocative proposals that took repeated iterations and years of conversations to draft. Obviously, one Sunday morning congregational event does not lead to this type of polished statement. Instead, this was more in line with Branson’s thought that “simpler, short, proactive statements” can get people moving more quickly to experiments. The point is to “spark imagination and innovation.”

37 See appendix L for the bulletin insert. Details of what was shared during this congregational event are discussed in chapter five.
this invitation was one filled with tension and controversy. During this time period, the congregation had to confront underlying issues of racism and fear of the community. At odds within the congregation were the instincts to close in upon ourselves (acting to preserve and protect the community of those who are established members) and the understanding that God’s community is out there—that God is already present in and loves the community outside the church doors.

This tension came to a head in the early weeks of the AR intervention. By December, the congregation had voted to jump in the Missional River. By January, the congregation had begun forming a team tasked with investigating missional experiments that the congregation might consider to foster relationships with the wider community. By February, these team members were beginning to work with other congregations and a coach from the LEAD organization to develop the skills necessary to nurture this congregation’s relationships with God, each other, and the wider community.\textsuperscript{38} Through the months of March and April this team gathered every other week at local restaurants, including intentionally spending time at restaurants representing diverse ethnic backgrounds. During this time period, the group also began regularly reporting back to the congregational council about their activities. Communication between the Missional River team and the congregation’s council was designed to promote the development of experiments. These experiments would be opportunities for the congregation to play with the connections God might be opening between this congregation and the surrounding community.

\textsuperscript{38} Details about this organization can be found at www.waytolead.org.
Growth in missional imagination is evident in the fact that the congregation was able to name significant issues that have kept us from being able to establish meaningful relationships with our community. Committing to an intentional process of missional engagement is evidence of God’s Spirit at work. Throughout the intervention process, the Missional River was referred to as a bright spot in this congregation’s movement toward greater connection with the community.39

The congregation’s decision to enter into the Missional River process also means that some of the research that was begun as a part of this thesis project has taken on new life. There is now an intentional effort on the part of the whole congregation to enter into action learning. There is excitement building for the ways in which this could deepen faith and create relationships.

Summary

This chapter looked closely at the methodology employed by this study designed to address the key research question:

*How might an Action Research intervention involving engaging Scripture playfully expand missional imagination?*

Also addressed was the biblical and theological rationale behind the selection of this methodology. In addition, this chapter explored the various components of the playful engagement of Scripture intervention: The Playful Engagement of Scripture in Worship, Playful Bible Study, Playful Devotions in Board Meetings, Appreciative Inquiry Interviews, and Appreciative Inquiry Congregational Event. Finally, an intervening variable that resulted from the ongoing expansion of the congregation’s missional

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39 The term “bright spot” comes from Heath and Heath, *Switch: How to Change Things When Change Is Hard.*
imagination during the AR intervention was discussed. Further results of this study will be discussed in depth in the following chapter.
CHAPTER 5
RESULTS OF STUDY AND INTERPRETATION

This study sought to explore how Scripture is engaged in ways that lead to life-giving imagination for what God is up to in worshipping communities and in the surrounding world. Particularly of interest in this research is how the engagement of Scripture in congregations could mirror the playful, creative nature of God. This research asked the question:

*How might an Action Research intervention involving engaging Scripture playfully expand missional imagination?*

As described in depth in the previous chapter, the primary social science approach utilized in this study was Action Research (AR) employing mixed methods research. The quantitative portion of this project was transformative with baseline and end line surveys made available to the entire adult population of the congregation. This quantitative portion of the project was aimed at measuring any change that resulted from the intervention of playfully engaging Scripture and determining its statistical significance.

Qualitative data were also collected. In addition to open-ended questions on the baseline and end line surveys, these data were obtained through a concurrently nested Appreciative Inquiry into the stories of ten individuals in this congregation, a widely inclusive congregational Appreciative Inquiry event, and journal notes of conversations and observations.
This chapter reports the results of this study and begins to interpret the patterns found in the research based on the triangulation of these quantitative and qualitative sources of data. A full exploration of the conclusions of this study as they relate to the biblical, theological, and theoretical lenses described in previous chapters is found in chapter six.

**Quantitative Data**

Quantitative data were gathered from baseline and end line surveys. These were census surveys conducted via SurveyMonkey as well as through paper copies made available to the entire adult population of the congregation on two consecutive Sundays. The baseline survey was conducted in November of 2016. The end line survey was conducted in late April and early May of 2017.

Table 2 provides a breakdown of baseline survey participants according to gender and worship habits. Of the 63 total responses to the baseline survey, 68.25% (43) of the respondents were female while 31.75% (20) were male. The majority of respondents, 63.49% (40), indicated that they worship at this congregation “usually every week.” Another 20.63% (13) respondents answered that they worship with this congregation several times a month. Only 4.76% (3) said they worship with this congregation about once a month and 1.59% (1) indicated worshipping with this congregation several times per year. In addition, 9.52% (6) of respondents indicated that they do not currently worship with this congregation citing poor health or work as reasons that they are unable to attend.

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Table 2. Baseline Survey Participant Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>68.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>31.75</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Worship Participation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participation</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Usually every week</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>63.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Several times a month</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>20.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>About once a month</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Several times per year</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Once a year or less</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>9.52</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total 63 100.00

Participation in the end line survey was also greater among women. Over three quarters, 76.36% (42), were female while 23.65% (13) were male. More than half of respondents, 60.00% (33), reported attending worship usually every week in the past six months and 30.91% (17) reported attending several times a month. Only 1.82% (1) indicated attending about once a month and 1.82% (1) responded as having attended 3-5 times during the past six months. No one said that they attended two or fewer times in the past six months but 5.45% (3) indicated a response of “other” and wrote in indicating
their lack of participation due to disability or other inability. Table 3 shows these demographics.

**Table 3. End Line Survey Participant Demographics**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>76.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>23.65</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Worship Participation in the past six months*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Usually every week</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Several times a month</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>About once a month</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-5 times</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 or 2 times</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Participants were asked on both baseline and end line surveys to choose three descriptors of God from the following list. Between the baseline and end line survey the percentages of respondents increased for the descriptors of *distant, approachable, playful, creative, and friendly*. *Holy* and *angry* decreased in percentage. The write-in option for both baseline and end line surveys included primarily the response of “loving”
and “forgiving/gracious” although there was more diversity in response at the end line, with one comment specifically referring to God’s “sense of humor.” Table 4 illustrates these results.

**Table 4. Which of the following do you think best describe God?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Baseline (N=56)</th>
<th>End line (N=48)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Freq.</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distant</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Approachable</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>82.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holy</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>91.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Playful</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angry</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creative</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>39.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friendly</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>44.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other(^2)</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>28.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>100.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Both independent and paired t-tests were conducted on all questions composed of Likert scales. This allowed me to see whether or not the differences in mean responses in these categories were statistically significant. The independent t-test compared the mean of responses for the entire baseline survey group to the entire end line group. There were no statistically significant differences in responses analyzed by independent t-tests. There were, however, two questions that resulted in statistically significant differences in the

\(^2\) Baseline write-in descriptors included ten comments of “loving”; four “forgiving/gracious”; one “respectable” and one “all of the above—maybe more!” End line write-in descriptors included six “loving”; three “forgiving/gracious”; as well as “all powerful”; “big”; “unsure”; “Great listener, as well as fixer”; “Always there”; and “I speak to Him daily, from the events of my life these last 8 years, I have proof that God has a great sense of humor.”
paired t-test as shown in Table 5, which compared the baseline and end line responses of particular individuals that responded to both surveys.  

Table 5. Statistically Significant Paired t-Test Responses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>$\bar{x}_b$</th>
<th>$\bar{x}_e$</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>t-value</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>This congregation is meaningfully connecting with our community.</td>
<td>3.96</td>
<td>3.58</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>2.229</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1=Strongly disagree; 2=Disagree; 3=Neutral; 4=Agree; 5=Strongly Agree

As can be seen in Table 5, the mean of agreement to the statement *This congregation is meaningfully connecting with our community* significantly decreased from 3.96 in the baseline to 3.58 in the end line, $p = .036$, and the null hypothesis must be rejected. Likewise, for the statement *Our Congregation is growing spiritually* the mean of agreement decreased from 4.25 in the baseline to 3.96 at the end line. With a $p$-value of .016, the null hypothesis in this case must also be rejected. This means that the congregation’s strength of agreement to these statements about meaningfully connecting with the community and their own spiritual growth both declined significantly between the baseline and end line surveys.

These were not the only survey responses to move in a negative direction between baseline and end line surveys. In fact, this was the case for the majority of the questions.

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3 Baseline and end line surveys were matched using a combination of birthdate, gender, and play style responses. Each matched pair of responses was given a unique ID number for the purposes of conducting the paired t-test in the SPSS software. IBM SPSS Statistics.
There were, however, a few notable exceptions in which the direction of movement in responses stayed equal or moved in a positive direction. These included the following statements: *I have read the entire Bible; As I look back on the events of my life, I recognize God’s presence/activity; I enjoy imagining what God will do next; I enjoy worship services in this congregation; I want our church family to grow larger, in terms of the number of people attending.* These statements with growth in strength of agreement between the baseline and end line surveys are shown in Table 6.

**Table 6. Positive Movement in Paired t-Test Survey Responses**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>( \bar{X}_b )</th>
<th>( \bar{X}_e )</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>t-value</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I have read the entire Bible.</td>
<td>2.96</td>
<td>3.16</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>-0.866</td>
<td>0.395</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>25</td>
<td>25</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As I look back on the events of my life,</td>
<td>4.80</td>
<td>4.80</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>1.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I recognize God’s presence/activity.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>25</td>
<td>25</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I enjoy imagining what God will do next.</td>
<td>3.84</td>
<td>3.92</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>-0.337</td>
<td>0.739</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>25</td>
<td>25</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I enjoy worship services in this</td>
<td>4.54</td>
<td>4.63</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>-0.700</td>
<td>0.491</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>congregation.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>24</td>
<td>24</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I want our church to grow larger,</td>
<td>4.52</td>
<td>4.64</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>-0.901</td>
<td>0.376</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in terms of number of people attending.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>25</td>
<td>25</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1=Strongly disagree; 2=Disagree; 3= Neutral; 4=Agree; 5=Strongly Agree
One interesting comparison can be made between two similar questions. Participants were asked about their strength of agreement to statements about their own desire for the church to grow in terms of number of people attending as well as their perception of whether or not the majority of the congregation wants the church to grow. The difference in response between these two questions reveals an interesting disagreement in one’s own desires and the perception of others’ desire. While the mean response of personal desire to have the congregation grow increased from 4.52 in the baseline to 4.62 at the end line, the perception of others’ desire to have the church grow decreased from 4.32 to 4.20 as shown in Table 7.

**Table 7. Desire for Church Growth t-Test Survey Responses**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>( \bar{X}_b )</th>
<th>( \bar{X}_e )</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>t-value</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I want our church to grow larger, in terms of number of people attending.</td>
<td>4.52</td>
<td>4.64</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>-.901</td>
<td>.376</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The majority of our church family wants our church to grow larger in terms of the number of people attending.</td>
<td>4.25</td>
<td>3.96</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>.721</td>
<td>.478</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1=Strongly disagree; 2=Disagree; 3= Neutral; 4=Agree; 5=Strongly Agree

On its own these data are confusing and present a conflicting picture. While there was some positive improvement in areas that constitute missional imagination (such as the capacity to recognize God’s activity in the past and imagine what God will do next), the only statistically significant results were negative. To gain insight into why perceptions of meaningful connection to the community and spiritual growth decreased over the course of the intervention it is necessary to look at the qualitative data.
Qualitative Data

Qualitative data were gathered from a variety of sources. These included open-ended comment sections on the base line and end line surveys, open-ended questions on the playful Bible study completion survey, Appreciative Inquiry interviews, an Appreciative Inquiry congregational event, and journal notes made throughout the intervention. Material from these sources was coded using Charmaz’s method of qualitative data analysis. This process of coding and refining included initial word-by-word, line-by-line, and incident-by-incident coding to obtain in vivo codes. These in vivo codes were then clustered by shared concepts into focused codes to condense and sharpen the data gathered as well as reveal comparisons between initial codes. These focused codes were then integrated into axial codes to show relationships between corresponding ideas. Theoretical codes were then used to lend form to the axial codes and add precision and clarity to the data. Each source of qualitative data is discussed below.

Open-Ended Comments on Baseline and End Line Surveys

There were sixteen write-in comments on the baseline survey. All the comments centered around appreciation for the pastor, an affirmation of the growing presence/participation of children in the congregation, and the sense of belonging that is found in this congregation giving a “down home feeling” and “completing my circle of friends.” All of these focused codes can be grouped under an axial code of comfort. Figure 5 illustrates this axial code in the shape of a big, fluffy pillow.

---

4 Charmaz, Constructing Grounded Theory.
By contrast, the end line comments were not as universally positive, or expressive of comfort. The comments on the end line survey reflected a wider range of responses to change in the congregation. Table 8 shows the groupings of focused codes into axial codes.
Table 8. End Line Focused and Axial Codes

AC1- Listening for God’s Guidance
- FC1- What could we be doing differently to welcome people of different ages, backgrounds, ideas, and attitudes?
- FC2- God is present with us and speaking to us.

AC2- New Perspectives in Worship are Appreciated by Young and Old
- FC3- Worship is enjoyable.\(^5\)
- FC4- Both children and adults are being engaged by God’s Word in new ways.

AC3- Ambivalence Toward Growth
- FC5- I like the changes that are happening, but others might not.
- FC6- I cannot receive the Spirit of God in child-like ways.\(^6\)

AC4- Growth is Good
- FC7- It is a good thing that we are seeing a growth in members.
- FC8- Our church is moving in the right direction by reaching out and being inclusive.

Present in the end line survey responses is a progression of thought represented by the theoretical codes illustrated in Figure 6. The survey responses express an awareness that *Spirit-led change is happening. We need to pay attention to what God is doing* (Theoretical Code 1). Following this observation, however, there seem to be differing responses. Some responses seem to embrace the change as *good*. Other responses, however, express concern that the changes challenge the congregation’s expectations of what church is and should be about. This leads to the question *Is this change a good thing?* (Theoretical Code 2).

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\(^5\) An example of a response incorporated into this code is the following: “I can no longer let my mind wander to my to do lists during the service. It is too exciting and interesting to miss.”

\(^6\) An example of a response incorporated into this code is the following: “I do not receive the Spirit of God when the youth (very young participants) are involved in the main sermon. The children’s sermon should be their participation and then the main sermon directed to the adult. When children read the lessons they either mispronounce words, read too fast, not speak into the microphone where you can hear, not stop at the punctuation marks making the reading less meaningful and distractful. Sunday school is where the children should be participating. The main service should be directed toward the mature audience.”
While there was some ambivalence about the goodness of changes that occurred over the course of this intervention expressed in the survey responses, the responses to change expressed in the Appreciative Inquiry interviews gives more insight into the thinking of individuals within this congregation and their thoughts about God’s activity. This is true both about God’s activity within the congregation as well throughout the community.

Appreciative Inquiry Interviews

Ten Appreciative Inquiry interviews were conducted between March 30th and April 19th, 2017. These interviews encouraged participants to share stories of positive experiences and formative narratives within the congregation’s life as well as with their own personal engagement with Scripture. A full list of the questions asked during these interviews can be found in appendix K.
Table 9 gives an overview of the participants interviewed. From those who volunteered to be interviewed on the baseline survey, these ten were selected to represent a diversity of backgrounds, particularly with regard to age, gender, length of membership at this congregation, and participation levels.\footnote{Most of those who volunteered to be interviewed were of similar Northern European ethnic background. An effort was made, however, to choose several participants whose families are bi-cultural (those whose spouses, parents, children, and/or grandchildren identify themselves as Hispanic or another ethnic background).}

Table 9. Appreciative Inquiry Interview Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Length of Membership</th>
<th>Participation</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age Range</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>10+ Years</td>
<td>Attends Every Week, Non-Leadership Role</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>70-79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>10+ Years</td>
<td>Attends Every Week, Non-Leadership Role</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>60-69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>4-9 Years</td>
<td>Attends Every Week, Leadership Role</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>70-79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Non-Member or Less Than 4 Years</td>
<td>Attends Every Week, Leadership Role</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>50-59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Life-Long</td>
<td>Attends Every Week, Non-Leadership Role</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>80-89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Life-Long</td>
<td>Attends 2-3 Times/Mo., Non-Leadership Role</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>50-59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>4-9 Years</td>
<td>Attends Every Week, Non-Leadership Role</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>60-69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>10+ Years</td>
<td>Attends Every Week, Leadership Role</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Under 45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Non-Member or Less Than 4 Years</td>
<td>Attends Every Week, Non-Leadership Role</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Under 45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Life-Long</td>
<td>Attends 2-3 Times/Mo., Non-Leadership Role</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>80-89</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From transcripts of these interviews, 610 \textit{in vivo} codes were identified. These \textit{in vivo} codes were then clustered by shared concepts into 34 focused codes to condense and sharpen the data gathered as well as reveal comparisons between initial codes. These
focused codes were then integrated into axial codes to show relationships between corresponding ideas. This integration is shown in Table 10.

