

DO YOU HEAR WHAT I HEAR?
DISCERNMENT AND DIALOGUE IN A SECULAR AGE

by

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ABSTRACT

*Do You Hear What I Hear?
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This Participatory Action Research (PAR) utilized a mixed methods approach to address an adaptive challenge in a Lutheran church in a bedroom community in a small town and rural setting. The research involved implementing PAR interventions that cultivated four spiritual capacities: see, hear, know, and say within the realm of faith formation. Results suggest the Holy Spirit initiated a process of cultural adaptation as participants began reframing their world view, having their missional imagination transformed, discerning the triune God's active presence, and engaging in dialogue.

See appendix L for the Executive Summary.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Missional leadership is not an individual sport or a solo endeavor—it is team-oriented and collaborative. When Jesus sent out the seventy-two disciples ahead of him to proclaim, “The kingdom of God has come near to you,” he sent them in pairs, two by two (Lk 10:1-16). Jesus further advised them, “The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.” I asked the Lord of the harvest for workers for the Kingdom, and sure enough, he raised them up. There are many people for whom I offer thanks and praise to God.

Members of the cohort have been a wealth of experience and encouragement. Seeing how the Holy Spirit is working through them and their congregations is genuinely inspirational. Luther Seminary’s Congregational Mission and Leadership faculty and staff, particularly my advisors for this thesis, Dr. Alvin Luedke and Dr. Daniel Anderson, were insightful and inspiring. They challenged my thinking and presuppositions while helping me grow as a missional leader.

God has blessed me with serving side-by-side with a marvelous congregation. They are supportive, curious, and courageous while being willing to experiment. Most of all, they are faithful disciples of Jesus Christ. I am particularly grateful to everyone who participated in the interventions, surveys, interviews, and focus groups.

The Participatory Action Research Team was inventive, diligent, and open to new experiences. They regularly stepped out of their comfort zones because of their love for

Jesus, and they challenged me to step outside of my comfort zone, too. This research could not have been completed without them.

When my wife and I were in college, Rev. Dr. Ronald J. Lavin was our pastor, mentor, and friend. He was a good and faithful servant who stretched me beyond anything I had ever imagined as a disciple of Jesus. He passed away midway through this program, so I give thanks to God for calling Ron to be a missional leader who proclaimed the good news of Jesus Christ.

I am blessed with the most amazing, faithful, loving family, especially my children, Katharina and Kyle, Victoria, Jonathan, and Elizabeth, my grandchildren, Kaedence, Alanna, Korina, and Rebekka, my parents, Duane and Antonia, and mother-in-law, Beverly, who support me whenever I head off on my next adventure, as well as my Aunt Donna, Uncle Don, and cousin Rien who made me feel at home during my treks to Luther Seminary. In Proverbs 31:10, it is written, “A wife of noble character who can find? She is worth far more than rubies.” I am doubly blessed because I have found her. I am so grateful for my remarkable, beautiful, faithful, and loving wife, Vallorie. Nearly forty years ago, she introduced me to a Jesus I had never known. I am blessed beyond all measure.

I offer up this prayer from the Apostle Paul for all of you from Ephesians 1:15-19:

For this reason, ever since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all God’s people, I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers. I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people, and his incomparably great power for us who believe.

Amen.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AC	Axial Code
AMB	Anti-Missourian Brotherhood
ALC	American Lutheran Church
BLC	Beloved Lutheran Church
CWS	Closed World Structure
ELCA	Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
FAC	Final Axial Code
IRB	Institutional Review Board
KJV	King James Version
MTD	Moralistic Therapeutic Deism
NIV	New International Version
PAR	Participatory Action Research
SPSS	Statistical Package for the Social Sciences
VCP	Vibrant Congregations Project

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CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION AND RESEARCH QUESTION

Introduction

Whispering, her voice was barely audible, “Pastor, may I talk to you . . .?” Clearly uncomfortable, we made our way into my study for privacy, where she continued in a hushed tone to share a story about how God had acted in her life. After she departed, I pondered not only the witness she shared but the way she had shared. Why had she whispered? Why was she concerned that someone might overhear her? What emotions were driving her? Embarrassment? Fear? Uncertainty? Was she worried that people would question the validity of her experience? If she was not comfortable engaging in dialogue about God in the church with fellow believers, would she be comfortable with anyone else?¹

Philosopher Charles Taylor describes three types of secularity which emerged out of exclusive (or self-sufficing) humanism near the end of the eighteenth century: secularity one, two, and three. “Secularity one” designates public spaces as nonreligious zones while asserting that God is no longer the center of social or public life. “Secularity two” portrays a decline in belief and Christian practices. “Secularity three” does not

¹ Andrew Root, *Faith Formation in a Secular Age: Responding to the Church’s Obsession with Youthfulness*, Ministry in a Secular Age (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2017), 110. “To talk too much about such realities (outside some online chat rooms) makes you sound crazy—literally out of your mind. And now, because reality is mostly constituted in human minds, to be out of your mind is to be untrustworthy, deranged, and mad.”

describe a world devoid of religion or God, but rather a world that no longer discerns divine action or what he terms the “transcendent.”² Taylor observes, “The main feature of this new context is that it puts an end to the naïve acknowledgment of the transcendent, or of goals or claims which go beyond human flourishing.”³ People in Western culture currently “live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28)⁴ in secularity three, which negates transcendence, rendering it as naïve and implausible.

Similarly, sociologists Christian Smith and Melinda Denton propose a new understanding of religion among adolescents and their parents from major American religious traditions (Christian and non-Christian) that they label Moralistic Therapeutic Deism (MTD). The term “moralistic” describes the belief that God wants us to be good people who get along with others. “Therapeutic” means that God exists to make us happy and reinforce our self-esteem. “Deism” refers to God as a cosmic clockmaker who set the universe in motion at the beginning of time but who is not an active agent in history or in our lives.⁵ (See Secularity in chapter two.)

Some of the challenges of discipleship and faith formation within the American church include struggling to discern divine action and avoiding dialogue about God. We lack a missional imagination—the ability to conceive new ways of identifying, living in, acting out, and speaking about God's mission here and now. We have difficulty answering

² Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007).

³ Taylor, 21.

⁴ All biblical references and quotations are from *The Holy Bible: New International Version* (NIV) (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011) unless noted otherwise.

⁵ Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2009), 162-64.

the question, “What is God up to?” People’s lives are cross-pressured—we live between the extremes of “orthodox religion . . . and hardline materialistic atheism”⁶—as we struggle to discern the triune God’s active presence in Scripture, in our lives, in the lives of those close to us, in our community, in the world, and in the church. Faith has become individualistic and private rather than communal and public. As a result, we struggle to discern how our story intersects with God’s story in our everyday lives.

Research Question

These observations provide a frame for the research question. *How might Participatory Action Research (PAR) interventions increase our capacity to discern the triune God’s active presence and engage in dialogue with others?*

Noël Regney and Gloria Shayne Baker composed the Christmas song “Do You Hear What I Hear?” in 1962 during the Cuban Missile Crisis.⁷ The sight of mothers pushing their infants in strollers along the streets of New York City inspired the opening line as the threat of nuclear war loomed over the world.⁸ Regney’s lyrics provide a framework for exploring discernment and dialogue in a secular age (*italics added*):

Said the night wind to the little lamb,
Do you see what I see
 Way up in the sky, little lamb,
Do you see what I see
 A star, a star, dancing in the night
 With a tail as big as a kite
 With a tail as big as a kite

⁶ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 676.

⁷ Noël Regney and Gloria Shayne Baker, “Do You Hear What I Hear?” (Regent Music Corporation (BMI) renewed by Jewel Music Publishing Company (ASCAP), 1962).

⁸ Claire Noland, “Pianist Wrote Music for Holiday Song,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 15, 2008, <http://articles.latimes.com/2008/mar/15/local/me-baker15>.

Said the little lamb to the shepherd boy,
Do you hear what I hear
 Ringing through the sky, shepherd boy,
Do you hear what I hear
 A song, a song, high above the trees
 With a voice as big as the sea
 With a voice as big as the sea

Said the shepherd boy to the mighty king,
Do you know what I know
 In your palace warm, mighty king,
Do you know what I know
 A Child, a Child shivers in the cold
 Let us bring Him silver and gold
 Let us bring Him silver and gold

Said the king to the people everywhere,
Listen to what I say
 Pray for peace, people everywhere!
Listen to what I say
 The Child, the Child, sleeping in the night
 He will bring us goodness and light
 He will bring us goodness and light

This song captures the spirit of this adaptive challenge that sought to change the culture of a church by cultivating a missional imagination and nurturing four spiritual capacities: see, hear, know, and say within the realm of faith formation.

Importance of the Research Question

This research created the opportunity to investigate and cultivate a missional imagination. The project is an adaptive challenge that sought to change the culture of a church by equipping people to discern God's active presence and engage in dialogue as they asked, "What is God up to?" Interventions were pragmatic ways of linking academic learning with ministry. The participants wrestled with discerning God's active presence in Scripture, in their lives, in the lives of those close to them, in their community, in the world, and in the church. Participants were invited to imagine how God's story

intersected with their story, both individually and collectively. Through the Holy Spirit, they hopefully discerned God's active presence, so they could share the compelling story of God's grace and could be more fully engaged in God's mission to usher in the Kingdom. The hope is that this research would be beneficial to the church catholic given the pervasiveness of secularity in Western culture and how it has impacted faith formation, discernment, and dialogue.

Theoretical Lenses

Four theoretical lenses are utilized to explore how PAR interventions might increase our capacity to discern the triune God's active presence and engage in dialogue with others. Chapter two explores in detail the historical background as well as the theoretical lenses: Secularity, Adaptive Change, Mental Models and Reframing, and Story and Ritual.

In addition to the small town and rural setting of this bedroom community, Charles Taylor's theories regarding secularity, the transcendent, the immanent frame, and the Closed World Structure (CWS) have been invaluable in understanding the secular context in which we live and their implications for faith formation.⁹ His work is enhanced with the writings of Patrick R. Keifert and Nigel Rooms,¹⁰ as well as Dwight J. Zscheile.¹¹

Adaptive change theory serves as one of the theoretical lenses since this research focused on cultural change and utilized a concurrent mixed methods approach. Martin

⁹ Taylor, *A Secular Age*.

¹⁰ Patrick R. Keifert and Nigel Rooms, *Forming the Missional Church: Creating Deep Cultural Change in Congregations* (Cambridge, MA: Grove Books, 2014).

¹¹ Dwight J. Zscheile, ed., *Cultivating Sent Communities: Missional Spiritual Formation*, Missional Church Series (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 2012).

Linsky, professor at Harvard University Kennedy School of Government, and Ronald A. Heifetz, co-founder of Cambridge Leadership Associates, are leaders in this theory, and their writing shaped the research process.¹²

Mental models and reframing theories draw on social and cultural anthropology to describe how people process and make sense of the world around them. Scott Cormode introduces the theory of mental models, which are parallel to schema and archetypes,¹³ while Lee G. Bolman and Terrence E. Deal explain a similar theory called reframing.¹⁴ While they define four frames, only the symbolic frame is used as a lens for this study. Reframing became a way of understanding the immanent frame articulated by Charles Taylor in *secularity* three as well as a tool of cultural change.

Bolman and Deal advocate the theory of the symbolic frame, which includes the importance of story and ritual to any organization, secular or sacred. Story ultimately became a thread that runs through much of the research and the various theoretical, biblical, and theological lenses employed since people love to both listen to stories and tell stories. Kendall Haven, research scientist and professional storyteller, explores story structure and observes that neurological research reveals that we are hardwired from birth to think in stories.¹⁵ Andrew J. Reagan researches Kurt Vonnegut's theory of the shapes

¹² 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 Scott Cormode, "Cultivating Missional Leaders: Mental Models and the Ecology of Vocation," in *The Missional Church and Leadership Formation: Helping Congregations Develop Leadership Capacity*, ed. Craig Van Gelder, Missional Church Series (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 2009), 99-119.

¹⁴ Lee G. Bolman and Terrence E. Deal, *Reframing Organizations: Artistry, Choice, and Leadership*, Fifth edition (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2013).

¹⁵ Kendall F. Haven, *Story Proof: The Science behind the Startling Power of Story* (Westport, CT: Libraries Unlimited, 2007), Kindle Location 1961.

of stories.¹⁶ Medical historian Anne Harrington¹⁷ and socio-narratologist Arthur Frank¹⁸ bring a new perspective to understanding the impact of stories. Dr. Seuss and his wonderfully imaginative tale *Horton Hears a Who!*¹⁹ deliver a dose of creativity and inspiration, as well as a way of reimagining discernment and dialogue.

Rituals can be understood as actualizing stories, thus creating cohesiveness and solidifying identity within an organization. Ronald L. Grimes, a specialist in ritual studies, views humans as “ritualizing animals” and introduces modes of rituals, particularly liturgy.²⁰ Taken together, story and ritual can be tools to both reinforce culture as well as transform culture through mental models and reframing.²¹ This lens is explored further in *Liturgy and Witness* under the Biblical and Theological Lenses.

Biblical and Theological Lenses

Five biblical texts from the Old and New Testaments serve as lenses to guide this research. Moreover, four theological lenses are used: Discernment and Dialogue, the Glory Story and the Cross Story, Missional Imagination, and Liturgy and Witness. Chapter three explores these lenses in detail.

¹⁶ Andrew J. Reagan et al., “The Emotional Arcs of Stories Are Dominated by Six Basic Shapes,” *EPJ Data Science* 5, no. 1 (November 4, 2016): 31, <https://doi.org/10.1140/epjds/s13688-016-0093-1>.

¹⁷ Anne Harrington, *The Cure Within: A History of Mind-Body Medicine* (New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 2009).

¹⁸ Arthur W. Frank, *Letting Stories Breathe: A Socio-Narratology* (Chicago, IL; Bristol: University of Chicago Press; University Presses Marketing distributor, 2012).

¹⁹ Dr. Seuss, *Horton Hears a Who!*, Grolier Book Club Edition (New York, NY: Random House, 1982).

²⁰ Ronald L. Grimes, *Beginnings in Ritual Studies*, Second edition (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1995).

²¹ Bolman and Deal, *Reframing Organizations*.

The first biblical lens is Jesus' healing of the blind man in Mark 8:17-26 when Jesus asks the disciples, "Do you not see or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Do you have eyes but fail to see, and ears but fail to hear? And don't you remember?" This theme is deepened by exploring Jesus' crucifixion between two criminals in Luke 23:32-49. The disciples encounter Jesus after his resurrection while they walk along the road to Emmaus in Luke 24:13-35. In the book of Ruth, although God never speaks, Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz experience the steadfast love of God in the ordinary circumstances of life through the loving actions of others. God's encounter with Cornelius and Peter in Acts 10:1-11:18 frames witnessing and dialogue as both listening and speaking. By dwelling on each of these texts, we explore four spiritual capacities: see, hear, know, and say.

The first theological lens is discernment and dialogue since the research question focuses on increasing our capacity to discern the triune God's active presence and talk about God. After defining discernment and contrasting it with the predominant narrative of the immanent frame, we explore dialogue as two-way communication rooted in the account of creation in Genesis chapter one. We turn to Harvey C. Kwiyani, who reminds us that discernment is not a solo endeavor, but rather it is the task of a community of discerners.²² Patrick R. Keifert and Nigel Rooms explore discernment as centered on the *missio Dei* in conjunction with asking, "What is God up to?"²³

Nancey Murphy delineates three criteria for discerning whether an event, experience, or utterance is an example of the transcendent impinging into the immanent

²² Harvey C. Kwiyani, "Umunthu and the Spirituality of Leadership: Leadership Lessons from Malawi," *Journal of Religious Leadership* 12, no. 2 (Fall 2013): 39-59.

²³ Keifert and Rooms, *Forming the Missional Church*, 4.

frame.²⁴ The reflections of Andrew Root expand our understanding of discernment.²⁵ We explore one possible process of discernment and dialogue with Craig Van Gelder, who observes that it is vital that we keep God in the conversation.²⁶ The lens discernment and dialogue concludes by exploring a biblical understanding of the four spiritual capacities noted earlier: see, hear, know, and say.

In keeping with the thread of story running through this research, Gerhard O. Forde introduces us to two overarching Christian theological stories: The Glory Story and the Cross Story.²⁷ Here we explore Martin Luther's Theology of the Cross as proposed in his *Heidelberg Disputation*, including the paradox of the hiddenness of God. The cross story is explored further through commentary by Steven D. Paulson,²⁸ Peter L. Steinke,²⁹ and from the Catholic perspective via the pen of Henry Nouwen.³⁰

One of the challenges of missional leadership is encouraging congregations to be open to their collective missional imagination being transformed by the Holy Spirit. Patrick Keifert introduces the lens of missional imagination, which he describes as

²⁴ Nancey C. Murphy, *Beyond Liberalism and Fundamentalism: How Modern and Postmodern Philosophy Set the Theological Agenda*, The Rockwell Lecture Series (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1996).

²⁵ Root, *Faith Formation in a Secular Age*.

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

²⁷ Gerhard O. Forde and Martin Luther, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross: Reflections on Luther's Heidelberg Disputation, 1518* (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 1997).

²⁸ Steven D. Paulson, "Luther on the Hidden God," *Word & World* Volume XIX, no. 4 (Fall 1999): 363-71.

²⁹ Peter L. Steinke, *Preaching the Theology of the Cross: Sermons and Worship Ideas for Lent and Easter* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Pub. House, 1983).

³⁰ Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Living Reminder: Service and Prayer in Memory of Jesus Christ* (San Francisco, CA: Harper San Francisco, CA, 1998).

“God’s preferred and promised future.”³¹ In a similar vein, Dwight Zscheile proposes cultivating a posture of wonder.³² Jürgen Moltmann argues that a trinitarian hermeneutic grounded in *koinonia*, *perichoresis*, and *kenosis* should shape our missional imagination in terms of both community and ecclesiology.³³ We build on the concepts by Alan Hirsch and rethink missional imagination in terms of the three spheres of life: God, world, and church.³⁴

The final theological lens is the Christian practices of liturgy and witness. Dorothy C. Bass and Craig Dykstra define these practices by building on the work of Alasdair MacIntyre.³⁵ Liturgy integrates story and ritual by actualizing stories and helping us remember through participation, so these stories are woven into the fabric of our own story. Henry Nouwen,³⁶ as well as Hans Schwarz and Robert W. Jenson,³⁷ dig deeper into the transformative power of liturgy.

Witnessing is, at heart, telling a story. Andrew Root recounts the Apostle Paul’s encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus and explores having the narrative arc of

³¹ Patrick Keifert, *We Are Here Now: A New Missional Era: A Missional Journey of Spiritual Discovery* (Eagle, ID: Allelon, 2007), 64-68.

³² Zscheile, *Cultivating Sent Communities*.

³³ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom: The Doctrine of God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993).

³⁴ Alan Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating the Missional Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2006).

³⁵ Dorothy C. Bass and Craig Dykstra, “Times of Yearning, Practices of Faith,” in *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People*, The Practices of Faith Series (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1998), 1-12.

³⁶ Nouwen, *The Living Reminder*.

³⁷ Hans Schwarz and Robert W. Jenson, “The Means of Grace,” in *Christian Dogmatics*, ed. Robert W. Jenson and Carl E. Braaten, vol. 2, 2 vols. (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 2011).

our story crucified.³⁸ Thomas Hoyt, Jr., highlights the critical links among story, remembering, testimony, and the Bible.³⁹ Thomas Long recaps how worship transforms the way we see, hear, speak, feel, think, and act.⁴⁰ Through the power of the Holy Spirit, we learn to discern how God is acting and moving, so we can share the compelling story of God’s grace and be more fully engaged in God’s mission to usher in the Kingdom.

Definition of Key Terms

Faith Formation: Variouslly termed Christian formation, spiritual formation, and sanctification, faith formation is not about self-improvement wherein we make ourselves acceptable to God, earn salvation, or become more like Christ by our good works. Instead, the Holy Spirit transforms us in and through our fellowship (*koinonia*) with the triune God and one another, so we become more like Jesus for others.⁴¹ Strictly speaking, formation is what the Holy Spirit does when forming disciples (learners, apprentices, followers), while discipleship is what we do in response to Jesus’ invitation as we live out our missional vocation. Christ invites us to “follow me” and be his hands and feet and

³⁸ Root, *Faith Formation in a Secular Age*.

³⁹ Thomas Hoyt, Jr., “Testimony,” in *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People*, ed. Dorothy C Bass, The Practices of Faith Series (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1998), 91-103.

⁴⁰ Thomas G. Long, *Testimony: Talking Ourselves into Being Christian*, The Practices of Faith Series (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2013).

⁴¹ Dwight J. Zscheile similarly defines Christian spiritual formation as an “‘intentional communal process of growing in our relationship with God and becoming conformed to Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit’ for the sake of the world . . . Spiritual formation is not just for our own individual growth; it is for love of God and neighbor.” Dwight J. Zscheile, ed., *Cultivating Sent Communities: Missional Spiritual Formation*, Missional Church Series (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 2012), 7-8. In formulating this definition, Zscheile quotes James Wilhoit from his book *Spiritual Formation as if the Church Mattered: Growing in Christ through Community* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 23.

voice as we grow in the awareness that we are dependent on God's grace.⁴² Carla Dahl contends that faith formation is an intentional process of “becoming whole and holy” featuring three attributes. First, formation is multidimensional, involving God’s work but also dependent upon our openness to becoming Christlike. Second, formation integrates both process and event, including the cognitive, emotional, and psychological aspects of ontology (being) and epistemology (knowing). Third, formation is invitational in that the triune God invites us into a relationship and is thus primarily communal rather than solitary.⁴³ God initiates; we respond. The Holy Spirit changes how we see, hear, and know God’s active presence, which in turn transforms our missional imagination.

Kingdom of God: Alternatively translated as Kingdom of Heaven or Reign of God, the Kingdom is embodied in the person and works of Jesus as King.⁴⁴ Jesus tells parables that shape our missional imagination rather than defining the Kingdom. The Kingdom comes on earth and all of creation as well as in Heaven, in the present as well as in the future, by lifting the poor and powerless as well as bringing low the rich and powerful, through the active presence of the triune God as well as in a particular place. Jesus avows, “the Kingdom of God is in your midst” (Luke 17:21), but we still live in a

⁴² In Ephesians 2:8-10, Paul writes, “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.” Later in 4:12-13 we read, “So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.”

⁴³ Carla M. Dahl, “Wholeness and Holiness,” in *Becoming Whole and Holy: An Integrative Conversation about Christian Formation*, by Jeannine K. Brown, Carla M. Dahl, and Wyndy Corbin Reuschling (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 38–39.

⁴⁴ The Greek word *basileia* is typically translated in English as “Kingdom.” This translation may reflect gender bias. The word “Kingdom” was chosen as it is consistent with most liturgical language and biblical translations, including the NIV used in this thesis.

broken world. The Kingdom is already and not yet, so Jesus assures us, “I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world” (John 16:33). Jesus defeated sin, death, and the devil, but suffering is still real. We live in the in-between time—between the cross and the *parousia*, at which time God will create a new heaven and a new earth. The Holy Spirit gathers, centers, empowers, and sends the church to both embody and proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom of God in the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ (Luke 10:5-9) and to live in solidarity with the least, the lost, and the last (Luke 1:46-55, 4:18-21; Matt. 5:3-12, 25:31-46). God ushers in the Kingdom and invites us to participate. We do not build the Kingdom—it is a gift that we inherit, receive, enter, and proclaim.

missio Dei: *Missio* means sending, but this term is typically translated as the mission of God rather than the sending of God. The triune God has a mission, and God invites humanity to participate with God as God brings salvation, recreates the cosmos, and ushers in the Kingdom. God does not restrict God’s active presence to the church; God is already active in the world. Thus, the church is not an end in itself—the church witnesses to the reign of Christ and is his servant in the world so that God will be glorified (Jer. 3:17, John 12:32, Rev. 21:1-4). Just as the Father⁴⁵ sends the Son, and the Father and Son send the Holy Spirit, so the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit send the church into the world to be witnesses.⁴⁶ Witnessing is our work (missional vocation) as disciples who are obedient to Christ’s command, “As my Father has sent me, so I send you” (John 20:21).

⁴⁵ God as “Father” is used throughout this thesis as it is consistent with biblical translations, including the NIV, the ecumenical creeds—Apostles’ Creed, Nicene Creed, and Athanasian Creed—and most liturgical language while reflecting the trinitarian vocabulary commonly used in the research context.

Missional Imagination: Simply put, missional imagination is the capacity to discern God’s active presence in Scripture, in our lives, in the lives of those close to us, in our community, in the world, and in the church. The Holy Spirit equips us to see, hear, know, and say who God is and what God is up to, while living our lives individually and communally grounded in faith, hope, and love (1 Cor. 13:13) as participants in the *missio Dei*. As noted above, Keifert describes missional imagination as God’s preferred and promised future. The Apostle Peter identifies the wellspring of our missional imagination:

In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy. . . . And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. (Acts 2:17-18)

Central to our missional imagination is Jesus Christ, God incarnate, who proclaims, “The Kingdom of God has come near! Repent and believe the Good News” (Mark 1:15). The Holy Spirit inspires our missional imagination, so we can discern how we fit into God’s story—both individually and as the church. Through this missional imagination, we perceive how God is acting and moving in our lives. We also witness to other persons the compelling story of God’s grace and are more fully engaged in the life and ministry of the church for the sake of the world.