**Table 10. Appreciative Inquiry Axial Codes with Supporting Focused Codes**

**Axial Code 1: We are connected and nurtured in this community by God’s grace.**
- FC1 - Involvement/connection through groups, boards, and activities makes us feel alive, engaged, and motivated.
- FC2 - We are a part of this faith community because of the gift of God’s grace that this congregation proclaims.
- FC10 - Many of us came to be a part of this particular faith community because of the stories shared with us by our families or friends. Their legacy of faith has influenced our own.
- FC11 - The sacraments (baptism and communion) along with Scripture reading and prayer deepen our understanding of who we are as forgiven people of God.

**Axial Code 2: We have become insular and isolated from our community.**
- FC3 - Our congregation is a little country club and we take care of our own members, but we have not been reaching out.
- FC4 - We have gotten smaller.
- FC24 - Society has changed. Active participation in the church by families can no longer be assumed.

**Axial Code 3: God is empowering us to change directions and to connect more meaningfully with the wider community.**
- FC5 - We are proud of and excited about where our congregation is heading, in reaching out into the community.
- FC8 - Children, innovation, and creativity in worship are sources of delight.
- FC21 - God is challenging us to move in another direction from where we’ve been going in the past. We’ve been too insular.
- FC23 - There is a lot of closed-ness or exclusivity in our congregation. God is opening our eyes to this and trying to get us to look outward and grow outward.
- FC29 - We have a vision of this church being a living, breathing thing- a hive of activity- with a full parking lot and the building and grounds being used throughout the week by the community.
- FC30 - Sharing the good news is meant to be joyful and easy.
- FC31 - We need to be receptive to what God is telling us in making relationships with others in our community.
- FC32 - God is directing us in our genuine welcome of other people and other ideas.
Table 10. Appreciative Inquiry Axial Codes with Supporting Focused Codes (Cont.)

Axial Code 4: Our current limited funds present a challenge, but God is now and has always been our provider.
- FC6- Money has been a source of controversy in the past, both in our congregation and in our individual lives, but God has always provided for us even beyond our expectations.
- FC9- We have felt God’s presence most strongly in times of hardship, trauma, and tragedy.
- FC14- We have felt God’s presence through others’ prayers for us during hard times. We are conscious about praying for others in their struggles too.
- FC17- Dreaming about the future God desires for us is weighed down by concerns for our current budget shortfalls.

Axial Code 5: The decision to relocate the church to the current location opened up new possibilities for ministry, but we must continue to embrace an attitude of welcome for all.
- FC7- When we left town, we were fleeing.
- FC13- Attitudes are changing (have changed and are continuing to change) since the congregation relocated.
- FC20- We are dealing with issues of prejudice.

Axial Code 6: We are noticing change starting to happen. We’re not quite sure what will happen next, but we know that God is guiding us.
- FC15- Prayer and studying Scripture together are the primary methods of how we could better discern what God is doing.
- FC16- Our church is literally and figuratively at a crossroads. We are at the crossroads of major roadways with many unique possibilities for ministry… and at a crossroads in terms of our understanding what that ministry is.
- FC18- God’s desire for us may be very different than what our ministry currently looks like.
- FC19- We are like Jonah on the boat rocked by waves. Hopefully we’ll jump into the water and God will use us.
- FC22- We are wondering what God is trying to open up for us. There are a lot of unknowns right now.
- FC25- The Holy Spirit is working within this congregation and I feel like I might be a part of that change.
- FC26- We want to serve God in whatever way God desires. We think that probably means more community interaction.
- FC27- We need to find the mission God has for us.
- FC28- We are starting to see signs of change. We are being refocused.
- FC33- We can’t do anything without God.
- FC34- We have been surprised by some of the recent changes and we are excited to see what happens next.
A single theoretical code lends form to the axial codes and adds precision and clarity to the data. All of these axial codes point to the larger issue of living “out” God’s preferred and promised future. What is expressed in the axial codes is both an understanding of who this congregation is—as those gathered by God’s grace—as well as a growing missional imagination of an outward focus God is giving the congregation. While the congregation has significant historical and contemporary challenges to this understanding of God’s activity, nevertheless, they understand God as the provider who will make a path forward into this future. Figure 7 illustrates this understanding.
We are noticing change starting to happen. We’re not quite sure what will happen next, but we know that God is guiding us.

We are connected and nurtured in this community by God’s grace.

We have become insular and isolated from our community.

God is empowering us to change directions and to connect more meaningfully with the wider community.

The decision to relocate the church to the current location opens up new possibilities for ministry, but we must continue to embrace an attitude of welcome for all.

Living “OUT” God’s Preferred and Promised Future

Figure 7. Appreciative Inquiry Interviews Theoretical Code
Appreciative Inquiry Congregational Event

During the Appreciative Inquiry congregational event, the congregation was asked to begin formulating a provocative proposal for the future. Mark Lau Branson defines a provocative proposal as “an imaginative statement about the future, crafted as if it were already experiential and generative.”\(^{8}\) Participants were invited to answer the question: “How would you describe this congregation seven years from now? (Describe it as if you are seeing it around you today.)”\(^{9}\) Participants were encouraged to share their answers aloud in pairs as well as to write their answers on bulletin inserts that were collected. These submitted responses were then analyzed according to the method outlined by Charmaz.\(^{10}\)

These responses resulted in 81 in vivo codes. These in vivo codes were then clustered by shared concepts into focused codes to condense and sharpen the data gathered as well as to reveal comparisons between the initial codes. Table 11 shows the resulting ten focused codes along with the ideas from the in vivo codes they consolidate.

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8. Branson, Memories, Hopes, and Conversations: Appreciative Inquiry, Missional Engagement, and Congregational Change, 95, 99. Branson gives examples of provocative proposals that took repeated iterations and years of conversations to draft. Obviously, one Sunday morning congregational event does not lead to this type of polished statement. Instead, this was more in line with Branson’s thought that “simpler, short, proactive statements” can get people moving more quickly to experiments. The point is to “spark imagination and innovation.”

9. The congregation was asked to observe in the story of the Emmaus Road how the disciples, after recognizing Jesus, got up and that very hour ran seven miles back to Jerusalem. We imagined together that along the way they might have been thinking ahead to how they would possibly explain what they had witnessed. The congregation was asked to think ahead not seven miles, but seven years. If this very hour we were to think ahead seven years, what would we say about what God is doing?

10. Charmaz, Constructing Grounded Theory. This process of coding and refining included initial word-by-word, line-by-line, and incident-by-incident coding to obtain in vivo codes. These in vivo codes were then clustered by shared concepts into focused codes to condense and sharpen the data gathered as well as reveal comparisons between initial codes. These focused codes were then integrated into axial codes to show relationships between corresponding ideas. Theoretical codes were then used to lend form to the axial codes and add precision and clarity to the data.
Table 11. Appreciative Inquiry Congregational Event Focused Codes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FC1</th>
<th>Diverse Music</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• New Kinds of Instruments and Styles of Music</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Multiple Languages Represented in Singing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Choirs for both Children and Adults</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Expanded Leadership of Music to Diverse Musicians</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FC2</th>
<th>Physical Property and Activities that Invite Others</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Electronic Message Board to Invite Others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• A Playground Designed to Welcome the Public</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• A Prayer Garden that Welcomes Travelers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Walking Paths from the Bus Stop to the Church and Trailer Park</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• An Extended Coverage Area for Outdoor Worship &amp; Activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Re-Imagined Family Bible Studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Volunteers from Congregation Teaching Sports to Area Children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• A “Beehive of Christian Activity”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Congregation has Reputation of being Loving, Giving, Prayerful, Inviting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• A Great Asset to the Community</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FC3</th>
<th>Re-Imagined Stewardship of Resources and Environment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Utilizing Solar Power</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Intergenerational Gardening Provides Produce for Food Distribution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Sharing our Abundance Locally and With the World</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FC4</th>
<th>Growth in Worship Attendance and Involvement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• “Many, Many More People” Welcomed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Full Pews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Thriving Youth Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• More Bible Study Opportunities</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FC5</th>
<th>Diversity in People/Languages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Full of People of All Sorts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Multiple Languages Will be Spoken</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FC6</th>
<th>Continued “Fun”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Stays “Cool” and “Fun”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Even More Playful</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 11. Appreciative Inquiry Congregational Event Focused Codes (Cont.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| FC7  | Welcome and Nurturing of Children/Youth/Young Families  
|      | • Meeting Need for Christian Day School  
|      | • Mother’s Day/Father’s Day Out Program  
|      | • Older Adults Nurture Children’s Faith  
|      | • Intergenerational Events and Community Centered Projects  
|      | • Children Running, Laughing, and Sharing God’s Blessings |
| FC8  | Prayerfully Reflecting Christ’s Love and Doing God’s Will  
|      | • Focused on Following God Prayerfully  
|      | • Doing God’s Will  
|      | • Loving Others |
| FC9  | Not Afraid  
|      | • No One is Afraid to Be Themselves in this Community  
|      | • No One is Afraid to Talk to One Another |
| FC10 | Connected to the Community, Each Other, Pastor, and God  
|      | • People are Focused on God and One Another  
|      | • Connected to Community  
|      | • Connected to Each Other  
|      | • Connected to Pastor  
|      | • Connected to God  
|      | • Strong Relationships that Lead to Table Fellowship |
| FC11 | Serving God through Community Relationships  
|      | • Forming Partnerships with Area Non-Profits  
|      | • Serving the Hungry and Homeless  
|      | • Clothing Center to Accompany Food Pantry |

These focused codes were then integrated into axial codes to show relationships between corresponding ideas. This integration is shown in table 12.
Table 12. Appreciative Inquiry Congregational Event Axial Codes

Axial Code 1: Community Connections

- FC2- Physical Property and Activities that Invite Others
- FC5- Diversity in People/Languages
- FC9- Not Afraid
- FC10- Connected to the Community, Each Other, Pastor, and God
- FC11- Serving God through Community Relationships

Axial Code 2: Vibrant Worship and Learning Opportunities

- FC1- Diverse Music
- FC4- Growth in Worship Attendance and Involvement
- FC6- Continued “Fun”
- FC7- Welcome and Nurturing of Children/Youth/Young Families

Axial Code 3: Living with Faithful Imagination

- FC3- Re-Imagined Stewardship of Resources and Environment
- FC8- Prayerfully Reflecting Christ’s Love and Doing God’s Will

A single theoretical code lends form to the axial codes and adds precision and clarity to the data. All of the axial codes point to a provocative proposal for the future of a diverse and vibrant faith community serving God and the community with imagination and deep faith.
Observations and Conversations

Throughout this Action Research project, notes were made and observations kept as to the process and particular interactions and events that helped to explain what was happening in the congregation. At the beginning of the process, it was observed that this congregation was struggling with conflicting ideas about the future. A couple of individuals expressed in conversations their fear that “opening the doors” to people of other ethnic backgrounds would ruin what members love about this congregation. To some individuals, this congregation provides a sense of safety in a diverse world.11

11 Conversations held November 2016. This congregation is unique in that while most members of this congregation enjoy ethnic majority status in the United States as a whole, they are among the ethnic
To others, however, such an expression of insularity was cause for despair. The vision of a church unified by ethnic background was not the vision of the entire congregation. Grief over the realization that fellow worshippers did not want to welcome others of diverse backgrounds led some to consider leaving the church. Ultimately, however, these same individuals realized that they were being called to stay and to work toward enlarging the vision of God’s activity in and through this congregation. They expressed that the Gospel is what unifies us and propels us into loving relationships with our neighbors.

The tension between fear of the community and the call to embrace relationships formed by God came to a head at a congregational meeting at the end of November. An opportunity called the “Missional River” had been extended to the congregation through the synod. It was an opportunity for this congregation to focus specifically on learning to connect with the neighborhood. At that congregational meeting it became apparent that a few voices expressing opposition to community involvement might keep the congregation from growing in this way. The majority of the congregation, however, responded in favor of seeking a more missional direction. They called for a vote on entering the Missional River process, which passed with an overwhelming majority. This was felt to be a turning point for the congregation.

Over the course of the intervention it was observed that people seemed to become more engaged in the life of the congregation. This observation was confirmed by the minority in their particular community. For this reason, many members of this congregation have experienced a sort of “reverse racism” both toward the congregation as a whole (prompting the church building’s physical relocation several decades ago) as well as in their individual experiences.
realization that by the end of December we were able to report the first annual worship attendance growth in at least fifteen years.\textsuperscript{12}

**Table 13. Average Weekly Worship Attendance at Playground Lutheran Church**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Attendance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>194</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>193</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>191</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>182</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>179</td>
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<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>172</td>
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<td>2007</td>
<td>168</td>
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<td>2008</td>
<td>162</td>
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<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>160</td>
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<td>2010</td>
<td>136</td>
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<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>130</td>
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<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>116</td>
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<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>116</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

At the conclusion of this study, worship attendance for 2017 was continuing to grow. The average weekly worship as of the conclusion of this study in April of 2017 was 149.\textsuperscript{13}

\textsuperscript{12} Records were available beginning from the year 2001. See table 13.
By February, changes were being felt throughout the congregation sufficiently that the playful engagement of Scripture became a topic brought up spontaneously in conversations. A member of the worship board brought up the topic for conversation at one meeting. The comment was made that while this individual liked the changes that were happening, this individual was not sure if older members would. The board answered unanimously that they all thought the changes were good and they are among the oldest members in the congregation. One of them remarked, “Just because we’re old doesn’t mean we don’t like to play. Don’t assume that about us!”

In March, the newly formed Missional River team also brought up the topic of the playful changes in worship. The team thought the changes were helpful for continuing to engage the congregation and prepare it for more missional outreach. There was discussion about which Sundays each of them liked best. It was noted that what one person loved might not necessarily be the same as someone else. Each person enjoyed a different element of the playful engagement of Scripture. What was interesting, though, was that these individuals in their discussion were recalling specific sermons and texts from months ago. They were discussing from memory each Sunday in detail from the beginning of the intervention back in November!

During Holy Week in April, a member of the congregation pulled me aside to tell me that she could not believe the changes she was seeing in the congregation. She never would have imagined that her older family members would be as excited about changes

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13 Weekly worship averages referred to throughout this study were obtained by averaging the attendance at all public worship services held during the week. This included Wednesday Lenten services, but excluded events such as weddings and funerals. The same criteria were used to determine the previous years’ averages as well.

14 Conversation at February Board of Worship meeting.
in the congregation as they were. She had anticipated there being a lot of push back and
difficulty with any change in the congregation. Instead, she was delighted by the joy she saw as these changes were taking place. She motioned to the campfire that was the centerpiece in the sanctuary through the Lenten season and said, “It’s because of things like this. It’s all the creative things that you are doing that are opening up new possibilities. We’re changing and we’re loving it.”15 A similar comment was made by one of the older members of the congregation at the end of the Appreciative Inquiry congregational event. “I wasn’t so sure what to think about all this. I wasn’t sure that I could have fun in church. But I was stuck in my ways. You just welcomed me to the twenty-first century.”16

It was not all smooth sailing through this project, however. In December, the congregation realized that they had been coasting financially. Giving had plateaued over the years while expenses had increased. The congregation had been using savings to make up the difference. Considerable anxiety over this realization gripped the congregation. The height of anxiety came during the January council meeting when the council began considering such desperate measures as cancelling worship services to save money on electricity. Instead, however, the council decided to move forward with a plan of praying intentionally with the full congregation about the church’s finances. In January through March, the congregation spent time praying about stewardship and several large gifts were given.

15 Conversation in April 2017.
16 Conversation in April 2017.
In April, a playful approach to financial stewardship was implemented to coincide with the visioning done in the Appreciative Inquiry congregational event. A poster was displayed featuring a three-dimensional hot air balloon and the words “Above and Beyond.” Around the balloon were sticky-notes shaped as clouds. On each cloud was written an expense that the congregation recently had or would soon incur. Also included were items representing hopes and dreams for ministries that the congregation would like to be able to do if the finances were available to move forward.

Figure 9. Above and Beyond Board

Congregation members were encouraged to consider giving above and beyond their current regular giving by taking clouds and growing their giving by that amount. This simple poster contributed to thousands of dollars of increased giving and helped to

\[17 \text{ See figure 9.}\]
shift the focus from our anxiety to the joy of giving to enrich the ministry of the congregation in ways that each of us are passionate about. While this poster did not solve all the financial challenges facing this congregation, this playful approach to giving has helped to reframe the conversation and provide a new way to think about giving and the ministries of the congregation.