Missional Leadership: Defining the term missional church helps us understand missional leadership. Dwight Zscheile describes the missional church as a

church whose identity lies in its participation in the triune God’s mission in all of creation. In the view of missional ecclesiology, it is God’s mission that has a church, not the church that has a mission. . . . [The] missional church views

⁴⁶ David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, American Society of Missiology Series, no. 16 (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011), 399. Bosch credits Karl Barth for this perspective. Bosch adds, “Jesus’ calling and formation of disciples is not an end in itself but rather the process that results in apostolate, in ‘sentness’ to continue his mission. . . . One can also speak of this dynamic process as the church’s ‘inhaling’ and ‘exhaling,’ or with Barth, ‘diastole’ and ‘systole,’ or to cite other imagery developed by Barth, as the church’s ‘gathering, upbuilding, and sending,’” 548.

mission as definitive of what the church is because the church is a product of and participant in God's mission. It exists to share meaningfully in the triune God's creative, reconciling, healing, restoring movement in the world. All its members are missionaries through baptism, not just a select few. Local churches are central to God's mission as they discern God's movement in their particular times and places and join up with it.⁴⁷

Our understanding of missional leadership grows out of this theology of the missional church, which is rooted in the *missio Dei* and a trinitarian perspective. Terri Martinson Elton defines missional leaders as “persons who understand their calling as disciples of Jesus Christ, see themselves as equipped by God with certain gifts to be shared with the larger body of Christ, and believe that they are empowered by the Spirit . . .”⁴⁸ One's identity as a missional leader is rooted in baptism and our calling in the context of *koinonia*—fellowship with God, a particular faith community, and the wider community—where we are joined to the body of Christ and receive the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38-39) for the sake of the world. Missional leadership is trinitarian, *perichoretic* (mutual indwelling in our relationship with the triune God), *kenotic* (self-emptying and sacrificial), incarnational, visionary, collaborative, fearless, and ultimately points to Jesus.

Spiritual Capacities: The phrase spiritual capacities refers to our openness to see, hear, know, and say by the power of the Holy Spirit, specifically in relation to discernment and dialogue regarding God's active presence and our missional imagination. Spiritual capacities are cultivated by the Holy Spirit and are thus closely linked with spiritual gifts (e.g., Eph. 4:11-13, 1 Cor. 12:1-13:13) and the fruit of the spirit (Gal. 5:22-23) but are not the same. They appear in the first biblical lens mentioned

⁴⁷ Zscheile, *Cultivating Sent Communities*, 6.

⁴⁸ Terri Martinson Elton, “Characteristics of Congregations that Empower Missional Leadership: A Lutheran Voice,” in *The Missional Church and Leadership Formation: Helping Congregations Develop Leadership Capacity*, ed. Craig Van Gelder, Missional Church Series (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 2009), 178.

above when Jesus asks the disciples, “Do you not see or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Do you have eyes but fail to see, and ears but fail to hear? And don’t you remember” (Mark 8:17-26)? The term capacities underscores our dependence upon God rather than ourselves (*perichoresis*). These capacities are explored more fully in chapter three under the theological lens Discernment and Dialogue.⁴⁹

Word of God: As a Lutheran, the Word of God has three meanings.⁵⁰ Jesus is the *Living Word*, “through whom everything was made and through whose life, death, and resurrection God grants us the gift of salvation” (John 1:1-18). The *Proclaimed Word* comes “to us as both Law and Gospel, revealing judgment and mercy through word and deed, beginning with the Word in creation, continuing in the history of Israel, and centering in all its fullness in the person and work of Jesus Christ.” The *Written Word* includes the sixty-six canonical books of the Old and New Testaments. The Bible is a divine-human book that tells the story about the active presence of the triune God in history from Genesis to Revelation to redeem all of creation. “Inspired by God’s Spirit speaking through the authors, the Bible records and announces” the coming of the Kingdom (Reign) of God in Jesus Christ, God incarnate (Rom. 1:1-5). Through Scripture, the Holy Spirit invites us into *koinonia* with the triune God, creates and sustains faith, and forms the church for ministry and witness. What is remarkable about the stories in

⁴⁹ The term “spiritual capacities” arises from the work of Stephanie Spellers, “Spiritual Formation for Missional Leadership” (Missional Leadership Cohort, Mustang Island, TX: Luther Seminary, 2015). The phrase “spiritual competencies” was initially used during the research. However, the word “competencies” can negatively evoke the word “incompetent.” Changing from “competencies” to “capacities” is in alignment with the research question which explores how PAR interventions might increase our “capacity” to discern the triune God’s active presence and engage in dialogue with others.

⁵⁰ Concepts and quotes in the text are drawn from the “ELCA Model Constitution for Congregations,” 2019, <https://www.elca.org/About/Churchwide/Office-of-the-Secretary/Constitutions>, Chapter Two Confession of Faith paragraphs C2.01-C2.03, which are in turn grounded in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (originally published in Dresden, 1580).

the Bible is not that they happened—but that they are happening today. We see ourselves in the pages of Scripture.

Research Methodology and Methods

This study utilized a Participatory Action Research (PAR) methodology with a concurrent mixed methods approach at Beloved Lutheran Church (BLC), which is located in a bedroom community in a small town and rural setting in the upper-Midwest in the United States.⁵¹ The research was conducted between November 10, 2018, and May 31, 2019. People eighteen years of age and older were invited to participate, including active members and non-members, as well as visitors. The methodology included four interventions that were designed and implemented by the Participatory Action Research team (PAR team) composed of current and former members of BLC. There were seven phases to the project: Design, Data Gathering, Intervention 1: Sunday Worship, Intervention 2: Lent, Intervention 3: Sunday School, Intervention 4: Story and Dialogue, and finally Review. Chapter four provides a detailed explanation of the research methodology and design.

Variables

This study sought to transform culture through a series of interventions. The Participatory Action Research interventions (experiments) were independent variables involving discernment and dialogue over five months. These interventions included a variety of activities, such as sharing faith stories by members of the church, Bible studies

⁵¹ Beloved Lutheran Church is a pseudonym for the research site. The names of participants and PAR team members have been changed. While every effort has been made to ensure confidentiality, participants were advised that anonymity could not be guaranteed.

led by confirmation students with adults, sermons, visualizations, meditations, videos, music, and children's artwork. The actual impact of the PAR interventions on our capacity to discern the triune God's active presence and engage in dialogue with others were dependent variables. The intervening variables included secularity three (immanent and transcendent frames), faith background, age, cultural influences, gender, personality, spiritual gifts, church participation (e.g., worship, Bible study, choir, teaching), Christian practices, self-perception, and engagement with the various interventions. These factors may have affected the results of this study.

Ethical Considerations

An "Application for the Approval of Use of Human Subjects in Research" was submitted for approval to the Luther Seminary Institutional Review Board (IRB), which "exists as a safeguard to promote and ensure ethical and responsible treatment of human subjects involved in research conducted at Luther Seminary. Luther Seminary accepts three historic documents, the Nuremburg Code (1949), the Helsinki Declaration (1964), and the Belmont Report (1979) as expressing the general philosophical and ethical foundation of the IRB."⁵² Final approval was granted on November 9, 2018. Luther Seminary's IRB Policies and Procedures, along with Federal Policy codified at Title 45 Part 46 of the Code of Federal Regulations, governed this research.

This research project invited survey, interview, and focus group responses from individuals over the age of eighteen. No vulnerable populations were included. There were no special risks involved by being a part of this study, aside from ordinary life risks.

⁵² Luther Seminary, "IRB Approval Instructions," 2019, <https://www.luthersem.edu/irb/approval.aspx?m=6082>.

No sensitive information was discussed. There were no direct benefits for participating in this research. Indirect benefits included the potential of improved understanding of Scripture and Christian faith formation for the participants. Appendices E and F consist of the implied and informed consent forms. Implied consent was included at the beginning of the questionnaires or on the invitation page of electronic surveys that described the project and indicated that completion of the questionnaire implied consent to use their responses in this study. The informed consent form was printed and handed out, discussed, and signed at the time of an interview or focus group. I recognize that I served in a dual role as both a researcher and a pastor.⁵³ As a result, self-reflection and note-taking were essential to the process. I strove to avoid assuming too much while being aware that my understanding sometimes needed to be reframed.⁵⁴

The records of this study have been kept confidential. The actual names of participants, churches, and communities have been changed. While every effort has been made to ensure confidentiality, participants were advised that anonymity could not be guaranteed. The interviews were digitally recorded, and the files are stored on my computer. All written data have been kept locked in my study at the church or password protected on my computer. Only my advisors and I have access to the raw data. Federal

⁵³ David Coghlan and Teresa Brannick, *Doing Action Research in Your Own Organization*, Fourth edition (Los Angeles, CA: SAGE Publishing, 2014), Kindle Location 2939. “The dynamics of doing action research in your own organization in quadrants 2, 3 and 4 involve building on the insider knowledge that you have already (preunderstanding), managing the two roles that you have (your standard organizational roles and now, in addition, the action researcher role) and negotiating access.”

⁵⁴ Coghlan and Brannick, *Doing Action Research*, Kindle Location 2963. “However, there are some disadvantages to being close to the data. When you are interviewing you may assume too much, and so not probe as much as if you were an outsider or ignorant of the situation. You may think that you know the answer and not expose your current thinking to alternative reframing. In insider research, epistemic reflexivity is the constant analysis of your lived experience, as well as your own theoretical and methodological presuppositions. This helps you to retain an awareness of the importance of other people’s definitions and understandings of theirs.”

guidelines specify that data must be retained for a minimum of three years. Raw data will be destroyed after June 1, 2023.

Summary

This chapter introduced the cultural context of the United States using Charles Taylor's term "secularity three," which describes a world that no longer recognizes transcendence. In other words, people in general struggle to discern divine action, lack a missional imagination, and avoid engaging in dialogue about God with others.

Chapter two provides the historical background to the congregation, which is located in a bedroom community in a small town and rural setting in the upper-Midwest of the United States. Additionally, we delve more deeply into the theoretical lenses that informed the research process. Chapter three similarly engages the biblical and theological lenses that shaped the overall research approach. Chapter four delineates in detail the research methodology and design. Chapter five probes the results of this study and their interpretation. Chapter six summarizes findings in light of the theoretical, biblical, and theological lenses explained in previous chapters while looking toward implications of this study for both the congregation being studied and for continuing research. The epilogue includes personal reflections on this journey.

CHAPTER TWO

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND THEORETICAL LENSES

Introduction

Chapter one introduced the context using Charles Taylor's term "secularity three," which describes a world that no longer recognizes the transcendent. People in general struggle to discern divine action, lack a missional imagination, and avoid engaging in dialogue about God with others. This context, in turn, framed the research question.

This chapter introduces Beloved Lutheran Church (BLC), which is located in a bedroom community in a small town and rural setting. In seeking to answer the research question, four theoretical lenses were used to shape the research process: Secularity, Adaptive Change, Mental Models and Reframing, and Story and Ritual. A discussion of these theoretical lenses follows the description of the historical background.

Historical Background

Beloved Lutheran Church is a vibrant faith community organized in 1887 as *Beloved Norsk Evangelisk Lutenske Menighet* (Beloved Norwegian Evangelical Lutheran Congregation) in the upper-Midwest in the United States. The first resident pastor would eventually serve as the first president of a prominent private Lutheran college. BLC was yoked with Community Lutheran Church in 1896. Neighbor Lutheran Church joined to form a three-point parish in 1901. BLC eventually became a single-point congregation around 1960 as membership in the church continued to grow.

BLC was founded amid controversy over predestination as a member of the Anti-Missourian Brotherhood (AMB), which had broken away from the United Norwegian Lutheran Church in America in 1887. AMB united with other synods to form the Norwegian Lutheran Church in America in 1917. They, in turn, joined with other church bodies in 1960 to form The American Lutheran Church (ALC).¹ BLC has been a congregation of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) since 1988.

The small town of Beloved was established as a Norwegian farming community in 1880. Some of the most fertile and productive farmland in the world surrounds Beloved, which is a bedroom community serving a midsize city of over 120,000.² The convenient location, coupled with the construction of a new high school, attracts people to Beloved who want to escape the "big city" and desire a "small town" lifestyle. Both the elementary school and high school are located within Beloved, which is situated near the center of the school district. The result is that school activities are a focus of relationships and family life for many residents.

The context is fluid with younger families moving into Beloved, while older members move to the larger adjacent midsize city in order to downsize housing and improve their access to health care.³ Active members and nonmembers of BLC travel as far as twenty miles to participate in the life of the congregation. From 2007 to 2017,

¹ L. DeAne Lagerquist, *The Lutherans*, Denominations in America, no. 9 (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999), 94-96.

² US Census Bureau, "American FactFinder," accessed September 24, 2016.

³ US Census Bureau. For the 2010 census, 1,458 people lived within the zip code where BLC is located. Within the city limits, 692 people resided in 2010 which is a 12.7% increase over the previous ten years. The estimate for 2017 is 762 people. The 2010 population of Beloved included 267 households and 185 families. Of these households, 44.6% had children under the age of eighteen living with them as compared to 38.3% in 2000, indicating the population is getting younger.

membership increased from 343 to 556, while average annual worship attendance grew from 75 to 115 from January through December. Beloved is within an hour of a popular lake district, so a large percentage of the community travels to the lakes for long weekends during the summer, resulting in a substantial drop in worship attendance. Thus, from September through May, worship attendance varied from around 120 to over 200 people, averaging 140 in 2017. On Christmas Eve in 2016, there were 365 people gathered for worship. The number of children in Sunday school and confirmation (preschool through tenth grade) grew from 59 in 2007 to 137 in 2018. Bibles were given to fifteen preschoolers and fourteen third graders in the fall of 2018. There were twenty middle school and twenty-nine high school youth.

While the context is fluid, it is nevertheless racially homogenous. The racial makeup of Beloved was 95.7% white alone, although this reflects a decrease from 98.4% in 2000. The remaining population was 0.1% black, 0.7% American Indian, and 2.0% two or more races.⁴

Statistics on religious affiliation are not available specifically for the town or the zip code. However, for the county as a whole in 2010, Mainline Protestant Churches accounted for 31% of the population, and Evangelical Protestant Congregations were about 10%, while the Catholic Church comprised 18%. Nearly 41% of the population was “unclaimed,” meaning that they had no religious affiliation.⁵ According to the Pew Foundation, for 9% of the population, religion was “not important,” while 5% were

⁴ US Census Bureau.

⁵ Clifford Grammich et al., “2010 U.S. Religion Census: Religious Congregations & Membership Study” (Collected by the Association of Statisticians of American Religious Bodies (ASARB) and distributed by the Association of Religion Data Archives, 2010).

agnostic, and 2% were atheists.⁶ The largest six denominations were as follows: Evangelical Lutheran Church in America 44%, Roman Catholic 30%, Missouri Synod 4%, United Methodist 4%, Evangelical Free Church of America 3%, and Assemblies of God 3%.⁷

When BLC was in the call process in 2008, the congregation had recently emerged out of a difficult period. The church had splintered, but the remaining members acted in faith, confident in God's future. They identified their highest mission priorities as "growth in personal discipleship and growth in community service."⁸ Together we are the body of Christ, grounded in God's Word and the Sacraments. The congregation is facing continuing opportunities to grow, learn, and listen attentively to the Holy Spirit, one another, and our neighbors. The Holy Spirit walks beside us while forming our missional imagination. I hope that we see with God's eyes and hear with God's ears so that we know God and tell God's story and our story. I pray that the Spirit continues to foster a culture of transformation, so we can participate with God as God ushers in the Kingdom.

Theoretical Lenses

Four theoretical lenses are utilized to answer the research question. *How might Participatory Action Research (PAR) interventions increase our capacity to discern the triune God's active presence and engage in dialogue with others?* These lenses are Secularity, Adaptive Change, Mental Models and Reframing, and Story and Ritual.

⁶ Pew Research Center, "Religion & Public Life Project: Religious Landscape Study," *Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project* (blog), May 11, 2015, <http://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study>.

⁷ Grammich et al., "2010 U.S. Religion Census: Religious Congregations & Membership Study."

⁸ Beloved Lutheran Church Call Committee, "Congregational Mission Profile," September 24, 2007, Section 8.24.

Secularity

In addition to the historical background described above, there is a secular cultural context that was introduced in chapter one. *A Secular Age*, by philosopher Charles Taylor, has been an invaluable place to begin understanding this context and the implications for faith formation. There has been a shift in Western culture over the past 300 years from belief in God being commonplace to belief in God being challenged, from it being “virtually impossible not to believe in God” to belief in God being “one human possibility among others.” Taylor contends that this pluralist world is the direct consequence of “exclusive (or self-sufficing) humanism,” which presupposes that we are our own moral authorities, people are fundamentally good, and freedom to satisfy our innermost desires leads to authenticity and human flourishing.⁹

Taylor categorizes these secular trends in terms of three consecutive yet overlapping frames: secularity one, secularity two, and secularity three. In secularity one, religion retreats from the public square. Faith is restricted to the private sphere rather than being a public witness. Secularity two entails a general lack of adherence to historic Christian beliefs and practices, including a decline in membership in religious denominations as well as a waning in worship attendance. In current parlance, this is the rise of the “nones”—meaning those who claim no religious affiliation but not necessarily an increase in unbelief. Secularity three describes a world that no longer believes in the transcendent, which means that divine action is not acknowledged.

Taylor defines “religion” in terms of a distinction between the transcendent and the immanent. “Transcendent” refers to God, to a spiritual and supernatural realm, to someone

⁹ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 2-3; 19; 252-55.

and something beyond us, and specifically to divine action. “Immanent” describes the physical, natural, and material world which can be systematically analyzed and understood using the modern scientific method. People in an “enchanted” world acknowledge the reality of divine action. They view themselves as vulnerable to a transcendent realm of “spirits, demons, and moral forces” that are beyond their control. Taylor calls this the “porous self.” In contrast, the immanent frame is “disenchanted”—the transcendent is rejected, and people no longer discern divine action.¹⁰ This immanent frame shapes a new identity, which he calls the “buffered self,” that is characterized by anthropocentrism along with a sense of invulnerability as we rely on our abilities and intellect.

The term “world structure” designates the prevailing cultural milieu, mental model, or frame that influences how people think, see, argue, feel, communicate, and generally make sense of life (see *Mental Models and Reframing* below). Taylor labels the world structure of secularity three the “immanent frame,” which is “closed” or “horizontal” and therefore rejects the “vertical” or “transcendent.”¹¹ Most people do not live in the extremes of one world structure or another. Instead, they live cross-pressured between them.¹²

¹⁰ Taylor, 29. “The process of disenchantment is the disappearance of this world, and the substitution of what we live today: a world in which the only locus of thoughts, feelings, spiritual élan is what we call minds; the only minds in the cosmos are those of humans (*grosso modo*, with apologies to possible Martians or extra-terrestrials); and minds are bounded, so that these thoughts, feelings, etc., are situated ‘within’ them.”

¹¹ Taylor, 556.

¹² Taylor, 548. “I have been describing here the basic motivations of the two great polar positions. But we must also remember that there always have been a great many people who have been cross-pressured between the two basic orientations; who want to respect as much as they can the ‘scientific’ shape of the immanent order, as they have been led to see it; or who fear the effect of religious ‘fanaticism’; but who still cannot help believing that there is something more than the merely immanent. The kind of ‘spiritualist’ position that we see with Victor Hugo, for instance, or alternatively with Jean Jaurès, are striking examples. What emerges from all this is that we can either see the transcendent as a threat, a dangerous temptation, a distraction, or an obstacle to our greatest good. Or we can read it as answering to our deepest craving, need, fulfillment of the good.”

Taylor argues that there is a false secular narrative that makes it appear as if this immanent frame is a Closed World Structure that negates the transcendent, rendering it as naïve and implausible. There are four facets to this narrative, but what ultimately links them all together is the overarching “narrative of maturation or coming of age”—the proposition that as humanity has matured, we have outgrown the need for religion, the transcendent, and God. Regarding these four narrative facets, Taylor notes:

These facets are in a sense variants on a narrative of coming of age, moving from a childlike to an adult consciousness. But my goal has also been to give some sense of how lively and powerful these narrations can be, how exciting and engaging, in particular the last two [facets], and how they associate the closed take with various virtues, mainly those of courageous, clear-sighted adulthood. It is easy to see how, if no other considerations impinge, they could generate anticipatory confidence in a take of closure within the immanent frame. But as supposed conclusive proofs they don't make the grade.¹³

According to Taylor, this narrative of maturation strokes our ego by praising our intellectual prowess.¹⁴ The impact of this narrative reveals the power of story to shape our self-understanding and world view, a theme explored under both theoretical and theological lenses (see *Mental Models and Reframing*; *Story and Ritual*; *Glory Story and Cross Story*; and *Liturgy and Witness* below). Story became a recurring theme throughout this study.

In addition to disenchantment, this immanent frame is characterized by modern individualism, instrumentalism, mechanistic theory, reason, the secularization of time, and interiorization, which, when taken *in toto*, constitute a natural order in contrast with the supernatural order of the transcendent.¹⁵ As a result, both secularity three and the immanent frame have shifted our self-perception and our identity. Individualism emphasizes

¹³ Taylor, 589-90.

¹⁴ Taylor, 590.

¹⁵ Taylor, 541.

individuality, authenticity, autonomy, and liberty. Instrumentalism views everything (e.g., objects, people, activities, theories, reason) as a tool for achieving a practical purpose and attain a specific result—the end justifies the means—such as in economics, science, law, social justice, and politics. Instrumental individualism gave birth to the belief that social structures (e.g., marriage, government, church) exist for the benefit of the individual rather than the community. Mechanistic theory posits that all processes (e.g., physical, social, psychological) are the result of identifiable cause and effect relationships. Instrumentalism, in conjunction with mechanistic theory, gave rise to the secularization of time, wherein lives are measured by exceptionally accurate clocks that enable us to use time as a resource to be manipulated, conserved, or wasted.¹⁶ Consequently, our natural universe is governed by impersonal, natural laws that can be observed, measured, defined, understood, and wielded via human reason, particularly the scientific method.¹⁷

In this immanent frame, interiorization demarcates an inner (mind) and outer (world) distinction, where the inner realm of the mind supersedes the transcendent. This focus on the inner realm of thoughts and feelings is reflected in René Descartes' famous first principle, "I think, therefore I am. (*Cogito, ergo sum.*)"¹⁸ For example, where people once talked about being possessed by evil spirits, they now speak of mental illness. This shift gave rise to self-examination, self-improvement, authenticity, Romanticism, and

¹⁶ Taylor, 329. "But mechanistic theory fragilized faith not principally by refuting Plato and Aristotle. It was really because mechanism undermines enchantment, the expression-embodiment of higher reality in the things which surround us, and thus made the presence of God in the cosmos something which was no longer experience-near, or at least not at all in the same way. God's power was no longer something you could feel or see in the old way; it now had to be discerned in the design of things, the way we see the purposes of the maker or user in some artificial contrivance, a machine—an image which recurs again and again in the discourse of the time, particularly in the simile likening the universe to a clock."

¹⁷ Taylor, 539-42.

¹⁸ René Descartes, *Discourse on the Method and Principles of Philosophy*, 1637.

even the development of the modern novel. Furthermore, interiorization affects how we construct social space. Relationships are bounded by concentric inner to outer circles that define varying intensities of relational intimacy, which are gauged by the extent to which we share our innermost thoughts and feelings.¹⁹

One of the central facets of a belief in the transcendent is a quest for fullness of life and the desire to understand what it means to flourish. “Does the highest, the best life involve our seeking, or acknowledging, or serving a good which is beyond, in the sense of independent of human flourishing?”²⁰ Is there something more, something greater, something more significant that gives meaning and purpose to life? From a Judeo-Christian perspective, the answer is yes: loving God, loving our neighbor, and loving others as Christ loves us are central to our personhood, to being made in the *imago Dei*. These beliefs define what it means to flourish and lead a full life in the active presence of God:

In the Christian case, we could think of this as *agape*, the love which God has for us, and which we can partake of through his power. In other words, a possibility of transformation is offered, which takes us beyond merely human perfection. . . . But then thirdly, the Christian story of our potential transformation by *agape* requires that we see our life as going beyond the bounds of its “natural” scope between birth and death; our lives extend beyond “this life.”²¹

Secularity three has caused a shift in how people search for, define, and experience fullness of life because this secular age is closed to religious beliefs since the immanent frame rejects the transcendent. One of the consequences is that people experience a “profound dissatisfaction with a life encased entirely in the immanent order.

¹⁹ Taylor, 140.

²⁰ Taylor, 16.

²¹ Taylor, 20.

The sense is that this life is empty, flat, devoid of higher purpose.”²² Life has become two dimensional—only horizontal—as the vertical or transcendent dimension is minimized, ignored, or mocked. People struggle to find meaning and purpose.

The impact is that “we have moved from a world in which the place of fullness was understood as unproblematically outside of or ‘beyond’ human life, to a conflicted age in which this construal is challenged by others which place it (in a wide range of different ways) ‘within’ human life.”²³ Thus, a state of fullness arises from within ourselves in secularity three and the immanent frame. Taylor argues that “exclusive humanism” has redefined human flourishing as satisfying one’s ego, wants, and desires as we demand instant gratification to fulfill our narcissistic yearnings. We exalt self-sufficiency, self-centeredness, self-gratification, and self-aggrandizement. Our search often reflects the modern individualism, instrumental reason, and interiorization that characterize the immanent frame as it becomes “coded in the language of authenticity: I am trying to find my path, or find myself.”²⁴ The significance of this anthropocentrism is that this search is all about me, myself, and I—the human trinity. We are our own gods.

This emphasis on interiorization impacts Christian spirituality by shifting the focus to the inner (mind) aspects of faith formation. Taylor observes, “official Christianity has gone through what we can call an ‘excarnation,’ a transfer out of embodied, ‘enfleshed’ forms of religious life, to those which are more ‘in the head.’ In this it follows in parallel with ‘Enlightenment,’ and modern unbelieving culture in

²² Taylor, 506.

²³ Taylor, 15.

²⁴ Taylor, 507.

general.”²⁵ One of the consequences is that people’s lives are cross-pressured as we live between the extremes of orthodox religion (Christian and non-Christian) and hardline materialistic atheism while struggling to recognize God’s active presence. People often avoid engaging in dialogue about God even in the church since faith has become individualistic, inner, private, and excarnational rather than communal, outer, public, and incarnational. Figure 1 provides a visual summary of the different aspects of secularity three and the immanent frame.