**Triangulation of Data**

This chapter began with a discussion of quantitative data that I described as confusing and presenting a conflicting picture of what was occurring in the congregation. The quantitative data obtained through paired t-test comparisons of the baseline and end line survey responses showed some positive movement in areas that constitute missional imagination (such as the capacity to recognize God’s activity in the past and imagine what God will do next). The only statistically significant results, however, were negative. Statistical significance was found in the *decrease* of agreement with the statements: *This congregation is meaningfully connecting with our community*; and *Our congregation is growing spiritually*.

Qualitative data were necessary to understand why the only statistically significant changes were negative ones in these two areas. Qualitative examination of the baseline and end line survey responses reveals that a shift occurred. In the baseline, the congregation primarily expressed a perception of comfort. At the end line, the congregation expressed that God is leading them in a new direction. The triangulation of

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18 There have even been popular items on the board that people have wanted to hurry and get to before someone else does! While things like windstorm insurance tend to stick around for a while, anything related to children’s ministries, outreach, and creative worship opportunities flies off as fast as we can get them on! It should be noted, though, that while individuals are contributing the amounts equivalent to each of these needs, all the money collected is regarded as offering and is deposited and dispersed in the same manner as other money placed in the offering plate.
the qualitative and quantitative data reveals that agreement with those two statements likely declined because of an increase in awareness. Over the course of this study, the congregation became aware that: (1) they are not meaningfully connecting with their community, and (2) unresolved issues of racism and disconnection from their community are encumbering the congregation’s spiritual growth. Wrestling with such big issues shifted the perception of the congregation from thinking that everything is just fine to realizing that change is needed.

Change is often unsettling before it is desirable. The ambivalence expressed in the end line survey responses highlights this tension between excitement over the future (the growth of missional imagination) and the uncertainty of not knowing what exactly that future will look like. Another interesting theme to emerge both quantitatively and qualitatively in the end line survey is the idea that while individuals themselves liked the changes that were taking place and growth happening in the church, there was a perception that others might not. This was expressed in informal conversations as well. Individuals seemed to sense the Spirit’s leading in new directions as exciting and life-giving, but had more negative views of how others would view this change than what turned out to be accurate.

The Appreciative Inquiry interview data add further depth to understanding what occurred in this congregation during the intervention period. In the course of this relatively short period of study, the congregation began tackling such crucial issues as lingering racism, a history of disconnection with the wider community that stems from traumatic experiences, and the need for dependence on God in times of financial stress. In the midst of all of these challenges, new excitement developed for what God is doing.
People started articulating a call for this congregation to be more outwardly focused. Participants identified this as a “stirring up” of the Holy Spirit among them.\textsuperscript{19}

This theme of the Spirit’s stirring is evident in the codes that resulted from each set of qualitative data. In the end line survey, people identified the Holy Spirit as being active in this congregation. It is interesting that this was true both in responses that were reacting favorably to the intervention as well as those who were critical of it. Throughout the Appreciative Inquiry interviews, the congregation’s growing desire for a more outward focus was attributed to the leading of the Holy Spirit. The provocative proposal for the future created by the congregation at the Appreciative Inquiry congregation event pictured the Spirit’s leading in practice. The result would be a congregation that is diverse and vibrant—serving God and the community with imagination and deep faith.

Although a few people expressed discomfort with the playful engagement of Scripture in worship, the majority of the worshipping community affirmed the experience as both enjoyable and transformative. During this intervention, the congregation was able to report an increase in average worship attendance. This is the first increase in average attendance in what has otherwise been at least fifteen years of steady decline. Older adults marveled at the relative ease with which change is beginning to take place and affirmed that enjoying playfulness is not limited to the youth!

\textbf{Summary}

This chapter presented the results of this study and began to interpret those findings in light of the research question:

\textsuperscript{19} Appreciative Inquiry interviews.
How might an Action Research intervention involving engaging Scripture playfully expand missional imagination.

In chapter six these conclusions will be discussed in further depth, with particular focus on interpreting these results in light of the theoretical lenses of play and narrative imagination; biblical lenses of the Bible as metanarrative, the creative Word made flesh, and playful passages; and theological lenses of play and participation in the perichoretic relationship of the triune God.
One of my favorite parts of the day is to watch my children wake up in the morning. Of course, there are some mornings when the alarm goes off and we are running late that the light gets flipped on and clothing grabbed, breakfast shoved in our faces and we are out the door. Most days, though, the process of greeting a new day is much more gentle. I give them a kiss. We snuggle. I watch smiles creep across their faces before an eye eventually cracks open. Sometimes a giggle even escapes their lips and tickles are exchanged before that first tentative peek. The resistance does not usually come until their eyes are fully open and the brilliance of the light seems harsh given the warmth and comfort of staying so peacefully tucked into slumber. That is when reality sets in and the awareness comes that it is time to get moving. The fun and the laughter,
the joy we are having together can continue, but the context will have to change. If life is going to occur, we have to move to the breakfast table and out into the world beyond.

Chapter five of this thesis reported the results of this study focusing on the research question:

*How might an Action Research intervention involving engaging Scripture playfully expand missional imagination?*

These findings might be imagined a bit like watching one of my children wake up in the morning. The baseline survey pointed to a perception of comfort that pervaded the congregation. What occurred during the process of the intervention, however, was a waking-up or a coming to awareness. Something happened in those experiences of play. While there were giggles and laughter, smiles and enjoyment . . . eyes also opened. The end line survey reflected both quantitatively and qualitatively the sort of disequilibrium (and perhaps even a bit of the resistance) that occurs with coming to a new awareness about reality. This was reflected with statistical significance in the decline of people feeling that the congregation is meaningfully connecting to the surrounding community and that the congregation is growing spiritually. In the course of being tickled by the Holy Spirit into more full awareness, we came to understand that there are realities we are being awoken to—namely, that we have become insular and isolated from our community.

At the same time, however, the congregation is also waking up to the joyous possibility that God is about to do a new thing with us. Ten Appreciative Inquiry interviews not only revealed a grief-filled acknowledgement of the insularity that has arisen from this congregation’s history, but also pointed to hopeful signs for the future: We are connected and nurtured in this community by God’s grace; God is empowering us
to change directions and connect more meaningfully with the wider community; God is
now and has always been our provider. ¹ All of this points to a readiness to live out God’s
preferred and promised future.² What might that future be? We don’t know what that is
fully yet. We do have some ideas of what that future might include, though. A vision of it
was depicted in the provocative proposal for the future discerned at the Appreciative
Inquiry congregational event. In that vision, the Spirit is stirring up a diverse and vibrant
faith community serving God and the community with imagination and deep faith.³

What is Important About These Findings?

During the course of this research project, the denominational synod of which
Playground Lutheran Church is a part initiated a “synod audit.”⁴ The audit compared
trends across this synod as well as the region and entire denominational body of the
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Within the region and time frame presented,
this synod had the highest rate of decline in worship attendance with a 40% decline in
worship attendance between the years of 2009 and 2015.⁵ The decline represents some
8,044 fewer people attending worship in this synod. This synod was not alone in decline,

¹ See Appreciative Inquiry interview axial codes presented in chapter five.

² See Appreciative Inquiry interview theoretical code presented in chapter five.

³ See Appreciative Inquiry congregational event theoretical code presented in chapter five.

⁴ “In this process they looked at the wide variety of statistics available on the synod through
demographics, congregational annual reports, congregational vitality survey results, etc. They provided a
wealth of statistical information (ministry and financial trends in congregations’ population changes, etc.)
on the synod.” Synod Audit Document.

⁵ Synod Audit Document.
however. All the synods in the region reported declines in worship attendance of at least 21%.[^6] The ELCA as a whole saw worship attendance over this time period decline 25%.[^7]

Average worship attendance is only one piece of information about a congregation or denomination as a whole. It is often, though, what catches our attention first in terms of alerting us to the possibility that we may need to pay closer attention to what God is doing in our communities. The steep decline in average worship attendance over just the past few years throughout this synod and the ELCA as a whole is one attention-grabbing indicator that would suggest that it is time for us to be asking some intentional questions about what God is up to and how we are being invited to join in. The statistical trend of declining worship attendance begs for us to examine how our missional imagination might be expanded.

This project identified missional imagination as being essential to the life of the faith community. While increasing worship attendance was neither the focus nor the goal of this intervention, it did have a positive effect on average worship attendance in this congregation. The growth in attendance that the congregation reported during this intervention period was the first in at least 15 years.[^8] It may be helpful to other congregations experiencing declining worship attendance to consider how missional imagination plays a role.

This thesis began with the observation that some congregations seem to have missional imagination built into their DNA. These are congregations with an open

[^6]: Synod Audit Document.


[^8]: Records were available beginning from the year 2001.
imagination for what God is doing in their midst and in their wider communities. These congregations are bold in their willingness to experiment and risk for the sake of joining God in the wild and passionate mission that is God’s love for the world. The members of these congregations seem acutely aware of God’s movement in their lives and they look for God’s presence and activity in the world around them. There are other congregations, however, that do not seem to have this same capacity.

Waking up—becoming aware of the lack of connection with the surrounding community—and moving into a posture of missional imagination can be a difficult process for a congregation. Where does one start? How might congregational leaders begin to approach helping a congregation wake up to the Spirit’s stirring? What might that look like practically? Given the results of this study, perhaps the first stirrings of deepening missional imagination begin with engaging Scripture playfully.

**Results in Light of Theoretical, Biblical, and Theological Lenses**

Chapters two and three of this thesis presented theoretical, biblical, and theological lenses related to the expansion of missional imagination through the playful engagement of Scripture. We return now to each of these lenses to explore the findings of this study and its meaning.

**Theoretical Lens: Play**

Steven Johnson in his book *Wonderland: How Play Made the Modern World* tells a story about the color purple and how it changed the world. In the ancient world, purple cloth was made with dye created by harvesting a particular species of sea snail (*Hexaplex*...)

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trunculus) that lived in the shallow waters and tidal pools along the Mediterranean coast outside the city of Tyre in southern Phoenicia. The purple ink these sea snails had developed as a bioweapon against predators was of such a rare, surprising, and delightful color that it caught people’s attention and became highly sought after. In order to make just one gram of Tyrian dye, however, over ten thousand snails were needed.

In search of these purple-producing sea snails, Phoenician sailors began venturing further and further, eventually venturing beyond the Mediterranean into the Atlantic Ocean to discover a supply of sea snails along the coast of North Africa. Johnson writes:

Think of all the ways the world would be transformed by vessels launched from Mediterranean countries, exploring the Atlantic and beyond. Those vessels would eventually leave in search of gold, or religious freedom, or military conquest. But the first siren song that lured them onto the open ocean was a simple color. The delight of a surprising color resulted in exploration that changed the world.

Play is a driver of change. Just as play led to the exploration of the world back when gathering purple dye took voyagers further across the sea, play also becomes the route by which we are led to new vistas. Play provides the context in which the boundaries of our thinking are expanded.

That was certainly the case in this study. Through the playful engagement of Scripture, this congregation found itself in the deep waters of adaptive change. The end line survey responses and Appreciative Inquiry interviews create a picture of a faith

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10 Ibid., 18.

11 Heifetz and Linsky contrast adaptive change with technical change. Technical change involves problems which people already possess the knowledge to solve. Adaptive change is far more complicated and requires “new experiments, new discoveries, 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.” Ronald A. Heifetz and Martin Linsky, Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive through the Dangers of Leading (Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 2002), 13.
community waking up to the need to wrestle with a history of separation from the wider community and the growing sense that their call is to a deeper relationship with God and these very neighbors.

There is no pre-existing map for forging these relationships. There is no known method that can be plugged in to make this change easily. It is by definition an adaptive challenge that this congregation faces. Adaptive challenges are notorious for being avoided. Yet, this congregation has been led into these conversations with play as the holding environment for these questions to be raised and experimentation to take root.\textsuperscript{12}

Heifetz and Linsky describe a “holding environment” as a tool for facilitating adaptive change that provides “structural, procedural, or virtual boundaries” in which “people feel safe enough to address problems that are difficult, not only because they strain ingenuity, but also because they strain relationships.”\textsuperscript{13} Among the challenges that were named in the qualitative interviews of this study are those related to issues of prejudice/racism and how these issues not only affected the congregation in the past but continue to affect it today.\textsuperscript{14} Naming this struggle is one that can threaten relationships to their core. It is not a conversation that can be had without the safety of a holding environment in which people can address really difficult issues. Play provided that environment.

Huizinga’s definition of play was discussed in chapter two of this thesis. That definition begins with describing play as “an activity which proceeds within certain limits

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 103.

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{14} Appreciative Inquiry interviews AC5 and related focused codes name this challenge. See chapter five.
of time and space, in a visible order, according to rules freely accepted and outside the sphere of necessity or material utility.”\textsuperscript{15} In this intervention, the limits of play served as the boundaries of a holding environment for adaptive change. Play allowed this congregation to approach the big challenges of adaptive change in productive and imaginative ways. While we were just playing, we were free to experiment and risk.

Heifetz and Linsky suggest that within the boundaries of the holding environment the temperature can be raised or lowered to facilitate productive work on adaptive change.\textsuperscript{16} Play kept the temperature of adaptive change in check—with people involved, excited, and engaged—so that real progress was made on tough issues. The progression shown from the baseline survey axial code of “comfort” to those in the end line survey, acknowledging Spirit-led change, points to movement. The congregation was able to begin discussing, debating, and imagining creative responses to the adaptive challenges they are facing.

Enough heat was generated through this process of playfully engaging Scripture that change took place, but not so much that people were turned off or immobilized. Enough heat was generated that there was a statistically significant decrease in the mean of agreement to the statements This congregation is meaningfully connecting with our

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\textsuperscript{15} Huizinga, \textit{Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture}, 132.

\textsuperscript{16} “Changing the status quo generates tension and produces heat by surfacing hidden conflicts and challenging organizational culture. It’s a deep and natural human impulse to seek order and calm, and organizations and communities can tolerate only so much distress before recoiling. If you try to stimulate deep change within an organization, you have to control the temperature. There are really two tasks here. The first is to raise the heat enough that people sit up, pay attention, and deal with the real threats and challenges facing them. Without some distress, there is no incentive for them to change anything. The second is to lower the temperature when necessary to reduce a counterproductive level of tension. Any community can take only so much pressure before it becomes immobilized or spins out of control. The heat must stay within the tolerable range—not so high that people demand it be turned off completely, and not so low that they are lulled into inaction. We call this span the productive range of distress.” Heifetz and Linsky, \textit{Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive through the Dangers of Leading}, 107-108.
community and Our congregation is growing spiritually between the baseline and end line surveys. Yet, this represents a productive level of distress. The qualitative data gathered through the end line survey, Appreciative Inquiry interviews, and congregational event all point to a community starting to creatively envision God’s presence among them in a new way—with an expanding missional imagination that points them outward toward God’s presence in and with their neighbors. The fact that these conversations took place while the congregation was at the same time experiencing its first recorded growth in at least 15 years is one indication that play provided the right kind of holding environment for a productive level of heat to achieve adaptive change.

Play disarms so that imaginations are freed up to be able to participate in something new. Chapter two of this thesis discussed the theory of play developed by Gadamer and expounded upon by Vilhauer in which play opens us up to transformational engagement with “the Other.” The results of this study indicate that this is also true of the playful engagement of Scripture in a congregational setting. The Other that we become open to is the presence of the triune God at play in the world around us—including in the neighbor from whom we have previously been distanced. The provocative proposal for the future born out of the Appreciative Inquiry congregational event articulates this willingness to be transformed by the Other. This was expressed through a vision of this faith community transformed by a growing diversity of people,

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17 The mean of agreement to the statement This congregation is meaningfully connecting with our community decreased from 3.96 in the baseline to 3.58 in the end line, p = .036, and the null hypothesis must be rejected. Likewise, for the statement Our Congregation is growing spiritually the mean of agreement decreased from 4.25 in the baseline to 3.96 at the end line. With a p-value of .016, the null hypothesis in this case must also be rejected. This means that the congregation’s strength of agreement to these statements about meaningfully connecting with the community and their own spiritual growth both declined significantly between the baseline and end line surveys.

18 Vilhauer, Gadamer's Ethics of Play: Hermeneutics and the Other.
languages, music, ways of relating to the environment, ministry approaches, community interactions, etc.\textsuperscript{19} This is the Holy Spirit at play!

Theoretical Lens: Narrative Imagination

Those who participated in this study were given the opportunity to tell their stories in a way that encouraged them to see their current experiences as part of the larger story of God’s activity. For some, telling their stories was a new experience. One participant in an Appreciative Inquiry interview made that observation and then commented, “I’m not used to doing this.”\textsuperscript{20} As we observed in chapter two, however, all of us are shaped by stories. These stories become actors in our lives. If we are not conscious of the stories that we are living, we lose the power to see how they influence our future. As people of God, it is imperative that we perceive our own stories as those rooted in the grand story of God’s activity.