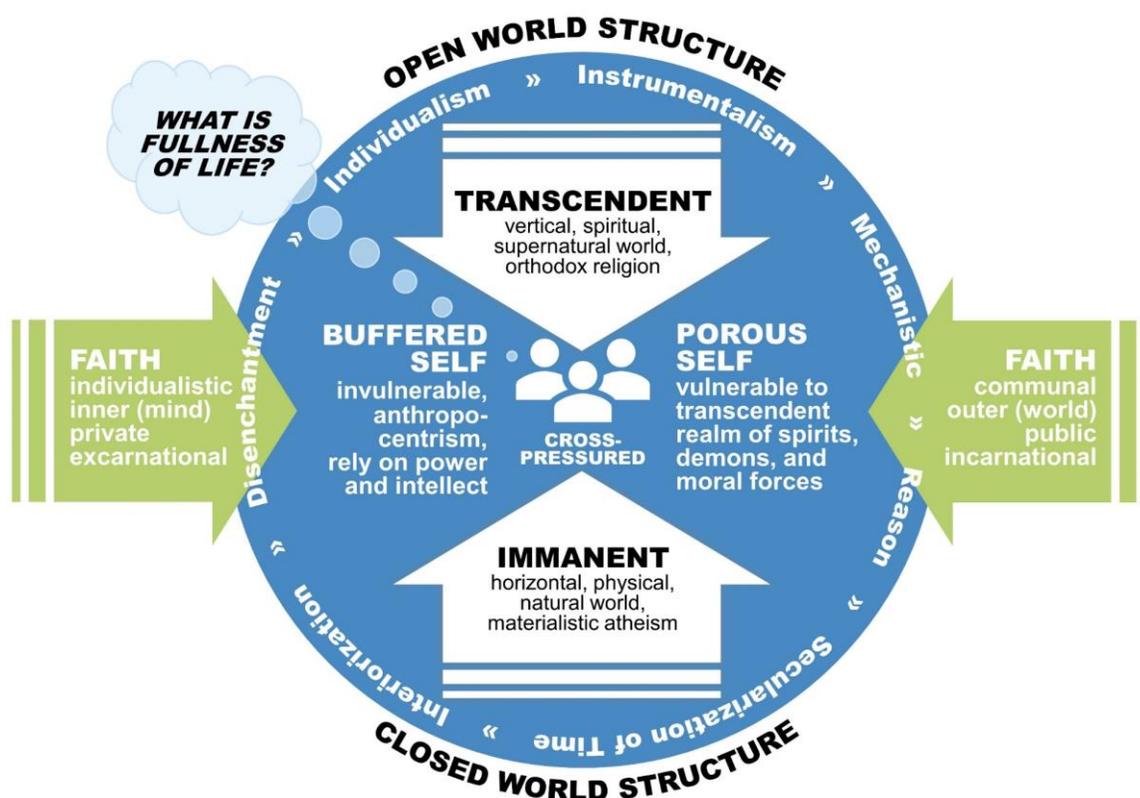


Figure 1. Secularity three: cross-pressured between transcendent and immanent

Patrick Keifert and Nigel Rooms further illustrate Taylor’s thesis:

In this cultural paradigm we have been trained to compartmentalize our faith. God, for many, is a moralistic, therapeutic deity who is far removed from this world, rather than an active, living, moving reality who creates and sustains the universe in every moment. The categorization of faith as private is among the reasons why many Christians do not speak and act as if God were living and

²⁵ Taylor, 554.

active in the here and now of our everyday lives. Research by Church Innovations has shown that most Christians, when asked a question like “What is God up to?” will not answer with a sentence that begins with God as subject.²⁶

Likewise, Dwight Zscheile tackles faith formation and discipleship within this immanent frame, explicitly referring to the Moralistic Therapeutic Deism (MTD) identified by sociologists Smith and Denton (see chapter one). He observes that people are often unable to articulate their faith in a way consistent with their tradition, they avoid dialogue about religion with others, and they struggle to discern God acting “in categories, images, metaphors, or narratives from the Christian tradition.” Fewer people are engaged in “an integrated set of communal Christian practices, beliefs, and norms,” which means they cobble together beliefs from many different sources, some of which are antithetical to core Christian convictions.²⁷

Three anecdotes regarding ministry at BLC illustrate the aptness of these observations. Shortly after arriving in 2008, the council president and I had prepared an agenda for our first council meeting that included time for dwelling in the Word.²⁸ Our goals included helping council members listen deeply to God as well as to one another. Members were informed that two people would read aloud the Scripture, then everyone would turn to a person sitting next to them and share either what caught their imagination or a question they had about the reading. Afterward, they would share with the group what they heard from their partner—not their own observations. Everyone looked uncomfortable, and someone boldly asked, “You mean we have to talk to one another?” I

²⁶ Patrick R. Keifert and Nigel Rooms, *Forming the Missional Church: Creating Deep Cultural Change in Congregations* (Cambridge, MA: Grove Books, 2014), 4-5.

²⁷ Zscheile, *Cultivating Sent Communities*, 3-5.

²⁸ Pat Taylor Ellison and Patrick R. Keifert, *Dwelling in the Word: A Pocket Handbook* (St. Paul, MN: Church Innovations Publishing, 2011).

smiled and nodded, “Yes.” Sensing their anxiety, I modeled the practice for them before encouraging them to proceed, which they did cautiously and reluctantly.

Several years later, two women visited me to complain because I had recently invited worshippers to turn to a neighbor and share a highlight from the sermon. “Pastor, do you have any idea how uncomfortable that was?” Sympathizing with her uneasiness, I responded, “Yes, I do. Isn’t it sad, because church is the one place that we should feel comfortable talking with one another about God?” Engaging in dialogue—both listening and speaking—about God can make people uneasy, so they generally prefer to avoid it. We struggle to discern God’s active presence or to recognize how our story intersects with God’s story in our everyday lives.

The third anecdote concerns BLC’s involvement in the Vibrant Congregations Project (VCP) with Luther Seminary from 2015 to 2017, which focused on faith formation. Thirteen interviews with members of BLC and residents of the community were conducted by the BLC Faith Formation Task Force, which was comprised of members of the church and the pastor. The task force identified patterns of belief similar to MTD:

- God exists. However, two divergent views of God were prominent: a punishing God who is waiting to catch us doing something wrong but is otherwise uninvolved in daily life and, alternatively, a loving God who is a superhero that swoops in to save the day.
- Faith is often equated with believing that God exists rather than a relationship built on trusting God’s promises in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit. If they are reasonably good persons, they will go to heaven when they die.
- God is not restricted to a faith community but can be found in nature. These encounters are nebulous, isolationist, and individualistic.
- Faith formation has been professionalized. Responsibility to teach the faith falls to the church in general and the pastor or staff specifically. As a result, adults, especially parents, feel uncomfortable and unqualified to talk about God, the Scriptures, or faith.

- People generally do not want to be disciples. Rather they want to be spiritual but, at least for some, not religious.
- “Church” has become just one more thing to squeeze into people’s hectic schedules. There is little to no time that is set apart as holy.²⁹

In terms of ecclesiology, the interviewees all held positive views of BLC, but some held negative opinions of “organized religion.” While they seldom explicitly used the term “church” when asked about activities that help them grow in faith, they stressed the importance of being part of a community that nurtures faith. Participants linked three experiences to growth in faith: (1) inspiration by people of faith such as a parent, friend, family member, Sunday school teacher, pastor; (2) a crisis or life change such as the death of a loved one/friend, marriage, or birth/adoption of children; and (3) learning from theologians or philosophers, including from other Christian denominations and non-Christian religions.

Zscheile argues that the early church’s identity was shaped through witness and service to their neighbors. However, as Christianity became more embedded in Western culture, the church’s identity switched to concentrating on influencing culture and institutional preservation.³⁰ How might an emphasis on this historical view of the church’s identity, particularly discernment of God’s active presence and bearing witness as core Christian practices, influence faith formation? This question is one of many adaptive challenges for discipleship in a secular age. Secularity three serves as the frame to understand the cultural context of this study as we seek to answer the research question.

²⁹ BLC Faith Formation Task Force, “Beloved Lutheran Church VCP Final Report” (Beloved Lutheran Church, 2017), 1-2.

³⁰ Zscheile, *Cultivating Sent Communities*, 9.

Adaptive Change

Heifetz and Linsky have been two of the key researchers on understanding adaptive change and how leadership can respond to technical and adaptive challenges. Technical challenges are problems with known, ready-made solutions. Heifetz and Linsky observe, “Groups will strongly prefer technical interpretation, particularly one in which the ‘problem’ lies with an individual rather than the group as a whole.”³¹ The reality is that we prefer quick fixes and to blame others for our troubles and failures.

Adaptive challenges, on the other hand, are those opportunities, problems, or situations for which there are no known, ready-made solutions. They are adaptive rather than technical challenges because “they require experiments, new discoveries, and adjustments from numerous places in an organization or community” to adapt or change the culture of an organization, such as “attitudes, values, and behaviors.”³²

Due to the nature of adaptive challenges, they can be tricky to identify and complicated to address. Heifetz and Linsky illustrate the distinction between technical and adaptive challenges with a car that is experiencing mechanical failure. The initial solution is to take the car to a mechanic for a technical fix. If the vehicle continues to succumb to the same mechanical failure, then the question is, “Why?” Is the mechanic unqualified? Are the parts substandard? Perhaps the problem is related to the operation of the car by the driver, such as riding the brakes, incorrectly shifting gears on a manual

³¹ Heifetz and Linsky, *Leadership on the Line*, 57.

³² Heifetz and Linsky, 13.

transmission, cognitive lapses, or risky behavior. In such cases, behavioral or cultural change needs to be made. In other words, this is an adaptive challenge.³³

The first practical leadership strategy is to step back to obtain a new perspective. Heifetz and Linsky use the metaphor of moving to the balcony to describe this process of gaining a bird's-eye view. If leaders want to effect change, however, they cannot stay on the balcony—leaders need to move back into the action, which the authors describe as stepping out on the dance floor. This iterative process involves moving back and forth from the dance floor to the balcony and back again. Perhaps a French expression is applicable: *recular pour mieux sauter*—we need to step back to jump farther.³⁴ After observing from the balcony, Heifetz and Linsky suggest focusing on four diagnostic tasks: (1) distinguish technical from adaptive challenges; (2) find out where people are; (3) listen to the “song beneath the words” (read between the lines and interpret their meaning); and (4) read the behavior of the authority figure for clues.³⁵

Addressing adaptive challenges requires asking people difficult questions and inspiring them to risk change.³⁶ This inquiry can be uncomfortable when it requires a cultural adaption that is at odds with the surrounding culture. Charles Taylor alludes to this when he uses the term “cross-pressured” to describe the effect of living between cultures (see Secularity above). Such changes can be disruptive and cause anxiety as people struggle with a sense of loss. Heifetz and Linsky make a profound observation,

³³ Heifetz and Linsky, 19.

³⁴ Nouwen, *The Living Reminder*, 63.

³⁵ Heifetz and Linsky, *Leadership on the Line*, 55.

³⁶ Heifetz and Linsky, 20.

“People do not resist change, per se. People resist loss.”³⁷ Loss may be experienced as a loss of competence, loss of relationships, and a loss of identity. As they further note, “Habits, values, and attitudes, even dysfunctional ones, are part of one’s identity. To change the way people see and do things is to challenge how they define themselves.”³⁸

Loss can result in power struggles. Opponents to change have the most to lose, while allies have the least to lose. Blinders can prevent leaders from recognizing this sense of loss as they march forward with change, which is why leaders need to acknowledge the loss by affirming that change is difficult and that people are giving up something of great value.³⁹ Building on that concept, Heifetz and Linsky suggest that a leader should help people within an organization envision a better future and connect with a higher purpose by engaging their imaginations (see *Missional Imagination* in chapter three).⁴⁰

One of the central concepts of adaptive leadership is giving the work back to the people rather than trying to be a superhero who swoops in to save the day. Leaders help people identify the problem or challenge they are facing and then explore possible responses collaboratively. For example, Heifetz and Linsky share an intriguing approach by a Jesuit priest who “started by simply asking [the group] what they wanted to talk about. They raised the issues. They set the agenda.”⁴¹

Responding to an adaptive challenge requires learning new ways to see, hear, know, and say. Adaptive leadership requires experimentation and innovation. Such a

³⁷ Heifetz and Linsky, 11.

³⁸ Heifetz and Linsky, 27.

³⁹ Heifetz and Linsky, 92-95.

⁴⁰ Heifetz and Linsky, 122 and 209.

⁴¹ Heifetz and Linsky, 64.

process is typically iterative, involving collaboration as well as a willingness to risk failure. This research sought to change the culture of the church by cultivating a missional imagination in the people of Beloved Lutheran Church.

Mental Models and Reframing

Scott Cormode discusses mental models, which are parallel to archetypes and schema in psychology, literary analysis, philosophy, and anthropology.⁴² Mental models help us to understand what is happening around us, and they influence how we act. Akin to mental models is the idea of frames, such as the immanent frame described by Charles Taylor above. “A frame is a mental model—a set of beliefs and assumptions—that you carry in your head to help you understand and negotiate a particular ‘territory.’”⁴³

Frames can be illustrated using three metaphors. First, a frame can be understood as a structure that gives overall form to one’s mental image of the world, functioning like the structural frame of a building or a web.⁴⁴ Second, a frame can be envisioned as a pair of glasses, a window, or a picture frame. This frame captures a static snapshot of reality, but what is left out of the frame can be as important as what is in the frame. Imagine a photograph of three smiling children with their baseball accouterments. Outside of the picture is a parent, arms folded, face scowled, gripping a baseball while behind is a shattered window. That, as they say, is the rest of the story. Third, imagine a film or movie, which is a series of rapidly moving picture frames. This metaphor is similar to

⁴² Scott Cormode, “Cultivating Missional Leaders,” in *The Missional Church and Leadership Formation*, 99-119.