In *Memories, Hopes, and Conversations: Appreciative Inquiry, Missional Engagement, and Congregational Change* Mark Lau Branson asserts that one assumption of Appreciative Inquiry is that language and questions change reality. He observes that “the research itself—interviewing people, using surveys, seeking opinions, and weighing votes—changes a church by influencing the thinking and conversations and images of participants. Memories, perceptions, and hopes are shaped in the midst of research questions. Change, of one kind or another, begins with the very first questions.”\textsuperscript{21} The

\textsuperscript{19} See focused codes resulting from the Appreciative Inquiry congregational event in chapter five.  
\textsuperscript{20} Appreciative Inquiry Interview Seven.  
questions asked in this research project were, therefore, the beginning of a change in the way that we tell our stories, both individually and as a community.

It was important that one of the questions asked during the Appreciative Inquiry interviews as well as the congregation event was: *When have you been surprised or delighted by an interaction with a stranger (or someone you didn’t know very well)*? For a congregation with a history of distancing ourselves from the surrounding community, it was a starting point simply to recall and lift up positive stories of interactions with strangers. As people answered this question and told their stories, they were able to spontaneously articulate ways in which they had experienced God’s grace through someone they did not previously know.

Mark Lau Branson lists another assumption of Appreciative Inquiry: “People have more confidence in the journey to the future when they carry forward parts of the past—and those facets should be what is best about the past.”22 He continues: “Patterns of behaviors, embedded through habitual action and words, can end up undermining core purposes and values.”23 This congregation had previously been carrying forward stories from the past that, while very important for understanding where this congregation came from, may not be helpful for determining its core purpose, values, and where it is called to go in the future. Through the course of this intervention, the opportunity to remember other stories and experiences helped lay the foundation for imagining ways that God has already been active preparing us to live into God’s preferred and promised future.

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22 Ibid., 35.

23 Ibid.
It is not just the stories of our own individual experiences that we had the opportunity to tell during this intervention, however. This intervention was also an intentional return to telling the biblical story in ways that articulate that God’s story is our story. As Rolf Jacobson argues, we need the biblical story to counteract the inadequacy of the stories that would otherwise define us.

We will need a different story. We will need this story to come alongside our stories and be a story that can tell the truth about us without killing us. Or rather, precisely a story that will tell the truth about us and thereby kill us, but also raise us from the dead. If such a story is to be found, it will have to come from outside of ourselves. In order to be a better story—one that can kill us but also give us new life—the story will need to be told by a better narrator. It will need a storyteller who is truth and whose perspective is larger than is humanly possible. It will have to be initiated, authored, and told by one wise enough, loving enough, and powerful enough to raise the dead.24

It is the story of God’s activity on behalf of the whole of creation that does this. It is God’s story that takes the litany of all of our individual experiences and makes sense of them.

It is interesting that more than once the biblical story of Jonah surfaced in the Appreciative Inquiry interviews and informal conversations as the narrative that most reminded interviewees of this congregation.25 The observation was made that this congregation is like Jonah in the boat in the midst of the storm. One participant described the similarity this way:

He’s in the boat and the boat’s sinking and he’s sleeping through it all. I mean you know finally he did his part and I guess he jumped in, maybe, before they


25 The story of Jonah was identified in Appreciative Inquiry Interview Three and Appreciative Inquiry Interview Four.
threw him in. Hopefully that will be us, you know? We'll jump in and God will use us.26

The particular section of Jonah referenced by interviewees is told in the first chapter of the biblical story. Jonah avoids going to preach to the wicked Ninevites by attempting to sail in the opposite direction. God intervenes and causes a storm to stir up the sea with such ferocity that the mariners fear for their lives. They cast lots and determine that it is Jonah who is to blame for the calamity. Jonah, however, is sound asleep. He remains unaware of the turmoil he has caused until the captain of the vessel wakes him up. The captain says, “What are you doing sound asleep? Get up, call on your god!” (Jonah 1:6).

In this playful story, Jonah did not jump overboard himself. Instead he urged the other men to throw him off the boat. “So they picked Jonah up and threw him into the sea; and the sea ceased from its raging” (Jonah 1:15). As for Jonah, he found himself in the belly of a fish where he finally called out to God and heard again the call from God he had up until that point neglected.

The words of the boat captain to Jonah—*What are you doing sound asleep? Get up and call on your God!*—might very well summarize the whole of this research project. Through the process of this intervention, the congregation woke up to the fact that God is calling them to go in a different direction. Having awoken to that realization, the question now is what will happen next? Prayerfully it will be as that interviewee stated, “We’ll jump in and God will use us.”27

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26 Appreciative Inquiry Interview Four.

27 Appreciative Inquiry Interview Four.
Identifying the story of Jonah as similar in some way to the current experience of this congregation gives this congregation a starting point for talking about how God may be calling them to move forward. They might have conversation about ways in which this story resonates with their experience and where their experience is different. They might use this as a jumping off point to pray about how they have been asleep in the past and where God is calling them in the future. Perhaps the congregation can find solidarity in this biblical witness to the struggle of staying awake to God’s call and acting with courage to move in the direction of God’s activity. There are a number of ways in which this congregation could play with this story in congregational life to see what insights the Spirit may bring out of it.

Maybe, just maybe, this congregation will hear in this story of Jonah the echoes of one that comes later. In Matthew 12, Jesus uses the “sign of the prophet Jonah” in reference to his own death and resurrection (verse 39). Perhaps the story of Jonah gives us a way to tell our story. Waking up and being thrown overboard—finally following God’s call—may lead to loss so great it could mean death. Ultimately, though, it is through death that we are given the powerful gift of resurrection.

Biblical Lens: The Creative Word Made Flesh

The playful engagement of Scripture used in this study invited participants to enter into the story of God’s creative and redeeming Word. The premise for this experiment was based on the understanding that the Word of God is incarnational. God communicates through Scripture, through the embodied form of Jesus of Nazareth, and through the Holy Spirit’s ongoing teaching and witness. The communication of God in

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all three of these forms meets us in the middle of our human experience—in all our joys, challenges, and foibles. We are invited then to play with the Word that has been given for us.

The playful engagement of Scripture in this study was designed to help worshippers connect the story of God’s activity in the Bible with their own experiences both individually and as a community of faith. Appendix D outlines the details of these playful ways Scripture was engaged during worship. What was most interesting to me is that months after a particular worship service, participants would bring up something that resonated with them—a particular aspect of playing with a text that helped them hear the story in a new way. As was true of the play styles discussed in chapter two, people expressed a preference for particular styles of play. Whether or not the play style used was their favorite, however, individuals were able to remember and discuss the stories they had heard. Play had enabled them to enter the story... or, perhaps more accurately stated, the incarnational Word had entered theirs.

Biblical Lens: Playful Passages

God plays. Chapter three traced God’s playfulness from the squish of the first lump of clay named Adam to the Pentecost party and the Holy Spirit’s grand entrance. All of Scripture testifies to the playfulness of God. We too, being made in the image of God, are created to play! God has made us in such a way that play opens up our capacity to be able to imagine, create, and enjoy. Is it really any wonder, then, that play also opens up our capacity to perceive God’s movement? The playfulness of God awakens us to new possibilities of a world in which God is active.
The result of the dependent paired t-test between the baseline and end line surveys showed growth in the congregation’s mean agreement to the statement *I enjoy imagining what God will do next.*29 One of the joys of recognizing God’s playful nature revealed throughout Scripture is the anticipation of what God will do next. This God who plays in the sandbox of creation, laughs in the face of death, and breathes holy fire into us is still playing!

**Theological Lens: Play**

There was one time in the course of this intervention that truly felt the opposite of playful. It occurred during worship the Sunday that the author of *Hello, Navi: A Novella About Human Trafficking* came to speak with us.30 As she told her personal story of being bought and trafficked as a sex slave, I could not help but feel all the playfulness drain from me—*How can we play when this is the experience of girls right here in our own city?* It was then that Moltmann’s words began to echo through my mind. “Life as rejoicing in liberation, as solidarity with those in bondage, as play with reconciled existence, and as pain at unreconciled existence demonstrates the Easter event in the world.”31 My sense of playfulness returned when this incredible woman was able to point to God’s victory over her experiences and proclaim that our story, like hers, is the living witness of God’s life-giving provision. In the midst of a terribly difficult topic, this author shared a story of thriving in God’s gift of new life.

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29 The mean of agreement to this statement in the baseline was 3.84 while the mean of agreement to the statement at the end line was 3.92. While this is not enough of a change to be statistically significant (*p > 0.05*), it does show growth in a positive direction. It would be interesting to see if, given a longer intervention, this would continue to grow into a statistically significant difference.


31 Moltmann et al., *Theology of Play*, 31.
Moltmann points out that joining in the playfulness of God does not somehow make us ignorant of the hard reality of life. Instead, he argues that the play of the liberated believer is one that “points critically at the oppressors.” He observes, “Only those who are capable of joy can feel pain at their own and other people’s suffering…. Where freedom is near, the chains begin to hurt.” It is because we have been liberated by Christ that we cannot tolerate the enslavement of others. It is because of the freedom and joy we have been given in Christ that we play with the ferocity of faith. The play of the believer now foreshadows the play of God’s victory and the future life of rejoicing. As Moltmann says, “Life is not a struggle but preplay, not preparatory labor but prevision of the future life of rejoicing.” To play now is to embody the promise of the life that is fully yet to come.

The playful Bible study that was a part of this intervention looked at the book of Revelation. In the first session, I asked the group to build a structure of LEGO® bricks to illustrate what they have heard or what they envision the end of the world will be like. One participant looked at the pile of toys in front of him and said, “I don’t need to build anything. That is how the end of the world will be. It will all be chaos and destruction.” At the end of the study, however, a much different idea was on display as participants made images from modeling clay to represent the good news that, in the end, God wins.

32 Ibid., 32.
33 Ibid., 31.
34 Ibid., 35.
35 LEGO® is a trademark of the LEGO Group of companies which in no way sponsored, authorized, or endorsed this study.
36 Playful Bible Study, Session One.
These images were ones of joy. The participant who made a sun said she did so “because the future is bright.” Another participant made a smiley face with a crown because “there is joy in the kingship of Christ.”

The surveys that participants took at the end of the Bible study also reflected a joyful quality. When asked what particular movement might come to mind when thinking about this portion of Scripture, they responded with such answers as smiling, singing, jumping, and cartwheeling. One participant wrote in “Skipping—cheerfulness, care-free days because God wins—and because God wins, I do too!”

God is playful and God created us to be playful too. There is much in our current experience that would attempt to steal this joy from our lives. As long as sin remains in this world we will be tempted to take ourselves too seriously, to give ourselves over to striving and needless worry, to create systems whereby we attempt to become our own saviors and those in which we enslave others to make ourselves feel more free. Play should be considered an act of rebellion against such forces of evil. Play is a ferocious act of faith, the claim stake of the Spirit, a daring witness to the promise on which we have bet our lives. We do not play in ignorance of the troubles of this world, we play in spite of them—in testament to their ultimate defeat.

Theological Lens: Participation in the Perichoretic Relationship of the Triune God

Play is never a solitary act. Play involves movement—a back-and-forth, to-and-fro, reciprocal relationship in which one yields to the other only to be invited to take the

37 Playful Bible Study, Session Five.

38 Playful Bible Study Completion Survey.
Within the triune relationship of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit we see this back-and-forth movement of mutual sharing, indwelling, and exchanging. Even more gloriously, it is into this relationship that we are invited.

To be invited into relationship with God is to be invited into perichoretic play. It is to be drawn into the risk and reward of relational life in which we are renewed in the constant motion of being drawn into God’s self and toward the Other. It is this movement into God and toward the Other that is evident in the provocative proposal for the future that was outlined during the Appreciative Inquiry congregational event. The movement of this congregation is toward becoming a more “diverse and vibrant faith community serving God and the community with imagination and deep faith.”

Summary

The congregation of Playground Lutheran Church was invited into the playful engagement of Scripture. The specific question at the heart of this study was:

*How might an Action Research intervention involving engaging Scripture playfully expand missional imagination?*

Six months later, it is the movement of perichoretic play that characterizes this congregation. This congregation is finding itself drawn into God’s self and toward their

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39 This is true even of solitary games. Even if one is playing against oneself, play always involves the give and take of reciprocal motion. Gadamer points this out, “Even in the case of games in which one tries to perform tasks that one has set oneself, there is a risk that they will not ‘work,’ ‘succeed,’ or ‘succeed again,’ which is the attraction of the game. Whoever ‘tries’ is the one who is tried. The real subject of the game (this is shown in precisely those experiences in which there is only a single player) is not the player but the game itself. What holds the player in its spell, draws him into play, and keeps him there is the game itself. This is shown also by the fact that every game has its own proper spirit. . . . Games differ from one another in their spirit. The reason for this is that the to-and-fro movement that constitutes the game is patterned in different ways.” Gadamer, *Truth and Method,* 111.

40 See Appreciative Inquiry congregational event theoretical code discussed in chapter five.
neighbor. Missional imagination is developing for what this movement looks like in this particular context.

This study defined missional imagination as:

- The capacity to name God’s action in the past;
- The capacity to recognize/wonder about God’s activity now; and
- The capacity to dream with others about God’s preferred and promised future.

After the six months of the intervention period, there is evidence that missional imagination is beginning to grow within this congregation.

Baseline and end line mean agreement to the statement *As I look back on my life, I recognize God’s presence/activity* was high in both the baseline and the end line surveys. However, through the Appreciative Inquiry process, the congregation is now intentionally telling those stories of what God has done for them in the past. They have also begun spontaneously relating what they have playfully experienced in worship to their own stories of God’s presence and activity in their lives.

The interview process also revealed deep questions and wonderings about God’s activity now. Overall, there was a willingness to be unsure about the details while at the same time firmly recognizing that the direction of God’s leading is outward toward the wider community. This was a theme in each of the interviews as well as the congregational event.

Finally, the congregation has begun dreaming together about what God will do next. A vision emerged during the Appreciative Inquiry congregational event of this congregation as a “diverse and vibrant faith community serving God and the community

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41 Mean agreement to this statement was 4.80 in both the baseline and end line. See table 6.
with imagination and deep faith." Many ideas were brought forth of what God might be ready to do with this community. There was also positive movement in the end line survey agreement to the statement *I enjoy imagining what God will do next.*

Through the playful engagement of Scripture, this congregation was awakened to the fact that God may be ready to do something new. Although awakened to the uncomfortable reality that adaptive change is needed, the playful engagement of Scripture gave them a way to begin addressing change while at the same time growing in missional imagination.

**Limits of this Study and Generalizability**

This study was conducted in one Lutheran congregation over a time period of six months. Obvious limitations exist with such a narrow focus. While important progress was made toward an expanded missional imagination in this one congregation, it is impossible to know without further research how congregations in other settings (with their own unique circumstances, histories, and populations) would respond similarly or perhaps differently. This one congregation’s experience, however, is an interesting starting point for future research.

**Questions for Future Research**

*Are the changes that were observed over the course of this intervention lasting?* It would be interesting to study this congregation over a longer period of time in order to

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42 See Appreciative Inquiry congregational event theoretical code presented in chapter five.

43 Mean agreement to this statement was 3.84 in the baseline survey and 3.92 in the end line. See table 6. While these do not represent changes of statistical significance, they do indicate movement in a positive direction. It would be interesting to see whether or not this growth would continue given more time for intervention.
determine whether this intervention has a long-term influence on this congregation’s missional imagination.

Is the playful engagement of Scripture helpful for expanding missional imagination in other congregations? Each congregation has its own history and institutional personality. It would be interesting to try a similar intervention in multiple congregations with varying backgrounds and in a variety of settings.

Could the playful engagement of Scripture expand missional imagination not just among individual congregations but across a group of churches, a synod, or a larger denominational body? I was recently a part of a conversation with a group of pastors wondering aloud about how it might be possible to expand missional engagement across their entire synod. I found myself dreaming about ways these churches might begin to join in perichoretic play.

God expanded the missional imagination of the congregation I serve through the playful engagement of Scripture. Perhaps there are ways in which this experiment can be helpful to others also seeking to more fully join God at play!
EPILOGUE

A Mayflower Moment

In chapter two of this thesis I quoted Diana Butler Bass asking the question of whether we approach telling the story of leadership in the church today as if we are aboard the Titanic or if, rather, we are on the Mayflower.¹ I admit it is tempting to lean toward the Titanic. It is way too easy to be discouraged and overwhelmed by the frenetic rate of change today and the church’s all too human love of the stable, predictable, and easy.

It took participating in this Doctor of Ministry program for me to begin articulating for myself and to others that this is indeed a Mayflower moment. We are voyagers in an exciting and unpredictable era. It is a privilege to be the church in this time. We get the opportunity to explore places and ideas we have never before experienced. We get to experience the grace of moments in which we find ourselves far from our comfort zone only to discover that God is here too.

Ministry as Perichoretic Play

I often observe ministry approached as if it is a dire duty. Ordained clergy are especially good at putting all kinds of pressure on ourselves and our congregants to make the church successful. Of course, by church what we really mean is our own individual

congregation and the ability to keep the building open and the group functioning with as minimal amount of change to the established routine as possible. If that is our definition of the success of the church, then we may very well fail. If we become bound up in anxiety over this point, the call to ministry becomes a millstone of law hung around our necks . . . and, as my mom would often quote, “there is no joy in Mudville.”\(^2\) None of us, no matter how talented a pastor we are and no matter how dedicated a congregation we may be, are going to cause the elusive growth that will save our congregations. It is time that we repent of the sin of thinking we could. No amount of our effort is going to save the church that we love.

Our effort will not save our church because, first of all, the church is not ours. It does not belong to us, nor is it limited to our particular congregation, group, or building. The church is God’s. It is a big, messy, global, local, intimate, holy, precious gathering of those called by the Holy Spirit. It is God alone who is responsible for the shape of the church and its mission. To think that we can save the church through our own effort, strength, power, or goodness is to put ourselves in the place of God.

If we confess our sins, God who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:9). So what then?

Liberated from the sin of our own striving, we are finally free to live the gospel. Without the millstone of fear cloaked in the excuse of responsibility, we get to be participants in a grand adventure of which we do not control the outcome. We are liberated to join in the perichoretic play of the triune God.

\(^2\) This phrase comes from a line of the poem by Ernest Lawrence Thayer, “Casey at the Bat,” (1888).
Ministry, at its best, is perichoretic play. It is the gift of joyfully finding ourselves caught up in the back-and-forth movement that draws us more deeply into God and more closely to the Other who is our neighbor. We are free to play! We are free to experiment, to risk, to try new things, to wonder, and to enjoy the gift of these playful relationships.

Since finishing the research portion of this project, I have continued to play. The congregation I serve has as well. In September we opened a Pray Ground in the sanctuary. It is stocked with modeling dough and craft supplies, a rocking chair, snacks, books, and blocks so that children can worship in creative ways during each service. Since its establishment the congregation has started dreaming about how an adult version could be implemented too!

![Figure 10. The Pray Ground](image)

Though not enough time has gone by for me to be able to give a full report on how that provocative proposal for the future has panned out for this congregation, I can

---

3 This Pray Ground was inspired by others who have created similar spaces. A helpful resource for us was a blog detailing a variety of different Pray Ground styles. Traci Smith, http://www.traci-smith.com/church-pray-grounds-eight-stories-and-inspiring-examples-kidmin/ (accessed June 1, 2017).
report that in the following months, changes are taking place. The vision of the
congregation worshipping in multiple languages is already coming true. Little did we
know that the first new language we would begin using in worship would be sign
language. I am now learning to sign and on Christmas Eve I conducted a baptism in sign
language for the first time!

Plans are in the works for creating a prayer garden. We are in the process of
communicating with the city’s transportation department to see what sort of bench/shelter
we could build at the bus stop on the corner. The hope is that the prayer garden would
also include paths so that those walking from the mobile home park behind the church
building to the bus stop would find this a peaceful, hospitable route. Longer term
dreaming has included conversations about the possibility of building a playground that
could be used by the surrounding community as well as travelers on the interstate that
regularly pass by.

Perhaps the most exciting part of this dreaming, though, is that we are learning to
play with others. We have recognized that it is the building of relationships that needs to
come first. All of these ideas have come through dwelling in God’s Word and none are
being enacted without playmates in the community who can help us to discern the Spirit’s
movement more clearly.

Having set out on an expedition into the unknown, we are eager to see what
unfolds. There is no map or chart of the waters ahead to guarantee smooth sailing. It is a
true adventure in every sense of the word. The divine game is afoot!

*I can’t wait to see what God will do next!*
APPENDIX A

Implied Consent Letter for Surveys

November 2016

Dear Participant,

You are invited to participate in a study as part of my Doctor of Ministry degree at Luther Seminary. As part of my research, I am studying how engaging Scripture in playful ways impacts missional imagination. You were selected as a possible participant in this study because you are a member of Playground Lutheran Church or frequently attend worship here.

If you decide to participate, please complete the enclosed survey. Your return of this survey is implied consent for me to use this information in my research. The survey is designed to gather your thoughts about the topics of Scripture, Play, and Mission. It will take about 10 minutes to complete. No benefits accrue to you for answering the survey. Any discomfort or inconvenience to you derives only from the amount of time taken to complete the survey.

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 me, Playground Lutheran Church, or Luther Seminary. If you decide to participate, you are free to discontinue participation at any time without prejudice.

If you have any questions, please ask. If you have additional questions later, contact me, Pastor Sarah Nye, via phone or email.

You may also contact my Professors, Dr. Daniel Anderson or Dr. Alvin Luedke, with any questions or concerns.

Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,
Pastor Sarah Nye
APPENDIX B

Baseline Questionnaire

Please fill in one circle per question. Please shade circles completely.

Q1. Are you:
   o Female
   o Male

Q2. On average, how many times do you attend worship services in this congregation?
   o Usually every week
   o Several times a month
   o About once a month
   o Several times per year
   o Once a year or less
   o Other: ___________________________________________________

Q3. On average, how many times do you attend Bible studies or Sunday School in this congregation?
   o Usually every week
   o Several times a month
   o About once a month
   o Several times per year
   o Once a year or less
   o Other: ___________________________________________________

Q4. Which one of the following statements describes your church experience prior to becoming a member or attendee of this congregation?
   o I have always been a member of this congregation
   o I was a member of another Lutheran congregation before attending here
   o I was a member/attendee at a church of another Christian denomination
     Please identify the denomination ________________________
   o I was not a member/did not attend any church prior to this one
   o Other ________________________________________________
   o Not Applicable
Q5. Which one of the following statements best describes you?
   o I like to goof around.
   o I think best when I am moving my body.
   o I love to discover new places, ideas, or experiences.
   o I really enjoy competing and winning— even when it is just against myself.
   o I like to be in charge. I’m a natural leader/organizer.
   o I have fun working on my collection.
   o I find joy in creating something beautiful or functional.
   o I can easily get lost in a great story.
   o Other: __________________________________________________

Q6. What is your birthdate? _____ / _____ / ______
   MM     DD    YYYY

In this section, more than one answer may apply. Please shade circles completely.

Q7. Which 3 of the following do you think best describe God?
   o Distant
   o Approachable
   o Holy
   o Playful
   o Angry
   o Creative
   o Friendly
   o Other: __________________________________________________
Q8. How many black dots do you see in the image below?

- 17
- 35
- I have absolutely no idea
- It keeps changing!
- Other: __________________________________________________

Q9. What sounds like fun to you?

- Pulling off a great practical joke
- A satisfying workout
- Exploring something or someplace new
- Improving your score on a favorite game
- Directing a play
- Finding that baseball, button, spoon, postcard (or whatever it is) that your collection is still missing
- Drawing, painting, quilting, woodworking, gardening, or creating some kind of craft
- Reading a good book or watching a good movie
- I don’t know
- Other: ______________________________________________________

Q10. Read the Bible on my own is…

- Fun
- Boring
- Invigorating
- Confusing
- Enlightening
- Other: _____________________________________________________
Q11. Hearing Bible stories in church is…
- Fun
- Boring
- Invigorating
- Confusing
- Enlightening
- Other: ______________________________________________________

Please circle the number that best describes the strength of your agreement to the following statements.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>STRENGTH OF AGREEMENT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Q12. I have read the entire Bible.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q13. I have favorite parts of the Bible I read over and over again.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q14. Daily events remind me of Bible stories I have read/heard.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q15. I would like to know more about the Bible.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q16. As I look back on the events of my life, I recognize God’s presence/activity.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q17. I enjoy imagining what God will do next.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q18. God cares about what happens in our city.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q19. God is doing big things in my community.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q20. I enjoy worship services in this congregation.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q21. The Word of God has changed my life.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q22. I am being invited by God to participate in something new.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q23. I want our church to grow larger, in terms of number of people attending.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q24. The majority of our church family wants our church to grow larger, in terms of the number of people attending.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q25. My unique gifts and talents are welcomed and appreciated by this congregation.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q26. The unique gifts and talents of others who are different from me are welcomed and appreciated by this congregation.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q27. This congregation is meaningfully connecting with our community.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q28. Our congregation is growing spiritually.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q29. I am excited to talk to my friends about what is happening at our church.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**STRENGTH OF AGREEMENT**

- Very Low
- Very High
- Don’t Know

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strength</th>
<th>Very Low</th>
<th>Very High</th>
<th>Don’t Know</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Q30. What additional comments would you like to add?

________________________________________________________________________________________

OPTIONAL:

Q31. If you would be willing to be interviewed about your experiences in this congregation and what is important to you, please sign your name below or contact Pastor Sarah.

________________________________________________________________________________________
APPENDIX C

End line Questionnaire

Please fill in one circle per question. Please shade circles completely.

Q1. Are you:
   o Female
   o Male

Q2. Are you currently a member of a church board and/or the church council?
   o No
   o Yes

Q3. On average, how many times did you attend worship services in this congregation in the past six months.
   o Usually every week
   o Several times a month
   o About once a month
   o 3-5 times
   o 1 or 2 times
   o Never
   o Other: ___________________________________________________

Q4. Did you participate in Bible Study or Sunday School at this church in the past six months?
   o No
   o Yes, I participated in the following:
     (Please include your participation in the Revelation Bible Study in November/December if you did so.)
     __________________________________________________________

Q5. Which one of the following statements describes your church experience prior to becoming a member or attendee of this congregation?
   o I have always been a member of this congregation
   o I was a member of another Lutheran congregation before attending here
   o I was a member/attendee at a church of another Christian denomination
     Please identify the denomination _____________________________
   o I was not a member/did not attend any church prior to this one
   o Other _____________________________
   o Not Applicable
Q6. Which one of the following statements best describes you?

- I like to goof around.
- I think best when I am moving my body.
- I love to discover new places, ideas, or experiences.
- I really enjoy competing and winning— even when it is just against myself.
- I like to be in charge. I’m a natural leader/organizer.
- I have fun working on my collection.
- I find joy in creating something beautiful or functional.
- I can easily get lost in a great story.
- Other: __________________________________________________

Q7. What is your birthdate?

___ / ___ / ______

MM     DD    YYYY

In this section, more than one answer may apply. Please shade circles completely.

Q8. Which 3 of the following do you think best describe God?

- Distant
- Approachable
- Holy
- Playful
- Angry
- Creative
- Friendly
- Other: __________________________________________________
Q9. What do you see?

- Me
- You
- I have absolutely no idea
- It keeps changing!
- Other: ________________________________________________

Q10. What sounds like fun to you?

- Pulling off a great practical joke
- A satisfying workout
- Exploring something or someplace new
- Improving your score on a favorite game
- Directing a play
- Finding that baseball, button, spoon, postcard (or whatever it is) that your collection is still missing
- Drawing, painting, quilting, woodworking, gardening, or creating some kind of craft
- Reading a good book or watching a good movie
- I don’t know
- Other: ___________________________________________________________________

Q11. Read the Bible on my own is…

- Fun
- Boring
- Invigorating
- Confusing
- Enlightening
- Other: __________________________________________________________________
Q12. Hearing Bible stories in church is…
   - Fun
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   - Invigorating
   - Confusing
   - Enlightening
   - Other: ________________________________

Please circle the number that best describes how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Very Low</th>
<th>Low</th>
<th>Very High</th>
<th>High</th>
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<td>Question</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Q31. What was your favorite worship experience in the past six months?

_____________________________________________________________________

_____________________________________________________________________

Q 32. What Bible story (or stories) that you heard in church within the past six months have particularly stuck in your mind? Why do you think it has?

_____________________________________________________________________

_____________________________________________________________________

Q32. What additional comments would you like to add?

_____________________________________________________________________

_____________________________________________________________________

Thank you for your participation!
## APPENDIX D

### Playful Engagement of Scripture in Worship

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Scripture Text</th>
<th>Playful Engagement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Nov. 6, 2016 | **Jonah and God’s Mercy**  
                           Jonah 1:1-17; 3:1-10; 4:1-11  
                           *Stewardship Emphasis Text—Romans 15:13* | - These first two Sundays in November were part of our congregation’s stewardship emphasis. The sanctuary was decorated so as to “overflow!”  
- The call of Jonah was engaged through a video retelling. We used the *Read Scripture Old Testament: Jonah* video from thebibleproject.com. |
| Nov. 13, 2016 | **God Calls Isaiah**  
                           Isaiah 6:1-8  
                           *Stewardship Emphasis Text—Romans 15:13* | - Isaiah responds “Here am I; send me!”  
- At the start of this Commitment Sunday service, the front steps of the church were covered with pompoms to extend the overflowing river. During the service the children passed out the pompoms. Anyone who wanted to was invited to wave their pompoms anytime they heard the word “overflow.” *Some of the adults got more excited than the kids about catching every “overflow!”* |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Scripture Text</th>
<th>Playful Engagement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nov. 20, 2016</td>
<td><strong>God Promises a New Covenant</strong>&lt;br&gt;Jeremiah 36:1-8, 21-23, 27-28; then 31:31-34</td>
<td>- In this text, the king cuts off the scroll of the words of the Lord with a penknife after every few lines that are read and throws it into the fire. During the entirety of this sermon, sound effects of a burning fire and the cutting of paper were played.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Dec. 4, 2016 | **Joel: God’s Promised Spirit**<br>Joel 2:12-13, 28-29 | - The Lord implores the people to “rend your hearts and not your clothing.” Each member of the congregation was given a heart shaped box with blank slips of paper inside. The modern day rending of our hearts this morning was the opportunity to create a visual representation of what it is that we carry with us in our hearts—the joys, the sorrows, and those things for which we are repentant.  
- Rending our heart exposes all that we are to God, but it also has another effect. Rending our hearts is a hopeful move. It opens us up to what God is about to do… for God to pour something new into our hearts. God’s promise in Joel is that rending our hearts not only exposes us, but also makes us ready to receive what God will pour in. Open hearts make us ready to receive what God will give—the gift of God’s Spirit, which is a gift of hope. Each member of the congregation was also given a symbol of hope to put into their heart shaped boxes. |
Playful Engagement of Scripture in Worship (cont.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Scripture Text</th>
<th>Playful Engagement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dec. 11, 2016</td>
<td><strong>Spirit of the Lord Upon Me</strong></td>
<td>• We played with Jenga blocks during the children’s sermon as a reminder that even</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Isaiah 61:1-11</td>
<td>when life looks like it is in rubble, God is about to do a new thing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• During the sermon, we remembered</td>
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<td></td>
<td>that it is the Spirit of God that</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>gives us the authority to join in</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>God’s mission. We wondered aloud</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>about how God might be calling us</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>to do that, and then decorated</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>the Christmas trees in our sanctuary</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>together as one expression of our</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>trust in God’s power and provision</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>even in the midst of uncertain times.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dec. 11, 2016</td>
<td><strong>Advent Event</strong></td>
<td>• We had a special advent event/worship service entitled “A Night in Bethlehem.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(evening)</td>
<td>Luke 2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Our church was transformed into the city of Bethlehem. In the carpentry shop we</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>built benches for the food pantry, in the fabric shop we made quilts for our</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>local pregnancy resource center, etc. We ended with candlelight worship in the</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>stable.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

1 This event was loosely based on the materials from Group Publishing by the same title, though it was significantly adapted for our congregation/community.
## Playful Engagement of Scripture in Worship (cont.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Scripture Text</th>
<th>Playful Engagement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dec. 18, 2016</td>
<td>Jesus’ Birth Announced Luke 1:26-49</td>
<td>• We watched “First Christmas: Elizabeth” video from skitguys.com</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Wooden angels were passed out for individuals to write Luke 1:37 on. <em>A ten-year-old boy remarked that this verse is going to be his life motto from now on!</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Everyone was sent home with a baby Jesus as a reminder of God With Us.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>These stuffed babies were observed in the following weeks showing up in hospital rooms, cars, purses, etc. as they were carried around with the congregation in their daily lives.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dec. 25, 2016</td>
<td>Shepherds Visit Luke 2:8-20</td>
<td>• This service was entirely music and story. The Christmas story was interspersed with favorite songs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jan. 1, 2017</td>
<td>Simeon and Anna Luke 2:21-38</td>
<td>• The sermon for this Sunday was a dramatic monologue—“The Crazy One and the Chosen One.”3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


### Playful Engagement of Scripture in Worship (cont.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Scripture Text</th>
<th>Playful Engagement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Jan. 8, 2017 | Jesus’ Baptism          | • We watched a video on John the Baptist from the Re:Form Ancestors curriculum.  
[![John the Baptist](image)](image)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
| Jan. 15, 2017 | Sermon at Nazareth    | • To help illustrate the concept of *release* in this gospel passage, the kids had their hands tied behind their back, their legs tied together, or a blindfold put over their eyes. After attempting to do normal activities, they were freed. *One grandmother, whose six-year-old granddaughter’s legs were tied together, noticed that during the closing hymn of “Amazing Grace/My Chains Are Gone” her granddaughter was singing while doing motions with her hands going up and down her legs to indicate that her chains were gone.*  
• The sermon was a video made by a youth of the congregation whose friend is being treated for cancer at St. Jude’s Children’s Research Hospital. We were invited to join in supporting this ministry that is providing healing to all in need.                                                                                          |
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Scripture Text</th>
<th>Playful Engagement</th>
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</table>
| Jan. 29, 2017| Healing on the Sabbath, Luke 6:1-16| • After talking about what the Sabbath *isn’t* during the children’s sermon, the sermon focused on what a gift the Sabbath *is*. The congregation was invited to rest and listen to a Sabbath story—a reading from the first chapter of *Sabbath: Finding Rest, Renewal, and Delight in Our Busy Lives*.  