⁴³ Bolman and Deal, *Reframing Organizations*, 10.

⁴⁴ Murphy, *Beyond Liberalism and Fundamentalism*, 88.

metaphor two above, with the same limitation that not everything is captured on film. However, this frame is dynamic rather than static.⁴⁵

Bolman and Deal explain how mental models and frames influence our perceptions by recounting the story of two American pilots who mistakenly shot down two USAF Black Hawk helicopters in 1994 during the Gulf War. “The pilots did the normal thing in the face of ambiguous data: they filled in gaps based on what they knew, what they expected, and what they wanted to see.”⁴⁶ However, their frame was inaccurate because they tried to match the situation to their expectations, which blinded them to reality. Neuroscience researchers have challenged the belief that “seeing is believing” and replaced it with its converse: “believing is seeing.”⁴⁷

Bolman and Deal outline four frames (along with providing a distinct metaphor for each one) to help comprehend organizations: structural (organization as a factory), human resource (organization as a family), political (organization as a jungle), and symbolic (organization as a temple, theater, or carnival). Only the latter one, symbolic frame, was used as a lens for this study.

The symbolic frame draws on social and cultural anthropology to describe one way that humans make sense of the world. Every organization has its own culture, including symbols and symbolic actions such as stories, heroes, rituals, ceremonies, and specialized languages. Bolman and Deal contend, “Meaning, belief, and faith are its central concerns. Meaning is not given to us; we create it. . . . Symbols are the basic

⁴⁵ Steven P. Thomason, “Deep in the Burbs: A Participatory Action Research Project Exploring How the Social Trinity Impacts Spiritual Formation in Suburban ELCA Congregations” (Doctor of Philosophy Thesis, 2015), 20-22, <http://www.deepintheburbs.com/>.

⁴⁶ Bolman and Deal, *Reframing Organizations*, 37.

⁴⁷ Bolman and Deal, 36.

materials of the meaning systems, or cultures, we inhabit. Leaders are *bricoleurs*, people who survey and use the materials at hand to construct meaning systems.”⁴⁸ Arguably, while people do create meaning, they also receive meaning, such as from a family, church, volunteer organization, ethnic group, or nation-state. This received meaning is intellectually, spiritually, and emotionally processed, consciously and subconsciously, to ascertain the implications—the meaning may be transformed, claimed, or rejected. This process does not happen in isolation but is influenced by the surrounding cultural milieu and life experiences. The symbolic frame is an ideal lens to view a church.

In the symbolic frame, leadership is spiritual and creates a shared culture of faith, values, meaning, and purpose. Bolman and Deal outline nine features of organizations in the symbolic frame.⁴⁹ How one becomes a *member* is marked by ritual (e.g., Baptism). *Diversity* gives a competitive advantage, such as through skills, personality, temperament, experience, and interests (e.g., spiritual gifts). Leaders *lead by example* by inspiration, direction, tolerating ambiguity, encouraging inventiveness, and issuing challenges rather than through an authoritative command structure (e.g., discipleship). Members need to live a *balanced life* between work and play, seriousness and humor, in order to relieve tension, foster creativity, and nurture social bonds (e.g., serving, fellowship, Sabbath rest). A *specialized language* fosters unity while facilitating dialogue (e.g., creeds, doctrine, theological terms). *Stories* propagate core beliefs and preserve traditions while providing direction, defining expectations, reinforcing morals, strengthening values, envisioning the future, and forming identity (e.g., Scripture, witnessing). *Rituals and ceremonies* are sacred

⁴⁸ Bolman and Deal, 244.

⁴⁹ Bolman and Deal, 274-83.

occasions that celebrate and transform culture by communicating deep meaning, providing assurance, actualizing stories, and reinforcing identity (e.g., worship, liturgy, Holy Communion, Baptism). *Informal cultural players* minister to people’s spiritual needs and address personal issues (e.g., the priesthood of all believers). Finally, there is a *driving spirit* that inspires members to believe that there are meaning and purpose to their lives (e.g., Holy Spirit, Kingdom of God, *missio Dei*).

Scott Cormode argues that the task of Christian leaders is to “help change the way the people of God see the worlds in which they live. . . . In other words, Christian leaders lead by changing the mental models that the people of God use to make sense of the world.”⁵⁰ A leader reframes how people within an organization see their world by helping them to reimagine the present and the future. Some of the most effective ways of reframing are through the use of story and ritual (see Theological Lenses in chapter three).

For example, Jesus disrupted the mental models of his disciples by reframing their notion of the Messiah. Jesus invited listeners to reimagine the Kingdom of God (Matt. 5-7). He warned the disciples that the Messiah must suffer, be rejected, be killed, and rise again (Matt. 16:21). He instructed them to deny themselves, take up their crosses, and follow him (Matt. 16:24). They found Jesus’ mental model disquieting and even offensive (Matt. 16:22). We often do, too, but we may be reluctant to admit it. Missional leaders who are dealing with adaptive challenges must be self-aware of their mental models and reframe them where necessary, all while trying to understand the mental models of those around them and, when appropriate, disrupting those mental models (see Missional Imagination in chapter three).

⁵⁰ Cormode, “The Missional Church and Leadership Formation,” 104.

Living in the context of secularity three, as defined by Taylor, can blind us, so we do not discern the transcendent. Understanding this lens is therefore useful in exploring how to change a culture by disrupting mental models and reframing the way people see the world and the Kingdom of God, thus opening them to discern divine action contra the narrative of maturation of the immanent frame with its Closed World Structure. The next lens specifically explores story and ritual in light of the above discussion of the symbolic frame introduced by Bolman and Deal.

Story and Ritual

The children's book *Horton Hears a Who!* by Dr. Seuss recounts the tale of Horton the elephant who *hears* a voice.⁵¹ After hearing the voice, Horton *sees* a speck of dust that is the source of the sound. He soon comes to *know* that the speck of dust is an extraordinarily small place called Whoville filled with equally small persons named Whos. Proclaiming "a person's a person, no matter how small," Horton takes on the mission to protect the Whos from harm and *tells* others about his discovery.

Horton is ridiculed, harassed, and threatened by a despotic kangaroo and vigilante monkeys who inflame an animal mob because he believes in something that they can neither see nor hear. The animals prepare to destroy the speck by boiling it in Beezle-Nut oil. During the chaos, ridicule, and trouble that ensues, Horton implores the Whos to prove their existence and save themselves from trouble by making as much noise as possible. Almost everyone in Whoville sings, plays instruments, and shouts, "We are here! We are here!" Nonetheless, only Horton can hear them. Finally, little Jojo is cajoled into joining the other Whos and shouts, "Yopp!" The kangaroo and the monkeys finally

⁵¹ Dr. Seuss, *Horton Hears a Who!*

hear them. All the animals are now convinced of the Whos' existence and are gripped by Horton's mission to save and protect the Whos in Whoville.

So what, exactly, does Horton have to do with anything? People like to listen to and tell stories. As noted above, Bolman and Deal highlight symbolic frames that encompass various forms of symbols, including stories. They note, “[Stories] grant comfort, reassurance, direction, and hope to people of all ages. They externalize inner conflicts and tensions. . . . Yet stories convey information, morals, and myths vividly and convincingly. They perpetuate values and keep heroic feats alive. . . . Stories are deeply rooted in the human experience.”⁵² The sharing of stories is foundational to who we are.

Kendall Haven, research scientist and professional storyteller, observes, “Humans are truly *homo narratus*, story animals.”⁵³ Neurological research reveals that we are hardwired from birth to think in stories. Our brains have a “neural story net,” which means that we are predisposed to use *story structure* to process life experiences and sensory input. The brain assigns the responsibility for making sense of input to the neural story net, and if the brain cannot make sense of the input, it is ignored. We subconsciously process input via the neural story net, which converts the input into story form before it reaches the conscious mind in order “to understand, to make sense, to remember.”⁵⁴

⁵² Bolman and Deal, 253-54.

⁵³ Kendall F. Haven, *Story Proof*, Kindle Location 1961.

⁵⁴ Kendall F. Haven, “Your Brain on Story” (March 30, 2015), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zGrf0LGn6Y4&feature=youtu.be>.

Haven defines *story* as “a detailed, character-based narration of a character's struggles to overcome obstacles and reach an important goal.”⁵⁵ He proposes that researchers have identified five core elements of a compelling story structure: character, intent, actions, struggles, and details. *Character*: The story needs to be about someone (protagonist) with a set of character traits. *Intent*: The main character strives for a goal. A motive identifies why the goal is essential. *Actions*: The character must do something in seeking to achieve the goal. A sequence of actions forms the plot. *Struggles*: The character must struggle against a set of conflicts and problems that block him from reaching the goal, whether another character (villain, antagonist), physical obstacle (structure, culture, geography, power), or internal conflict (spiritual, emotional, social, mental). Risk (likelihood of failure) and danger (consequences of failure) are paramount to establishing the relevance of the story. These struggles move toward a crisis, then the climax, and finally, the resolution of the story. *Details*: These include descriptions of characters, settings, objects, environments, and cultures is essential to engaging our imagination and aiding our ability to visualize the story.⁵⁶ All of these elements were evident above in Dr. Seuss’ tale *Horton Hears a Who!*

Anne Harington, a medical historian who explores stories in the healing process, contrasts stories with “narratives,” a term she uses for templates or tropes that help us understand stories and to construct our own stories. We learn these narratives subconsciously from our culture, similar to the way we learn language, by exposure within social groups such as a family. Examples of narratives include “true love thwarted,”

⁵⁵ Haven, *Story Proof*, Kindle Locations 1308-1309.

⁵⁶ Haven, Kindle Locations 1238-1256.

“knight in shining armor,” “David and Goliath,” or “Romeo and Juliet.” However, she clarifies that we do not tend to give narratives actual titles in our day-to-day lives consciously. These constructs affect the way we see, hear, think, imagine, talk, and act.⁵⁷

In a similar vein, Author Kurt Vonnegut proposes that stories have shapes based on their emotional arc rather than focusing on story structure. In his autobiography, *Palm Sunday*, Vonnegut describes the rejected proposal for his master’s thesis in anthropology at the University of Chicago, where he argues that stories have shapes that can be plotted on a graph.⁵⁸ The vertical G-I axis represents *Good Fortune* at the top with *Ill Fortune* at the bottom, while the horizontal B-E axis depicts the timeline of a story from *Beginning* to *Ending*. He asserts, “There is no reason why the simple shapes of stories can’t be fed into computers; they have beautiful shapes.”⁵⁹

A group of researchers from the University of Vermont and the University of Adelaide tested Vonnegut’s theory by conducting a computer analysis of 1,327 fiction stories from the collection of Project Gutenberg. They identify six core shapes or emotional arcs (see figure 2): Rags to Riches (rise), Riches to Rags (fall), Man in a Hole (fall then rise), Icarus (rise then fall), Cinderella (rise then fall then rise), and Oedipus (fall then rise then fall). The authors of the study conclude:

⁵⁷ Harrington, *The Cure Within*, 24-25. “I am persuaded that they are real, not in some archetypal or platonic sense, but in the way that the abstract rules of etiquette for different cultures are real and, with time and patience, can be identified and named with a fair degree of certainty, even if they are nowhere written down. Like the rules of etiquette, the effects of these narratives are everywhere in the ways that people talk, think, and behave; they help make sense of much that would otherwise seem mysterious or arbitrary about the business at hand; and ‘natives’ invariably recognize a description of a narrative—they know it without realizing it—once it is pointed out to them.”

⁵⁸ Kurt Vonnegut, *Palm Sunday: An Autobiographical Collage* (New York, NY: Dial Press Trade Paperbacks, 2006), 285.

⁵⁹ Kurt Vonnegut, “Kurt Vonnegut on the Shapes of Stories,” TED-Ed, accessed July 8, 2019, <https://ed.ted.com/featured/ZG7Q2obA>.