![Sabbath book cover](image)

• Each person was given two lifesavers, one to eat during worship (if so desired) and the other to stash in a pocket or purse to discover later during the week as a reminder to savor the Lord’s lifesaving gift of Sabbath renewal.  

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### Playful Engagement of Scripture in Worship (cont.)

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Scripture Text</th>
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</table>
| Feb. 5, 2017 | Healing the Centurion’s Slave and Raising the Widow’s Son | • During the children’s sermon the kids played *Simon Says* and then a version based on the gospel that we called *Centurion Says*.  
• The pattern of God’s healing and compassion is evident throughout Scripture, but this is the first moment in the Gospel of Luke when the light comes on, and Jesus is revealed as the one with the authority to speak the word of life.  
We played with the image of a Lite Brite and everyone was given a black sheet of paper on which to write/draw the word of life that they heard in the Gospel for their life. |

- ![Lite Brite](image1.png)
- ![Rise](image2.png)
- ![Light](image3.png)
Playful Engagement of Scripture in Worship (cont.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
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</table>
| Feb. 12, 2017 | **Are You the One?**  
Luke 7:18-35 | • This Sunday we invited an author/abolitionist to come and speak to our congregation. The author of *Hello Navi* spoke about the evils of human trafficking in our city and how we are being called to help stop it.  
• The introduction to *Hello Navi* makes clear that the main character’s name comes from the Hebrew word for prophet. As she was speaking, Sandy took on the role of prophet declaring to our congregation the Word of the Lord.  
• *This was perhaps the only time in the entire scope of this project that I truly felt the opposite of playful. The playfulness returned, however, when this incredible woman was able to point to God’s victory over her experiences and proclaim that our story, like hers, is the living witness of God’s life-giving provision. In the midst of a terribly difficult topic, this author shared a story of thriving in God’s gift of new life! It was the epitome of what Moltmann writes: “Life as rejoicing in liberation, as solidarity with those in bondage, as play with reconciled existence, and as pain at unreconciled existence demonstrates the Easter event in the world.”* |

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6 Storm, *Hello Navi: A Novella About Human Trafficking.*

7 Moltmann et al., *Theology of Play,* 31.
Playful Engagement of Scripture in Worship (cont.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Scripture Text</th>
<th>Playful Engagement</th>
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</thead>
</table>
| Feb. 19, 2017 | **Forgiven at Jesus’ Feet**  
Luke 7:36-50 | • During the children’s sermon we noticed that the smell of the ointment must have filled the room. We rubbed good-smelling lotion on our hands as we prayed for our acts of praise to fill the rooms we enter too!  

![Image](image.png)  

• The sermon incorporated a piece of performance art utilizing volunteers from the congregation. Three youth were invited forward to play the parts of Jesus, Simon the Pharisee, and the woman at Jesus’ feet. They formed a freeze-frame image for the remainder of the sermon.  

• This visual image was referred to as it was discussed through the lens of Glaser’s *Conversational Intelligence*.  

![Image](image.png)  

• We delighted in noticing that Jesus didn’t allow Simon’s skeptical thoughts to remain silent. Instead, Jesus invited Simon into conversation, telling a story, and inviting Simon to a greater level of trust and love.  

• The congregation was then invited to share a story with the person sitting next to them about a time when they experienced being moved to greater trust in God.  

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Playful Engagement of Scripture in Worship (cont.)

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
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</table>
| Feb. 26, 2017 | Transfiguration  
Luke 9:28-45 | • This was Transfiguration Sunday. It was also Oscar Sunday. We had a red carpet event in which we recognized this star-studded Scripture reading in which Moses and Elijah appear with Jesus. On this day when “Hidden Figures” was nominated for Best Picture, we reflected on Jesus as the ultimate *hidden figure*, the Messiah hiding so humbly in plain sight. |
| Mar. 1, 2017 | Jesus Turns to Jerusalem  
Luke 9:51-62 | • This Ash Wednesday we set out on a journey to travel with Jesus through the Gospel of Luke to Jerusalem.  
• Worshippers were invited to try what might be a new spiritual practice of journaling their journey through the season of Lent. Each worshipper was given a copy of the LEAD Tune-In Journal by Peggy Hahn.  

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9 I became aware of this LEAD resource through our congregation’s involvement with our synod’s Missional River process. This resource is available from LEAD at waytolead.org.
### Playful Engagement of Scripture in Worship (cont.)

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<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mar. 1, 2017 (cont.)</td>
<td>Luke 9:51-62 (cont.)</td>
<td>• We also committed to praying for and giving to those who are on physical journeys, such as refugees traveling to safety, this Lenten season. We kicked of a season-long effort of collecting supplies for Baskets of Promise for Lutheran World Relief kits.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Mar. 5, 2017          | **Good Samaritan** Luke 10:25-42 | • This Sunday the congregation engaged in the process of Dwelling in the Word with this text. The passage was read twice. The congregation was asked to pay attention to what caught their attention in this text. They were also asked to note anything that surprised them as well as what this passage reveals to us about following Jesus in our lives today.  
• After the congregation had an opportunity to share what the Holy Spirit was revealing to us in this text, we watched a YouTube clip of Fred Rogers accepting the Lifetime Achievement Award at the 1997 Emmy Awards. We reflected in conversation about how we have received the caring of neighbors around us. |
| Wednesdays Mar. 8- April 5, 2017 | Luke 15:11-32; Luke 10:25-37; Matthew 25:31-40; Matthew 5:38-41; Matthew 25:1-13 | • Our congregation held Wednesday evening Lenten worship services. Each of these services took place around a campfire (of sorts). Adults and youth from the congregation played the role of followers of Jesus discussing their experiences of journeying with Jesus toward Jerusalem. We used the resource *Sparks Around the Fire: Compassion and the Cross* by David R. Weiss. |

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10 This text was ultimately chosen as the Dwelling in the Word passage to be used at each gathering of the Missional River team.

11 [www.youtube.com/watch?v=Upm9LnuCBUM](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Upm9LnuCBUM), accessed March 5, 2017.

12 David R. Weiss, “Sparks around the Fire: Compassion and the Cross,” (Arches ’n Bells, 2014).
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<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Scripture Text</th>
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</table>
| Mar. 12, 2017 | **Lament Over Jerusalem**  
Luke 13:1-9, 31-35 | • During the children’s sermon we played with a colorful parachute large enough for all the children to gather around, lift up into the air and run under. As we sat under the parachute, we talked about times when it feels good and safe to be snuggled in someplace like a fort, a tent, or a comfy bed. We talked too about a parent’s loving arms being a place we find safety and comfort.  
• We compared this to Jesus talking about Jerusalem and wanting to gather all God’s people up like a mother hen gathering up her chicks. Then we played with wind up chicks that the kids got to keep. Throughout the sermon these chicks occasionally wandered out into the aisles of the church, only to be quickly gathered back in by the children. |
Playful Engagement of Scripture in Worship (cont.)

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<tr>
<th>Date</th>
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</thead>
</table>
| Mar. 19, 2017      | **Lost Sheep, Coin, Son**         | • During the children’s sermon the kids helped me to find my lost friend, a giant stuffed sheep. We talked about how we feel when we’ve lost something or someone we love and what these stories tell us about how God feels. The stuffed sheep was put on the pulpit for the rest of the service as a visual reminder of being found. The kids were then sent to their seats with a goodie bag containing a chocolate coin, candy sheep, and gingerbread man as an edible reminder of the stories.  

• The sermon began with a reading of the book *Maybe God is Like That Too* by Jennifer Grant. We talked about how the little boy in the story book lamented that he hadn’t seen God until his imagination was opened to the idea that God’s spirit was really all around him and how perhaps Jesus’ stories were also opening up our imagination to see God’s presence in our lives too. |

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### Playful Engagement of Scripture in Worship (cont.)

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</table>
| Mar. 26, 2017| Rich Man and Lazarus Luke 16:19-31 | - In the children’s sermon, the kids acted out this story—complete with royal purple robes for the rich man and stick-on purple sores for Lazarus, a baby gate for the gate/chasm, and a giant chocolate bar for the sumptuous feast. At the end of the children’s sermon, the kids passed out chocolate bars to the entire congregation as a reminder of all that God has provided and how we are called to share the good gifts of God with one another.  
- The sermon this week was the video from the SparkHouse Bible Study Animate: Practices—Money featuring Shane Claiborne in which he talks about the joy of sharing from a biblical perspective.  

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Playful Engagement of Scripture in Worship (cont.)

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<th>Date</th>
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| Apr. 2, 2017 | Zacchaeus       | • Our gathering hymn was “Zacchaeus Was A Wee Little Man” complete with motions.  
• Each bulletin was stuffed with a plain white sheet of paper. At the start of the sermon, worshippers were asked to draw a caricature of the kind of person that they have the hardest time getting along with. We noticed how easily it is to name the type of person that we just do not understand, particularly when it comes to such things as politics, social issues, and even different understandings of how we enjoy spending time.  
• We then looked at what the people of Jesus’ day might have drawn as their caricature. It might have looked something like Zacchaeus with the three strikes that he would have had against him.  

15 This was used as a jumping-off point for talking about sight/perceptions that occur throughout this Gospel reading and the realization that we are those in need of having our eyes opened to God’s presence with our neighbor. |

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15 This caricature of Zacchaeus was drawn by my dad, Paul G. Birkedal.
Playful Engagement of Scripture in Worship (cont.)

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| Apr. 9-13, 2017 | **Triumphal Entry, Last Supper, Crucifixion, and Resurrection** Luke 19:29-22:27 | • Palm Sunday’s scripture passage told the story of Jesus entering into Jerusalem. The services during Holy Week dramatized the events of Holy Week from the perspective of a local newscast (recorded in advance by the youth and children of the congregation). We utilized the play “Good Morning, Jerusalem” by Elise Seyfried, modified to be shown on Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Easter Morning.  


|                   | Emmaus Road Luke 24:13-35                      | • This was celebrated as Holy Humor Sunday.  
|                   |                                               | • The morning began with The Great Surprise event prior to worship.  
|                   |                                               | • Adults and children of all ages participated in surprising experiments and activities! |

17 This event was based on curriculum from Group Publishing, “The Great Surprise: Jesus is Alive!” We tailored the event to reflect the assigned scripture for the morning.
Playful Engagement of Scripture in Worship (cont.)

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<tr>
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| April 23, 2017   | Luke 24:13-35, cont. | • The entire liturgy of the morning’s worship service was designed to be humorous and playful. The offering even included the joyful offering of jokes!  
• The hymns were to the tune of familiar Christmas carols but with Easter lyrics.  
• The reading of the Gospel included the children acting out the story of the Road to Emmaus with one of them, representing Jesus, wearing a disguise until the line about Jesus’ identity being revealed in the breaking of the bread.  
• The Appreciative Inquiry congregational event took place during the sermon time of this service.  
• We ended the service with the finale of the William Tell Overture as a postlude. |

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\[18\] The results of this Appreciative Inquiry congregational event are described in more detail in chapter five.
Informed Consent Form for Bible Study

The Spirit’s Playground: How God Speaks through Scripture to Develop Contagious Missional Imagination

You are invited to be in a research study about the playful engagement of Scripture and its impact on missional imagination. You were selected as a possible participant because you volunteered to attend this Bible Study. 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 as part of my Doctor of Ministry thesis project in Congregational Mission and Leadership at Luther Seminary. My advisors are Dr. Daniel Anderson and Dr. Alvin Luedke.

Background Information:
The purpose of this study is to explore how engaging Scripture in playful ways helps us recognize God’s activity.

Procedures:
If you agree to be in this study, we would ask you to do the following things:
Attend this Bible Study involving the playful engagement of Scripture.
Agree to allowing pictures of any materials produced in this Bible Study to be used anonymously in my doctoral thesis.
Agree to allowing quotes from your participation in this Bible Study to be anonymously included in my doctoral thesis.

Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study:
This study has minimal risks. You will be asked only to participate in this Bible Study as you would in any other Bible Study held at this church.

There will be no financial compensation or any other direct benefits for your participation.

Indirect benefits to yourself and to our congregation include a deeper understanding of Scripture and excitement about the future of God’s activity.

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 office for a period of three years and then destroyed; only my advisors, Dr. Anderson and Dr. 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.

Raw data will be destroyed by September 2021.
Voluntary Nature of the Study:
Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Luther Seminary or Playground Lutheran Church. 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 Nye. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you may contact me by email or phone. You may also contact my advisors, Dr. Daniel Anderson and Dr. Alvin Luedke.

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 anonymous use of my direct quotations in the published thesis document:
Signature ____________________________ Date______

I consent to allow pictures of any materials produced in this Bible Study (with identifying information removed) to be published in the thesis document.
Signature ____________________________ Date______
APPENDIX F

Playing our Way Through the Book of Revelation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Session Number</th>
<th>Scripture Focus</th>
<th>Outline of Bible Study</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Revelation 1-4</td>
<td><strong>Title</strong>- “Lego”: Dispelling Myths About Revelation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Setup**- LEGO® bricks were piled on the tables as well as in large, clear bins on a table off to the side for participants to dig through. Crayons with the wrappers removed were placed with plastic knives on paper plates and scattered around the tables. One couple, upon walking into the room, immediately asked that I take their picture so that they could text it to their grandson. They had never seen so many LEGO® bricks! They wanted to let their grandson know what was happening at church that night.

**Gathering Play**- Participants were asked to create models with LEGO® bricks of what they have heard (or envision) that the end of the world will be like. While they worked, instrumental music was played in the background. One person looked at the pile of toys in front of them and said, “I don’t need to build anything. That is how the end of the world will be. It will all be chaos and destruction.”

---

1 The toys used in this Bible study are referred to by their tradmarked names in an effort to give credit to those who produced the fun materials we played with. When such information was publically available, the toys have been referred to in the manner desired by the company who produced them. Use of the toys in this study in no way implies endorsement, sponsorship, or authorization on the part of these toy companies.

2 The music played during this activity was composed by Shigeru Umebayashi, “Battle in the Forest,” in *House of Flying Daggers* (2004).
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</table>
| 1 (cont.)      | Revelation 1-4 (cont.) | **Introduction to the Theme of the Day**- Participants were asked to share their LEGO® creations and to talk about their impressions of the book of Revelation. *Words used to describe Revelation were “scary” and “confusing.”* The resources drawn upon in this study by Craig Koester and Marva Dawn were introduced as was the concept that Revelation is actually a hopeful, and even playful, book.  

**Read**- Revelation 1  

**Watch**- “Is This The Time: Interpreting the Mystery of Revelation” Session Two  

**Discuss**- Participants were invited to discuss the issues of assimilation, persecution, and complacency and where we see them in our lives today. *Participants pointed to complacency as our congregation’s biggest challenge. They also identified specific ways in which our congregation is trying to fight complacency, including starting a food pantry and discussing involvement in our synod’s Missional River initiative.*  

**Closing Playful Prayer**- After reading the quote from Marva Dawn included in the handouts, instrumental music was played during the reading of Revelation 4.² Participants were invited to create a Kaleidoscope Prayer of Revelation 4:11 by making a design of crayon shavings between two pieces of vellum paper. These pages were then ironed together to melt and seal in the wax design. *One woman who didn’t touch the LEGO® bricks at the beginning of the session was particularly excited about the Kaleidoscope Prayer. The crayon shaving design reminded her of the quilting she loves to do.*

---

¹ The Missional River process made mention of here became a significant piece of this congregation’s life during the intervention period. See chapter four.

² The instrumental music used during the Kaleidoscope Prayer was composed by Ray Lynch, “Celestial Soda Pop,” in *Deep Breakfast* (1984).
## Playing Our Way through the Book of Revelation (cont.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Revelation 5-7</td>
<td><strong>Title</strong> - Picture This: Picture Language in the Book of Revelation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Setup** - Rebus puzzle picture cards from the game *Picture This* were scattered all over the tables. Rainbow Color Scratch Off Art Paper in a variety of shapes was placed within easy reach of each seat. Two marker boards on easels were placed back to back in the opening at the center of the tables.