While the plot captures the mechanics of a narrative and the structure encodes their delivery, in the present work we examine the emotional arc that is invoked through the words used. The emotional arc of a story does not give us direct information about the plot or the intended meaning of the story, but rather exists as part of the whole narrative (e.g., an emotional arc showing a fall in sentiment throughout a story may arise from very different plot and structure combinations).⁶⁰

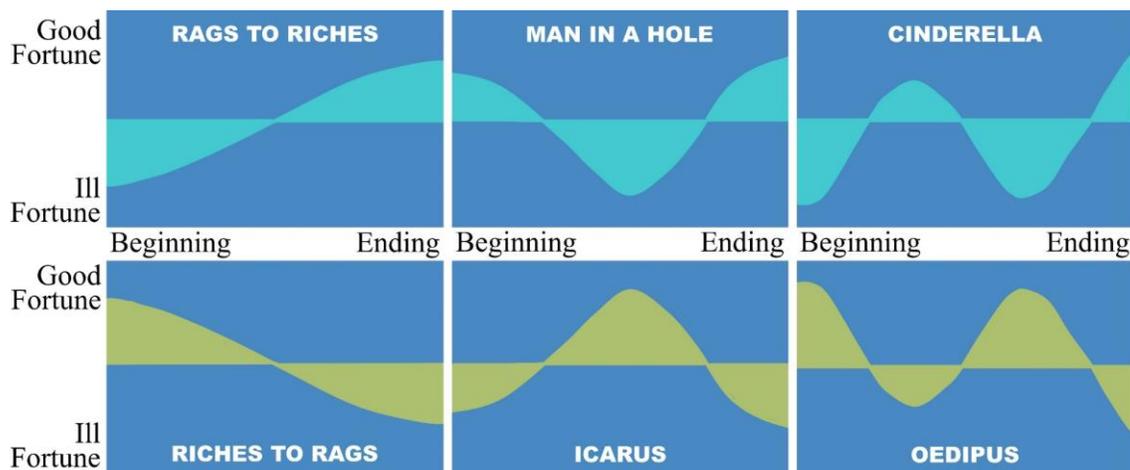


Figure 2. Six core story shapes or emotional arcs

Adapted from Andrew J. Reagan et al., “The Emotional Arcs of Stories Are Dominated by Six Basic Shapes,” *EPJ Data Science* 5, no. 1 (November 4, 2016), 7.

Socio-narratologist Arthur Frank reflects on the capacities of stories, or their narrative equipment, in terms of how stories work, affect us, and hold our attention. Frank recognizes four works of stories that follow along two perpendicular axes, as illustrated in figure 3. One axis moves along a continuum from *self-identity* at one end to *group identity* or affiliation at the opposite end. This axis helps us recognize those with whom we are connected as well as those with whom we are disconnected. Perpendicular to this is an axis that connects *good* at one end with *evil* at the opposite end of the spectrum. This axis helps us to imagine how to live in a world of danger, toil, and trouble. Frank further observes that “these four are all one work, because selves are always affiliated, and goodness is never separable from danger. Any breathing, vital story

⁶⁰ Reagan et al., “The Emotional Arcs of Stories Are Dominated by Six Basic Shapes,” 2.

does multiple kinds of work, often in the same situation at the same time.”⁶¹

Again we see the power of stories to do their work on us, such as the narrative of maturation described by Charles Taylor (see Secularity above).

Stories inform life in two ways: they convey information but, more importantly, they give form—“temporal and spatial orientation,

coherence, meaning, intention, and especially boundaries—to lives that inherently lack form.”⁶² Frank argues that this can be both a gift and a danger. The narrative of maturation in the immanent frame mentioned above under Secularity is an example of just such a form or, to use Charles Taylor’s term, Closed World Structure. Haven likewise observes, “Story is the structure by and through which humans create meaning.”⁶³

Harrington writes, “Good stories, however, are not just talk. Many of the best ones are also scripts, or guides to action: things that provide us with a store of specific, if

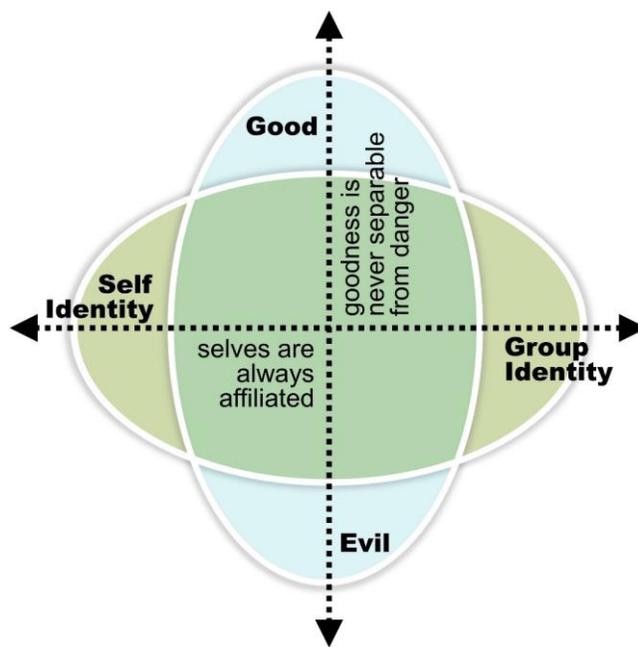


Figure 3. Four works of stories

⁶¹ Frank, *Letting Stories Breathe*, Kindle Locations 1100-1109.

⁶² Frank, Kindle Locations 80-81.

⁶³ Haven, Kindle Location 1697. Haven supports his thesis by citing several researchers: “McAdams, a psychologist, wrote in his 1993 book, ‘It is because of the narrative nature of human minds that we are impelled as adults to make sense of our lives in terms of stories.’ In 1999, Swatton stated, ‘Stories (structure of) are integral to the ability to have information formation and experience make sense to our lives.’ Kaminsky (1996) wrote, ‘To make sense of the world, people tend to structure the stream of time and events into traditional story elements. It is a way to create meaning from past events, a way to understand the present as an outcome of the past.’”

flexible, social roles, cues, and reference points that tell us how to behave and even—sometimes—how to feel (what to experience) in different situations.”⁶⁴ Stories help people define boundaries while enabling us to ascertain the possible consequences of crossing those boundaries, such as fairy tales like “Hansel and Gretel” and “The Boy Who Cried Wolf,” as well as biblical stories like “The Fall” (Gen. 3) and “Jesus and the Samaritan Woman at the Well” (John 4:1-42).

Stories are central to our identity individually, within families, and in organizations. Frank labels this the *narrative habitus*—the stories that live in us as well as the stories within which we live. A story affects people’s perceptions and motivates them to either take action or do nothing. He argues that stories breathe life into individuals and groups while prompting people to move into and change the future: “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.”⁶⁵ Frank contends that those who hear a story and, in turn, retell a story, thereby become part of the story. He also proposes that stories use *interpellation*, a term coined by philosopher Louis Althusser. Interpellation means “calling on a person to acknowledge and act on a particular identity; a crying baby calls on the person who may have slipped out of the parental identity to start assuming that identity. To use Althusser’s preferred verb, the baby hails the person to be a parent.”⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Harrington, *The Cure Within*, 22.

⁶⁵ Frank, *Letting Stories Breathe*, Kindle Locations 91-92.

⁶⁶ Frank, Kindle Locations 1128-1130.

Recalling the story *Horton Hears a Who!*, Horton *heard* the Whos and *saw* the speck of dust, changing his point of view and opening his Closed World Structure. He *knew* the Whos, not merely intellectually but as persons in relationship, and he *told* the other animals the truth, requiring him to take a risk, cross boundaries, and reimagine the future. Despite the chaos, ridicule, and trouble around him, Horton *listened* to the smallest of voices because he *knew* “a person’s a person, no matter how small.”⁶⁷ To succeed, the Whos and Horton had to work collaboratively, even to the point of enlisting the help of someone who would ostensibly be viewed among the least and the last. Horton’s imagination was transformed as he was called upon by the Whos to acknowledge and act on his new-found identity. Horton *sees*, *hears*, *knows*, and *says*. (See Discernment and Dialogue, Missional Imagination, and Liturgy and Witness in chapter three.)

Stories are about the past, the present, and the future. We absorb stories into our story, making them our own, as a way of helping us navigate life. Frank observes, “because I recognize in the story what has too often been my own position: how I have repeated in my imagination some story that I have, as Tolstoy writes, ‘adapted’ and then found myself in a situation that makes possible the future imaged in that story.”⁶⁸

As Kendall Haven noted above, we think in stories—we subconsciously review stories in our imagination, modify them to suit our circumstances, and then actualize them. Stories are more than a historical record. They capture our imagination and help us to visualize the future and incarnate it (see Missional Imagination and Liturgy and Witness in chapter three). Frank maintains that “stories do not simply report past

⁶⁷ Dr. Seuss, *Horton Hears a Who!*

⁶⁸ Frank, *Letting Stories Breathe*, Kindle Locations 223-225.

events. Stories project possible futures, and those projections affect what comes to be, although this will rarely be the future projected by the story. Stories do not just have plots. Stories work to *emplot* lives: they offer a plot that makes some particular future not only plausible but also compelling.”⁶⁹ From a Christian standpoint, God’s story becomes our story.

Similarly, rituals *emplot* lives by actualizing stories, thus enabling us to reimagine our past, present, and future. They reflect Arthur Frank’s concept of *narrative habitus* as they reinforce the stories that live in us and become the stories within which we live. Rituals use *interpellation* to call us into living into our identity. They mark time and provide a more profound meaning to daily lives by connecting people to a sense of the sacred and anchoring us in time and place. James F. White contends that a ritual has three characteristics: it is purposeful behavior that is repetitive with a communal social function.⁷⁰ Bolman and Deal differentiate between rituals and ceremonies, contending that “rituals are more frequent, everyday routines imbued with special meaning. Ceremonies are more episodic, grander, and more elaborate. Ceremonies often weave several rituals in concert and are convened at times of transition or on special occasions.”⁷¹

Ronald L. Grimes, a specialist in ritual studies, views humans as “ritualizing animals.” The scholarly definition of ritual is an intentionally repeated formalized act, typically sacred, passed down through tradition.⁷² He proposes “six modes of ritual

⁶⁹ Frank, *Kindle Locations* 231-233.

⁷⁰ James F. White, *Introduction to Christian Worship*, Third edition (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2000), 19.

⁷¹ Bolman and Deal, *Reframing Organizations*, 260.

⁷² Grimes, *Beginnings in Ritual Studies*, 53.

sensibilities” or “embodied attitudes.” Note that the boundaries of these modes are ambiguous as ritual acts can express “multiple sensibilities.” Grimes’ diagram, which is reproduced in table 1, summarizes these modes of ritual.

Table 1. Modes of ritual

	Frame of Reference	Dominant Mood	Voice	Basic Activity	Motivation	Examples
Ritualization	bodily, ecological, psychosomatic	ambivalence	exclamatory	embodying	compelled	symptoms, mannerisms
Decorum	interpersonal, formal	politeness	interrogative	co-operating	expected	greeting, departing, tea drinking
Ceremony	intergroup, political	contentiousness	imperative	competing	enforced	inauguration, rallies, legalities
Magic	technological, causal, means-end oriented, transcendent	anxiety	declarative / imperative	causing	desired	healing, fertility, divination
Liturgy	religious, sacral, ultimate	reverence	interrogative / declarative	being	cosmically necessary	meditation, invocation, praise
Celebration	expressive, playful, dramatic, aesthetic	festive	subjunctive	playing	spontaneous	carnivals, birthdays, feasts

Source: Ronald L. Grimes, *Beginnings in Ritual Studies*, Second edition (University of South Carolina Press, 1995), 50.

Ritualization is an ethnological term that describes stylized, repeated gestures and postures that are unconscious, programmed, and encultured. They arise in response to the natural rhythms of life—seasons, eating, drinking, mating, competition, birth, death, and healing—“because they make explicit the interdependence of people with their environments and bodies.”⁷³ *Decorum* focuses on our social life. They define expected behavior for crossing boundaries and rules of etiquette, such as words of greeting, shaking hands, how we dress, and expressions of affection. *Ceremony* is more intentional and involves larger social groups than decorum, such as political or labor union rallies, sporting events, coronations, inaugurations, and convocations. Symbolic anthropologists

⁷³ Grimes, 37.

label ceremonies “social drama.” They often involve surrender to a greater cause, the exaltation of power, and competition. *Magic* is not a pejorative term but describes a ritual act with a transcendent connection that aims for a specific outcome or empirical result. Examples include curses, divination, and prayers for healing; however, prayers can also be ceremonial. *Liturgy* is “how a people becomes attuned to the way things are—the way they really are, not the way they appear to be.”⁷⁴ Structurally similar to rehearsal or practice, liturgy necessitates waiting, receptivity, expectation, and powerlessness. Rather than being limited to the past, events are actualized in the present in the hope of transformation by “‘re-presenting’ events and ‘event-ualizing’ structures.”⁷⁵ Liturgy asks, “Can this be?” and then faithfully declares, “This is the case.” (See Liturgy and Witness in chapter three.) *Celebration* is “ritualized play” that is simultaneously spontaneous and choreographed. Examples include birthdays, carnivals, feasts, dances, and concerts.

Rituals connect us to people, the “great cloud of witnesses” (Heb. 12:1), thus reinforcing our individual and group identity. They can also establish a regular rhythm to life in a world that is often unpredictable, chaotic, and filled with trouble by offering comfort during times of loss, easing transitions, establishing boundaries, nurturing relationships, and celebrating milestones. Rituals clarify shared values and teach us ethical standards. In other words, rituals reflect the four works of stories proposed by Arthur Frank (see figure 3 above). As Bolman and Deal observe:

When ritual and ceremony are authentic and attuned, they fire the imagination, evoke insight, and touch the heart. Ceremony weaves past, present, and future into life’s ongoing tapestry. Ritual helps us face and comprehend life’s everyday shocks, triumphs, and mysteries. Both help us experience the unseen web of significance that ties a community together. When inauthentic, such occasions

⁷⁴ Grimes, 45.