**Gathering Play** - Participants played together attempting to figure out the rebus puzzles at their place. *Several people commented later that they had never seen a game like this before but wanted to find a copy to share with their family members.* After attempting the game pieces, they solved the Revelation rebus in the handouts.

**Introduction to the Theme of the Day** - As a way of having fun with pictures in preparation for discussing the picture language of Revelation, we played *Googly Eyes Pictionary*. This game was similar to traditional Pictionary, but with the addition of glasses that distorted the vision of the drawer. The words that were selected to be drawn were those that reviewed key concepts from the first Revelation Bible study session: letter, Patmos, John, persecution, etc. *Both teams did remarkably well!* One individual commented that the glasses “evened the playing field…. It's not about artistic talent anymore!”
## Playing Our Way through the Book of Revelation (cont.)

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<tr>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2 (cont.)</td>
<td>Revelation 5-7 (cont.)</td>
<td><strong>Read</strong> - Revelation 5-7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Watch</strong> - “Is This The Time: Interpreting the Mystery of Revelation” Session Three</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Discuss</strong> - Pictures in Handouts (Lion/Lamb imagery and Dürer woodcut)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<td><strong>Closing Playful Prayer</strong> - Participants were invited to write/draw words and images on the Rainbow Color Scratch Off Art Paper in thanksgiving to God for the challenges and threats that they have been safely brought through. These were then taped into their booklet of handouts above a quote from Marva Dawn.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

We know that someday the Lamb will thoroughly shepherd us because to some extent we experience his tenderness now. Every time we have felt that we absolutely could not go on, somehow a moment of Christ’s grace has slipped in to assure us of his loving care. The Christian life is composed of looking to those moments as foretastes of God’s complete restoration, a recognition that already the tending has begun...

- Marva Dawn
Playing Our Way through the Book of Revelation (cont.)

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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Revelation 8-11</td>
<td><strong>Title</strong>- Guess That Number: Finding Meaning in the Numbers of Revelation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Setup</strong>- Adhesive-backed foam numbers were scattered around the tables. A variety of scented candle/craft oils were set out around the room. Each place was also set with a Slinky and two packs of multi-colored Wikki Stixs.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Gathering Play**- We played a Guess That Number game in which clues from the Bible about a mystery number were given one at a time to the group starting with obscure clues and then progressing to more obvious ones. Participants were challenged to see how quickly they could guess the number.

**Introduction to the Theme of the Day**- Participants were encouraged to think through the impressions that numbers in the Bible give us. For example, thinking about the number three may feel holy to us since that is the number of the trinity. Participants were then asked to choose scents that corresponded to those impressions and put a drop or two on the foam numbers in front of them and attach them into their handout booklet. *One participant, for example, chose eucalyptus as the scent for the number seven because it smelled to him like the perfection of creation.*

**Read**- Revelation 11

**Watch**- “Is This The Time: Interpreting the Mystery of Revelation” Session Four and Session One
Placing Our Way through the Book of Revelation (cont.)

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</table>
| 3 (cont.)      | Revelation 8-11 (cont.) | Discuss - This discussion focused primarily on the difference in understanding this interpretation of Revelation compared to other interpretations. We played with Slinkies as we discussed the cyclical nature of Revelation as opposed to a linear timeline.  
Closing Playful Prayer - Using Wikki Stix, participants prayed prayers of thanksgiving for God’s unceasing desire to draw us to God’s self. We gave thanks for God’s presence, both in times when we felt near God and times when we felt at a distance. While participants worked, music was being played in the background.³ |

| 4              | Revelation 12-17 | Title - Sin and Satire: What We Make of All This Weirdness  
Setup - This was a red carpet event! The tables were covered with movie themed tablecloths. Each place was set with a box of popcorn and clapboard napkin. Crowns were also set at each place for the Hollywood royalty about to arrive. |

³ The music for this prayer was by D
### Playing Our Way through the Book of Revelation (cont.)

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Session Number</th>
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<th>Outline of Bible Study</th>
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</table>
| 4 (cont.)      | Revelation 12-17 (cont.) | **Gathering Play**- Each participant was given the name and picture of a famous movie character, but they were not allowed to look at who was on their card. Instead, they taped the card onto the crown they were wearing so that everyone else could see their character. Then, using clues provided by fellow participants, we guessed which character we were.⁴  

**Introduction to the Theme of the Day**- Participants read a quote by Craig Koester comparing this passage of Scripture to the modern day thrills and special effects of a Hollywood movie.  

**Read**- Revelation 12-13  

**Watch**- “Is This The Time: Interpreting the Mystery of Revelation” Session Five  

**Discuss**- Participants discussed the questions posed by Koester in the video series: What are the dangers of naming evil? What are the dangers of not recognizing and naming evil? We discussed how evil masks itself today.  

**Closing Playful Prayer**- On the image of a mask in the handout booklet, participants wrote/drew prayers for God’s guidance in recognizing and naming evil, that we might be ever more able to discern God’s presence and our call to the truly good.  

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⁴ The idea for this game came from the board game HedBanz.
### Playing Our Way through the Book of Revelation (cont.)

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<tr>
<th>Session Number</th>
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</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 5              | Revelation 18-22 | **Title**- Winner, Winner, Chicken Dinner! Our Guide to the End of the World  
**Setup**- The table was set for a full chicken dinner with chicken, mashed potatoes, coleslaw, macaroni and cheese, and green beans. Also set out on the tables were mounds of Moon Sand and tubs of Play-Doh.  
**Gathering Play**- We ate our chicken dinner and for dessert had King’s Cake. In the tradition of King’s Cake, a plastic baby Jesus was hidden inside. We passed around the cake and each cut a piece until baby Jesus was finally found!  
**Introducing the Theme of the Day**- We talked about how this King’s Cake was a little like a metaphor for the book of Revelation. If we find ourselves in the presence of Jesus, then we have discovered the purpose of the book.  
**Read**- Revelation 22  
**Watch**- “Is This The Time: Interpreting the Mystery of Revelation” Sessions Six and Seven  
**Discussion**- The discussion centered around how our understanding of Revelation had changed over the course of this study. A few of the comments that were made included:  
“We’re not scared anymore.”  
“We can summarize that it is all about God and the Lamb now. Before we didn’t know what to say; we just (blew lips).” |
### Playing Our Way through the Book of Revelation (cont.)

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</table>
| 5 (cont.)      | Revelation 18-22 (cont.) | **Closing Playful Prayer** - In thanksgiving for all that we had learned, we made Moon Sand and Play-Doh creations to show what a difference it makes to us that in the end, God wins. Some of the creations included the following:  
  - *A sun because the future is bright*  
  - *A rainbow because of the promise revealed in Christ*  
  - *The sun rising over the earth; it’s hope rising*  
  - *A smiley face with a crown because there is joy in the kingship of Christ*  
  - *The city of God with twelve open gates*  
  - *A crown with the Lamb in the center* |
Playing Our Way through the Book of Revelation (cont.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Session Number</th>
<th>Scripture Focus</th>
<th>Outline of Bible Study</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5 (cont.)</td>
<td>Revelation 18-22 (cont.)</td>
<td>• A star, thinking of the coming of Christmas and the hope of the world in the coming of Christ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• A rainbow for the promise of God that is true from Genesis to Revelation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• A cross for the hope of the victory we have in Christ</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While participants worked on these creations, recordings of hymns based on the book of Revelation were played in the background.\(^5\) One more observation of different types of play personalities was made when one participant, who wasn’t touching the Moon Sand or Play-Doh, suddenly burst out in song along with the recorded hymns. He never did make a Play-Doh creation, but he closed his eyes and sang Holy, Holy, Holy with what seemed like all his heart.

---

## APPENDIX G

### Bible Study Completion Survey

Please circle the number that best describes the strength of your agreement to the following statements.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STRENGTH OF AGREEMENT</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>8</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very Low</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very High</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t Know</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Q1. I enjoyed participating in this Bible study.

Q2. I learned something new in this Bible study.

Q3. This Bible study changed the way I think about this portion of Scripture.

Q4. This Bible study changed the way that I think about God’s activity in my life.

Q5. This Bible study changed the way I imagine God acting in the future.

Q6. This Bible study changed the way I imagine God acting in my community.

Q7. What was your favorite part of this Bible study?

Q8. What was something that surprised or delighted you?
Q9. If the words of this portion of Scripture appeared in a colored font in your Bible, what color would you choose and why?

Q10. Thinking about this Bible study, is there a particular movement that comes to your mind? For example, do you feel like running, jumping, cartwheeling, skipping, slumping, shrugging, or crawling under the table? Pick and a movement and describe why this one appeals to you.

Q11. Does the Bible passage we studied leave a bitter or sweet taste in your mouth? Please explain your answer.

Q12. What piece of music would you make the theme song of this section of Scripture? Why?

Q12. What other thoughts would you like to share about this study?

Thank you for your participation!
APPENDIX H

Playful Bible Study Handouts

(A Playful)

GUIDE TO
THE END OF
THE WORLD
You’ve heard the end of the world will be like....
What does the Bible really say about the end of the world?
But if we LEGO of our preconceived ideas-

What does the Bible really say about the end of the world?
What is Revelation really about?

Is it Scary?

Is it Strange?

Is it Too Hard to Understand?

or

Is it Comforting?

And Hopeful?

What is REVELATION anyway?
Solve this puzzle for some clues!

Revelation Chapter 1-4

**Down**
1. One of the best kept secrets of Revelation is that it is a _______
2. The number of churches
3. The writer of the book of Revelation
4. A situation of hardship for Christians
5. Chapter 4 describes not where we are coming from but where we are being drawn to- the ________ of God.

**Across**
1. The problem of how much your faith sets you apart
2. The problem of being "lukewarm" in faith
Revelation:

- A letter (Revelation 1:1)

- From a man named John, who wrote it while he was in prison because of his faith in Jesus, around 50 or 60 years after Jesus died (Revelation 1:9-10)

- To 7 churches in Asia who were struggling with problems of persecution, assimilation, and complacency (Revelation chapters 2 and 3)

- For the purpose of encouraging Christians to remain faithful to God and to resist the powers of evil through the assurance that God will win.

- John writes what he saw in a “vision” so his letter is very dream-like. There are cycles in his letter that go from describing evil to the glory of God’s goodness. After going back and forth six times to describe the dangers of evil and the glories of God’s presence that give hope, Revelation ends with the triumphant scene of God’s victory.
So What???

Revelation shapes the way people understand God, themselves, and their world.

The book describes the powers of evil at work in the world, powers that can lead people to despair.

But even more than that, Revelation describes God and Christ the Lamb, who save people and give hope through the assurance that God will win.

By warning about the power of evil and giving promises of life in God, this book encourages us to have faith and persevere through hard times.
Remember, the letter (that is now our book) of Revelation was written to people who were experiencing persecution (people really did hate and even kill followers of Christ), problems knowing how much to assimilate (or stick out for believing in Christ), and those who were just plain complacent (LAZY)!

Problems we still have today....
Persecution:

Being Killed • Put in Prison • Not Fitting In • Treated as an Outsider • The Churches at Smyrna and Philadelphia
Assimilation:

Wanting to Fit in at the Party. I Know it's Wrong, but Everybody's doing it! - How Much Does Faith Set Us Apart?

The Churching of Ephesians, Pompeyans, and Theodora.
Complacency:

Way too comfortable + "Lukewarm" Faith + Just Plain Lazy
The Churches of Sardis and Laodicea
No matter which of these backgrounds we come from though, Revelation has the same message for each of us.

We are all being drawn into the same place, God’s Presence!

Take a look at this description from Revelation chapter 4:

“After this I looked, and there in heaven a door stood open:... and there in heaven stood a throne, with one seated on the throne! And the one seated on the throne looks like jasper and carnelian, and around the throne there is a rainbow that looks like an emerald:... Coming, from the throne are flashes of lightning, and rumblings and peals of thunder, and in front of the throne burn seven flaming torches, which are the seven spirits of God; and in front of the throne there is something like a sea of glass, like crystal:... And whenever the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to the one who is seated on the throne, who lives forever and ever, the twenty-four elders fall before the one who is seated on the throne and worship the one who lives forever and ever; they cast their crowns before the throne, singing, ‘You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created.’”
Marva Dawn, author of Joy in Our Weakness: A Gift of Hope From the Book of Revelation writes that Revelation 4 reminds her of “a child full of great things to tell his mother running into the house and crying out, ‘and then I saw this... and looked at that... and oh, yes, they were so big... but wow, that was so wonderful!”

“The seer (John) can hardly keep pace with his impressions as he jumps from the magnificence of the stones, to the rainbow radiance, to the golden-wreathed elders, to the lightning and thunder, to the strange-looking creatures. The vision stuns, with spiraling collages of divine splendor that human words can hardly begin to describe.”
"The piling up of images is intended to create an atmosphere of great awesomeness, to immerse us in a profound sense of wonder at the privilege of our relationship with such a One, at the splendor of knowing the Lord who controls and surpasses time, even as we are limited by it now. We rejoice to be swept up into the song that fills the heavens and closes the scene in its exultation of the worthiness of the Lord our God.

All these images, stirring us to a heightened sense of mystery and magnificence, now culminate in the declaration of an outstanding reason why God is worthy of such praise. Surely all the accoutrements of the scene have prepared us for this splendor, but now the declaration is explicit. God is indeed worthy of our adoration because by His will all things were created. The idea of his creation here at the end of the Bible reminds us of the picture of his ordering work at the beginning.

This God who could bring existence out of the chaotic mass without form and full of nothingness (our vanity) is certainly worthy of our praising recognition of His power. Further more, the song declares that, having once given order and form, the Lord does not leave the creation to its own devices, but remains the means by which that creation has its being. By His will He sustains all life; by his grace He allows it to continue. The combination of a Greek aorist (once-for-all) declaration of creation with an imperfect (continuing) state of being reminds us that everything, from beginning to end and everywhere in between, is totally under the Lord God Almighty’s perfect control."
You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created.

A Kaleidoscope Prayer from Revelation 4:11
Picture This!

+ E +

+ T = SH

- SE +

P = V
But everything in Revelation sounds WEIRD!
(For example: try reading Revelation 5:5-6, skim chapter 6, read revelation 7:1-4)

One of the keys to understanding Revelation is that John uses “word pictures”

John writes descriptive, dream-like scenes to convey truth.

Take Revelation 5:5-6. Jesus isn’t really, physically, an animal like a lion or a lamb. But describing Jesus as both a lion and a lamb reveals some truths about Jesus strength and willingness to become vulnerable and die for us.

Like this. When you think of a lion, you think of certain qualities that are “lion like.” When you think of a lamb, you think of certain qualities that are “lamb like.” How is Jesus like both?
In what ways is Jesus like a lion?
In what ways is Jesus like a lamb?
Revelation is **FULL** of these
Word Pictures...

(Like the Horsemen in Chapter 6.)
John didn’t really mean that there are four horses and riders roaming the earth to kill people.

He was using yet another word picture to describe what it feels like to be scared, to feel threatened, to not know how you will get enough money to survive, to die without hope.

John’s point is this... if we didn’t have Christ, we couldn’t survive.

What has faith in Jesus helped you get through? What threats have you survived?
We know that someday the Lamb will thoroughly shepherd us because to some extent we experience his tenderness now. Every time we have felt that we absolutely could not go on, somehow a moment of Christ’s grace has slipped in to assure us of his loving care. The Christian life is composed of looking to those moments as foretastes of God’s complete restoration, a recognition that already the tending has begun...

- Marva Dawn
The other strategy that John uses to get across his message has to do with the importance of numbers.

In Bible times, numbers had certain meanings.

Good, holy numbers were numbers like:

3 - the number of the Trinity (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit)
7 - the number of days in creation
12 - the number of disciples
10 - a number meaning completeness

So, when John hears that there are going to be 144,000 people who are marked with the seal of God in Rev. 7:4, he’s not saying that there are actually 144,000 people. Because when he looks in Rev. 7:9, he sees a multitude of people!

So why say anything about 144,000?
12 x 12 x 10 x 10 x 10 is multiplying the number of disciples Jesus had with the numbers of perfect completeness.

It’s John’s way of communicating the truth that ALL GOD’S PEOPLE will gather at the throne of God... He’s just using number language to do it!
It's Time For...

Guess That Number!

(Revelation Chapters 8-11)
Using the strategies of writing in:
word pictures
and
important numbers,

John writes in Revelation
about a battle.

It's THE BATTLE of our lives and our world,
the battle of good and evil
that has been around since the beginning of time,
and is happening now,
but will one day end.
John writes,

“And war broke out in heaven.....”

(Read more about this battle in Revelation 12:7-17)

John’s picture language describes this battle in many ways
as the beast vs. the lamb
evil vs. good
the harlot (a prostitute) vs. the bride
and more

John goes round and round in a
cycle of visions that show the
desperate plots of evil in
comparison with the Glory of God

But his point is this....

Evil is making war
against those who keep the commandments
of God and believe in Jesus.

What struggles do you see between good and evil going on today?
When have you felt closest to God?

When have you felt furthest from God’s presence?
Sin and Satire:
Revelation Chapters 12-17
What do we make of all this weirdness?

"Modern readers may find the cosmic drama played out in Revelation 12-22 to be something like a movie that thrills audiences with special effects, as heroes and villains traverse the galaxies in battles for control of the universe. Such a comparison to modern popular culture does not trivialize Revelation, but actually offers a way to understand what the book is doing. John’s audience lived within a wider culture that had its own heroes and image makers, its rumors and stereotypes, its rituals and graffiti. Christians faced the continual challenge of discerning how far they could go in embracing non-Christian practices, and at what point they needed to resist. The description of the seven churches in Revelation 2-3 shows that Christian non-conformists were sometimes treated violently by non-Christians; but a more insidious threat was the power of popular culture to seduce Christians into compromising their convictions and relaxing into complacency. John grapples with the icons of the popular culture of his day in order to unmask them, so that when readers see the realities that lie behind the facades, they might better resist compromise and persevere in faith."

- Craig Koester, Revelation and the End of All Things
God vs. Evil
Revelation 12-13 presents us with a repulsive, devilish parody. The dragon and the beast represent the powers of evil in their corrupted imitation of the real power of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

- Marva Dawn Joy in Our Weakness: A Gift of Hope From the Book of Revelation

The Harlot Riding the Seven-Headed Beast (Rev. 17:1-8)
by Albrecht Durer
One of the ways John describes this is by comparing the seal of God with the mark of the beast.

Remember the 144,000 (multitude) who were sealed by God in Chapter 7?
God isn’t the only one who is marking which people belong to Him.
So is the evil “beast” in Chapter 14... and his mark is the number 666.

So why 666?
Remember, numbers have meaning.
This number has A LOT of meaning.

For one thing, 6 is one short of the holy/good number 7.
Putting 3 sixes together is making divine what is not God.
It’s putting something imperfect in God’s perfect place.
It’s worshipping something that’s not God instead of God.

In John’s day, numbers were also used to refer to people.
There was a way to add up the letters of a person’s name
so that each name also had a number that went with it.
Over the years since Revelation was written, people have come up with lots of different
crazy ideas about who this “beast” might be
that this number is pointing to.
Probably, it was referring to Nero Caesar- a ruler that lived just before the time John
wrote Revelation. Nero did horrible things to Christians.
(Nero was to Christians what Hitler was to Jews more recently.)
John wanted Christians to watch out and to be careful.

Everyone belongs to someone:
Either God or Evil.
“The mark of the second beast is given on either the right hand or the forehead. In Jewish thought, hands represent one’s deeds— as in the phrase, ‘he who has clean hands and a pure heart’ (Psalm 24:4), signifying someone who is upright both outside and inside, in actions/outward behavior and in thoughts/will. Furthermore, the right hand is the symbol for fellowship in Semitic cultures, so a mark on it suggests that with which the individual is associated.

To be marked on one’s forehead implies one’s thinking. That is why on their forehead and hand the Jewish people wore tephillin (plural of the noun that means ‘prayer’ in Hebrew)—small, square, black cases containing passages from the Torah. These little boxes reminded them to conform their thinking and their behavior to God’s designs and purposes. Even so, the parody of the beast stresses that those who belong to him become like him, accepting his authority over their thinking and deeds.”

- Marva Dawn, *Joy in Our Weakness*
How do you see evil masking itself today?
Winner, Winner, Winner, Chicken Dinner!

Revelation 18-22
Much of the message of Revelation has been true for ages. The battle between good and evil has been going on since creation and continues even today.

So does Revelation have anything to say about the end of the world after all? Or is it all just about the struggles we all go through now?

Yes.

Revelation is about the battle between God and evil that we all experience. But it also says something that gives us hope for the future.
God Wins!

The message that Revelation gives us to tell us how the world ends, is to tell us that in the end... it is God that defeats evil.

God wins.
Often times, though, Revelation is misunderstood. People think that Revelation tells of a particular timeline or certain kinds of events that we need to watch for to predict the end of the world.

We don’t know when the end will come.

Evil was defeated when Jesus died on the cross—but we are waiting for the day when we will see the truth of what God did in vanquishing evil.

What we do know is that the time is coming that evil will be done away with all together and Revelation encourages us to be faithful until then.

Here’s some of how John describes the final battle and Christ’s victory in more word pictures and important numbers....
Have you ever heard of Armageddon?

(Or as it is in Revelation 16:16, Harmagedon?)

Most people think that Armageddon is the sight of what will be a final war that ends the world. People have even claimed to be able to identify the spot where this battle will happen.

But Harmagedon isn’t an actual place.

Har- means mountain

but Megiddo is a plain.

(actually the flatest land in all of Israel where many ancient battles have been fought)

So what does it mean that this final battle is supposed to take place on “The Mountain of the Battle Plain”?

Do you remember the giving of the 10 commandments?

Do you remember the place on Mount Sinai where God met the Israelites?

The description about what happens at Harmagedon sounds a lot like that.

(Revelation 16:18)

The end of the world isn’t going to be brought about by any battle between the earth’s kings or nuclear weapons or terrorist attacks, but by a mighty coming of God.
The 1,000 Year Reign

(Revelation chapter 20)

is another part of Revelation that people like to talk about in order to predict how things might unfold in the future.

But remember,
all the numbers so far in Revelation have been used because they have meaning.
The 1,000 years is the same.

$10 \times 10 \times 10$
is a number of years symbolizing complete, holy, perfection.

John's point is that God's timing in all of this is perfect.
It is God who is in control.
Another common misunderstanding has to do with the Book of Life
(Revelation 20:12)

There are actually
2 different books

There is a book that records people’s deeds....
but the Book of Life isn’t that book!

The book of life has to do with God’s grace alone (what Jesus has done)
and not what we have done.

Never confuse the fact that our being welcomed by God is not about what we do but about what Christ did on the cross.
You need not fear judgement from God now or ever if you claim and put your trust in Jesus.
That’s all that matters.
The Bible Ends... In Victory for Our God!

Revelation chapter 21 describes a new heaven and a new earth:
“See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.”

This place is also described as a word picture:
“And in the spirit he carried me away to a great, high mountain and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God. It has the glory of God and a radiance like a very rare jewel, like jasper, clear as crystal. It has a great, high wall with twelve gates... The angel who talked to me had a measuring rod of gold to measure the city and its gates and walls. The city lies foursquare, its length the same as its width; and he measured the city with his rod, 12,000 stadia. He also measured its wall, 144 cubits by human measurement... I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb. The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it. Its gates will never be shut by day- and there will be no night there.”

12,000 (12 x 10 x 10 x 10)
144 (12 x 12)

These are the measurements of a city that has room for all the people of God.

This city has gates, but the gates are always open
The Bible begins with a garden and a tree.
Adam and Eve eat the tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil and are cast out.

The Bible ends with another garden and another tree.
It's the tree of life.
All the nations are invited to eat and dwell safely in the presence of God.

"Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with it's 12 kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. Nothing accursed will be found there any more. But the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him; they will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads."

- Revelation 22:1-4
(Final Words... Revelation 22:16-21)

Here is the main point of Revelation:

COME!

The closing words of Revelation reveal
John's meaning for writing....
to give the invitation for all who long for
God to come and receive life in Him as a gift.

The last words of the Bible:

"The one who testifies to these things says,
'Surely I am coming soon.'
Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!
The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all the saints. Amen."

(Amen = Let it Be So!)
So...

What difference does it make for you that God wins?
That’s what Revelation is all about.
### APPENDIX I

#### Playful Devotions in Board Meetings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Board</th>
<th>Scripture Focus</th>
<th>Playful Devotion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Stewardship | Luke 7:18-35                     | • Board members were asked to write down the name of a profession on a scrap of paper.  
• Luke 7:18-35 was read aloud.  
• Board members were asked to pass their scrap of paper two people to the left.  
• In a modified form of Dwelling in the Word, board members were asked to listen to the Scripture passage again, this time as if their profession was the one named on the slip of paper they just received.  
• After the Scripture was read a second time, board members were asked to share their insights about how they heard the text differently from this new perspective.  
• *This led to a discussion of ministry in daily life and some new thoughts regarding how our coming year’s stewardship emphasis could be less focused on gathering resources into the church and more focused on equipping church members to see their primary stewardship as being what they do outside of the church.* |
| Worship     | Joshua 4 and 1 Samuel 7:7-12     | • Joshua 4 was read aloud. In this passage twelve stones are collected from the middle of the Jordan River and then piled up on the banks as a reminder of what God did on behalf of the people.  
• Board members were asked to select several small river rocks to represent experiences that they could point to in which they recognized God’s activity. |
Playful Devotions in Board Meetings (cont.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Board</th>
<th>Scripture Focus</th>
<th>Playful Devotion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Worship (cont.)  | Joshua 4 and 1 Samuel 7:7-12    | • 1 Samuel 7:7-12 was read. It was noted that here too a rock stands as a reminder of what God has done. The rock becomes an “Ebenezer” – a stone of help.  
• Each participant was given a glass candleholder and tea light to make a small altar of remembrance and thanksgiving. While they worked the hymn *Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing* was played in the background. Special mention was made of the second stanza of the song and the lyrics “Here I raise my Ebenezer, here by Thy great help I’ve come.”¹  
• Board members were asked to discuss the following questions…  
  1) What events or experiences in your own life can you point to as something that God has brought you through?  
  2) When have you experienced God’s activity/provision in the life of this congregation?  
  3) How might God be inviting us to design worship experiences for this congregation that point to God’s activity now? |

### Playful Devotions in Board Meetings (cont.)

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<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Scripture Focus</th>
<th>Playful Devotion</th>
</tr>
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</table>
| Worship (cont.)     | Joshua 4 and 1 Samuel 7:7-12 (cont.) | - This led to conversation about our congregation’s past, present, and possibilities for the future. This included conversation about the upcoming Lenten series and a plan to incorporate weekly dramas. It was decided that this playfulness should be integrated even into our Maundy Thursday and Good Friday Services. The discussion included acknowledgement that playfulness was particularly needed in the midst of the politically anxious times.  
- An interesting conversation also took place when one of the younger members of the board suggested that perhaps older members of the congregation wouldn’t feel as positively about such playfulness. The older members of the board (age seventy plus) were quick to debunk the myth that older adults don’t appreciate play! |
| Education           | 1 John 4:7-12                    | - This Valentine’s Day devotion began with the reading of 1 John 4:7-12.  
- *Praying in Color* by Sybil MacBeth was introduced.  
  - Board members were given red and pink “prayer books” and a variety of colored pens to draw prayers for those that they love or are praying to love.  
  - This led to conversation about how our congregation could most effectively engage the youth we prayed for in future ministry opportunities. |

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Board</th>
<th>Scripture Focus</th>
<th>Playful Devotion</th>
</tr>
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</table>
| Lay Ministry | Genesis 18:1-8 | • Genesis 18:1-8 was read.  
• Copies of Andrei Rublev’s icon were distributed.  
• Chapter one of *The Divine Dance* by Richard Rohr was read.³ This passage explored the imagery of the Trinity in Rublev’s icon. Rohr suggests that some art historians have wondered about the remnants of glue on the icon in the open fourth space at the table. He wonders if it could be possible that a mirror was once occupying that space.  
• Each board member was given a small round mirror and Crayola Crystal Effects Window Markers. Individuals were then asked to reflect on what images, feelings, or thoughts come to mind at imagining seeing their own reflection at the fourth seat at the Trinity’s table. These images/words were drawn on the mirrors.  
• Board members were then asked to think about a time when they experienced those feelings in their personal lives and in the life of this congregation. *Discussion then flowed to what we might be invited to do to help nurture that sense of community among this faith community in the future.*

Informed Consent Form for Interviews

The Spirit’s Playground: How God Speaks through Scripture to Develop Contagious Missional Imagination

You are invited to be in a research study about the playful engagement of Scripture and its impact on missional imagination. You were selected as a possible participant because you volunteered to be interviewed. 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 as part of my Doctor of Ministry thesis project in Congregational Mission and Leadership at Luther Seminary. My advisors are Dr. Daniel Anderson and Dr. Alvin Luedke.

Background Information:
The purpose of this study is to explore how engaging Scripture in playful ways helps us recognize God’s activity.

Procedures:
If you agree to be in this study, we would ask you to do the following things:
Agree to be interviewed by myself or a research assistant.
Agree to allowing your interview responses to be transcribed (with identifying information removed) to be compiled with other interviews and shared with the congregation.
Agree to allowing quotes from your interview to be anonymously included in my doctoral thesis.

Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study:
This study has minimal risks. You will be asked only to share positive stories of your experiences including experiences within this congregation.

In the unlikely event that you experience psychological distress as a result of this research activity, your participation in this study will be discontinued and you will be referred to an appropriate mental health professional. However, payment for any such treatment must be provided by you or your third party payer, if any, (such as health insurance, Medicare, etc.)

There will be no financial compensation or any other direct benefits for your participation.

Indirect benefits to yourself and to our congregation include a deeper understanding of God’s gifts to our congregation and excitement about the future of God’s activity here.

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 office for a period of three years and then destroyed; only my advisors, Dr. Anderson and Dr. 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.

Raw data will be destroyed by September 2021.
Voluntary Nature of the Study:
Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Luther Seminary or Playground Lutheran Church. 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 Nye. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you may contact me by email or phone. You may also contact my advisors, Dr. Daniel Anderson and Dr. Alvin Luedke.

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 anonymous use of my direct quotations in the published thesis document:
Signature  ____________________________  Date  __________

I consent to allow a written transcript of this interview (with identifying information removed) to be discussed along with other interviews in a congregational forum.
Signature  ____________________________  Date  __________
APPENDIX K

Appreciative Inquiry Interview Questions

1. Reflecting on your entire experience at our church, remember a time when you felt the most engaged, alive, and motivated. What was happening? Who was involved? How did it feel?

2. Tell about a time when you were most proud of your association with this congregation.

3. When have you been surprised or delighted by something that has happened at church?

4. When have you been surprised or delighted by an interaction with a stranger (or someone you didn’t know very well)?

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1 Several of these questions are based on questions developed by Branson, Memories, Hopes, and Conversations: Appreciative Inquiry, Missional Engagement, and Congregational Change, 76.

5. Tell me about a time when something that you experienced in worship or a Bible study really connected with what you were thinking about or going through in your daily life. What helped make that connection? How did that experience change you or shape the way you approached your daily life?

6. One of the things that I am learning in my research is that we are all shaped by stories. There are a bunch of stories in my family about my grandmother’s resourcefulness and creativity in ways that were important to the life of the family. I can’t help but think that some of those stories have shaped my understanding about who I am too. On the other side of my family there’s a story about how my great-grandfather almost sailed on the Titanic, but his Dad asked him to wait so that they could go together later. Putting family above his own personal interests saved my great-grandfather’s life and I am here today because of that choice. When I hear that story, and now when I tell it to my children, I am reminded of the importance of family relationships and honoring the wisdom of generations that have come before me. That story has shaped my understanding of what it means to be part of a family. Thinking back now to when you were a child, what stories did your family tell you about who you are and where you came from? What story or stories do you feel are the most central to describing what is important to you?
7. Thinking now about what you hear when you come to worship or Bible study, or when you have conversations with other members at our church, what stories does this congregation tell that have helped you know who you are as a child of God?

8. There are times when a Bible story might influence how we think about our experiences. For example, I read about a man who was escaping from the Nazis by boat on the eve of World War II. As he was making the difficult journey across the sea, he was remembering the story of Exodus when God led the Israelites out of Egypt. He was strengthened by remembering that story of God’s deliverance. Tell about a time when a Bible story influenced how you thought about a particular experience or helped you to make a decision.

9. Tell me a story about a time when you knew God helped you or you could feel God’s presence in your life.

10. When you think about your life, or the life of our congregation, what is it that you think God might be doing right now? What Bible story (or stories) remind you of what is happening here now?

11. Make three wishes for the future of our church.
12. Imagine you are taking a hot air balloon ride three years from now into that future. From above the treetops you can look down on our church building and its surroundings. What do you see? What do you hear, smell, taste, feel?³

13. What do you imagine would be what God wants for your future? The future of our congregation? The future of our community?

14. Is there anything else that you would like to share?

³ This question is inspired by an exercise developed by Johannes Swart as part of his Ph.D. thesis project. Johannes Gerhardus Jacobus Swart, “A Local Christian Community’s Missional Imagination: Accessing, Cultivating, and Assessing Missional Discernment in Civil Society” (Luther Seminary, 2010).
APPENDIX L

Appreciative Inquiry Congregational Event Bulletin Insert

(FRONT) (BACK)

A Dream for Our Future:
(In Present Tense Description!)
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