⁷⁵ Grimes, 45.

become meaningless, repetitious, and alienating—wasting our time, disconnecting us from work, and splintering us from one another.⁷⁶

Bolman and Deal propose that story and ritual can be tools to reinforce culture as well as transform culture through mental models and reframing.⁷⁷ They contend that one of the barriers to change is when people lose their sense of meaning and purpose—both individually and communally—or what Charles Taylor calls fullness of life or what it means to flourish. People may respond to change either by clinging to the past or by disregarding the loss. In either case, this can result in them getting “stuck.”⁷⁸

An essential strategy for dealing with change, according to Bolman and Deal, is to implement rituals that serve as transitions from the old to the new. Rituals can serve as an occasion to mourn loss as well as to heal, since loss is a significant issue as noted above under adaptive challenge. At the same time, rituals offer an opportunity to celebrate the past, live faithfully in the present, and move hopefully into the future. Rituals may include acknowledging heroes, telling stories, and engaging the imagination.⁷⁹

Like Horton in *Horton Hears a Who!*, we are called to see, hear, know, and say. We discern where God is actively present in the world, even when others have a hard time believing in something that they can neither see nor hear. Engaging in dialogue and speaking the truth require us to take a risk, cross boundaries, and reimagine the future. We are attentive to the Holy Spirit, one another, and our neighbor despite the chaos, ridicule, and trouble that swirls around us. God hails us in the rituals of Baptism, Holy

⁷⁶ Bolman and Deal, *Reframing Organizations*, 405.

⁷⁷ Bolman and Deal, 390-92.

⁷⁸ Bolman and Deal, 388.

⁷⁹ Bolman and Deal, 378.

Communion, confession, and absolution to acknowledge and act on our identity as disciples of Jesus. At the same time, our missional imagination is transformed as we listen to the smallest of voices because we know “a person’s a person, no matter how small.”⁸⁰

Story and ritual are tools to reinforce culture as well as initiate adaptive change. This lens is therefore useful in exploring how to disrupt mental models while reframing the way people perceive the world, the Kingdom of God, and the triune God’s active presence in contrast with the narrative of maturation of the immanent frame. The implications of story and ritual are explored further from the perspective of Christian practices in the theological lens Liturgy and Witness in chapter three.

Summary

This chapter explored the historical background to the congregation, which is a Lutheran church in a bedroom community located in a small town and rural setting in the upper-Midwest. The four theoretical lenses used to shape the research process were also discussed: Secularity, Adaptive Change, Mental Models and Reframing, Story and Ritual. The next chapter focuses on the biblical and theological lenses, which shaped both the research design as well as the interpretation of the data.

⁸⁰ Dr. Seuss, *Horton Hears a Who!*

CHAPTER THREE

BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL LENSES

Introduction

Chapter one introduced the research question. *How might Participatory Action Research interventions increase our capacity to discern the triune God's active presence and engage in dialogue with others?* Chapter two provided the historical background for the congregation, which is situated in a bedroom community located in a small town and rural setting. The theoretical lenses employed in this study were identified: Secularity, Adaptive Change, Mental Models and Reframing, and Story and Ritual.

This chapter explores biblical lenses by focusing on five texts from the Old and New Testaments. This exegesis is followed by a discussion of the four theological lenses: Discernment and Dialogue, the Glory Story and the Cross Story, Missional Imagination, and Liturgy and Witness. Since this adaptive challenge involved seeking to change the culture of the church, these lenses also focus on four spiritual capacities—see, hear, know, and say—as we seek to discern the triune God's active presence and engage in dialogue with others.

Biblical Lenses

The discussion of the biblical lenses begins with Jesus' healing of the blind man in Mark, which serves as a way of framing the overall research question. The theme is deepened by exploring Jesus' crucifixion between two criminals, the disciples' encounter

with Jesus after his resurrection while walking along the road to Emmaus, the experiences of Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz in the book of Ruth, and finally Peter and Cornelius in Acts.

Healing a Blind Man: Mark 8:17-26

Aware of their discussion, Jesus asked them: “Why are you talking about having no bread? Do you still not see or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Do you have eyes but fail to see, and ears but fail to hear? And don’t you remember? When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many basketfuls of pieces did you pick up?” “Twelve,” they replied. “And when I broke the seven loaves for the four thousand, how many basketfuls of pieces did you pick up?” They answered, “Seven.” He said to them, “Do you still not understand?” They came to Bethsaida, and some people brought a blind man and begged Jesus to touch him. He took the blind man by the hand and led him outside the village. When he had spit on the man’s eyes and put his hands on him, Jesus asked, “Do you see anything?” He looked up and said, “I see people; they look like trees walking around.” Once more Jesus put his hands on the man’s eyes. Then his eyes were opened, his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly. Jesus sent him home, saying, “Don’t even go into the village.”

Jesus miraculously feeds the 4,000 people, whereupon the Pharisees begin testing him and demanding a sign. Jesus refuses to take the bait and climbs into a boat with his disciples to cross to the other side of the lake. While sailing, the disciples discover they have only one loaf of bread—seemingly not enough to feed all of them. Jesus warns his disciples to beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and Herod. Yeast was a common metaphor among rabbis for “the evil inclination within human beings.”¹

The disciples are worried, anxious, and perhaps hungry. They misconstrue Jesus’ words, thinking he is upset with them because they have not brought enough bread to eat. They have already forgotten Jesus’ feeding of the 4,000. Frustrated with the disciples’ inability to comprehend his words and actions, Jesus asks, “Why are you talking about having no bread? Do you still not see or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Do you

¹ Robert A. Guelich et al., *Mark 1-8:26*, Word Biblical Commentary; Vol. 34A (Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1989), 422.

have eyes but fail to see, and ears but fail to hear? And don't you remember" (17-18)? Even the disciples who are in the physical presence of Jesus and have witnessed his miracles struggle to see, hear, understand, and remember. Jesus' reprimand recalls the words of the prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah, who confront the people of Israel for failing to keep the Covenant, have faith in God, or trust God's promises.² The prophets call on Israel to repent, but the peoples' hearts remain hardened.

Jesus confronts his disciples, who fail to remember the words of Scripture and connect them to himself. The issue is not so much whether the disciples believe in Jesus' ability to perform miracles. Instead, they do not hear his words or see who Jesus is, nor do they truly know him or discern the active presence of God in their midst. Jesus equates their lack of understanding with a hardened heart.³ How often do our hardened hearts prevent us from perceiving God's active presence? In modern scientific parlance, this might be called inattentive blindness—the failure to be attentive to what is happening around us. In theological terms, we are so turned inward on ourselves that we fail to see, hear, understand, and remember.

Immediately after this incident, Jesus and the disciples encounter a blind man in Bethsaida. Jesus takes the man by the hand and leads him outside the village where he spits on the man's eyes, places his hands on him, and asks, "Do you see anything" (23)? The blind man responds, "I see people walking; they look like trees walking around" (24). After Jesus places his hands on the man a second time, "his eyes were opened, his

² Isaiah 6:9-10: "Go and tell this people: 'Be ever hearing, but never understanding; be ever seeing, but never perceiving.' Make the heart of this people calloused; make their ears dull and close their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed." Jeremiah 5:21: "Hear this, you foolish and senseless people, who have eyes but do not see, who have ears but do not hear . . ."

³ Guelich, *Mark 1-8*, 424-26.

sight restored, and he saw everything clearly” (25). Jesus warns him not to return to the village.

Initially, the blind man does not receive full sight. Perhaps this is analogous with the life of faith—sometimes we are blind, other times we see clearly, and often our vision is blurry. As Paul writes, “For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known” (1 Cor. 12:12). After the healing of the blind man, the disciples begin to see, hear, and understand who Jesus is, if only fleetingly. In response to Jesus’ inquiry, “Who do you say I am?” Peter boldly confesses, “You are the Messiah” (27-30). Immediately afterward, Peter rebukes Jesus for prophesying his own death and resurrection; Jesus, in turn, rebukes Peter for not seeing, hearing, or understanding. The disciples eventually abandon Jesus when he is arrested and crucified. Robert Guelich observes, “It does, however, give a hint to what Mark’s readers doubtless know, namely, that the disciples did gain their full sight but only after Easter. Only then did they fully comprehend who Jesus was and the significance of his ministry.”⁴ Believing is seeing (see *Mental Models and Reframing* in chapter two).

Jesus and Two Criminals: Luke 23:32-49

Two other men, both criminals, were also led out with him to be executed. When they came to the place called the Skull, they crucified him there, along with the criminals—one on his right, the other on his left. Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” And they divided up his clothes by casting lots. The people stood watching, and the rulers even sneered at him. They said, “He saved others; let him save himself if he is God’s Messiah, the Chosen One.” The soldiers also came up and mocked him. They offered him wine vinegar and said, “If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself.” There was a written notice above him, which read: THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS. One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: “Aren’t you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!” But the other criminal rebuked him. “Don’t you fear God,” he said, “since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly, for we are

⁴ Guelich, *Mark 1-8*, 430.

getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong.” Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” Jesus answered him, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.” It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon, for the sun stopped shining. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two. Jesus called out with a loud voice, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.” When he had said this, he breathed his last. The centurion, seeing what had happened, praised God and said, “Surely this was a righteous man.” When all the people who had gathered to witness this sight saw what took place, they beat their breasts and went away. But all those who knew him, including the women who had followed him from Galilee, stood at a distance, watching these things.

Jesus, who has been arrested, set on trial, and found guilty, is crucified with two criminals, one to either side of him. Hanging above Jesus is a sign which silently and truthfully bears witness to Jesus’ identity: “This is the King of the Jews” (38). The onlookers are unable to see, hear, or know who Jesus is, let alone discern God’s active presence. The people and leaders sneer at Jesus, “He saved others; let him save himself if he is God’s Messiah, the Chosen One” (35). Soldiers mock him, “If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself” (36). The first criminal insults him, “Aren’t you the Messiah? Save yourself and us” (39)! Remarkably, Jesus asks his heavenly Father to forgive his persecutors.

In contrast, the second criminal appears to know who Jesus is as he prayerfully implores, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom” (42). This criminal discerns the coming of the Kingdom in Jesus Christ even amid suffering and impending death. Though the criminal may not fully understand, he is witnessing and proclaiming who Jesus is through his simple plea. Jesus responds with a promise which confirms his identity, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise” (43).

Darkness descends in the final hour. Jesus calls out, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit” (46) before taking his last breath. Jesus, the Son of God, dies at our

hands. After seeing and hearing all that transpires, the centurion praises God, “Surely this was a righteous man” (47).

God the Son knows what it means to experience abandonment, loneliness, pain, violence, suffering, and death. God the Father knows what it means to lose a son to an agonizing death. Jesus, God incarnate, makes known who God is in the paradox of opposites. Humility, weakness, and suffering are signs of God’s active presence (see the Glory Story and the Cross Story below). God is in the last place we would look: the cross. The cross is a promise that God shows up.

The Road to Emmaus: Luke 24:13-35

Now that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem. They were talking with each other about everything that had happened. As they talked and discussed these things with each other, Jesus himself came up and walked along with them; but they were kept from recognizing him. He asked them, “What are you discussing together as you walk along?” They stood still, their faces downcast. One of them, named Cleopas, asked him, “Are you the only one visiting Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there in these days?” “What things?” he asked. “About Jesus of Nazareth,” they replied. “He was a prophet, powerful in word and deed before God and all the people. The chief priests and our rulers handed him over to be sentenced to death, and they crucified him; but we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel. And what is more, it is the third day since all this took place. In addition, some of our women amazed us. They went to the tomb early this morning but didn’t find his body. They came and told us that they had seen a vision of angels, who said he was alive. Then some of our companions went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but they did not see Jesus.” He said to them, “How foolish you are, and how slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?” And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself. As they approached the village to which they were going, Jesus continued on as if he were going farther. But they urged him strongly, “Stay with us, for it is nearly evening; the day is almost over.” So he went in to stay with them. When he was at the table with them, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them. Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him, and he disappeared from their sight. They asked each other, “Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?” They got up and returned at once to Jerusalem. There they found the Eleven and those with them,

assembled together and saying, “It is true! The Lord has risen and has appeared to Simon.” Then the two told what had happened on the way, and how Jesus was recognized by them when he broke the bread.

Cleopas and another disciple are feeling perplexed and somber as they walk along the dusty road from Jerusalem to the village of Emmaus. A stranger shows up and walks beside them. The stranger is Jesus, but Luke tells us that “they were kept from recognizing him” (16). After Cleopas and his companion open their broken hearts, Jesus engages them, “Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory” (26)? Beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, Jesus opens Scripture to them, and their hearts burn.

The disciples invite Jesus to join them as our three travelers finally approach Emmaus. Jesus the guest becomes Jesus the host. “When he was at the table with them, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him, and he disappeared from their sight” (30-31). Cleopas and his companion are energized, and they race back to Jerusalem. Their story tumbles from their lips as they witness to their fellow disciples: Jesus walked beside us, listened to us, talked with us, opened Scripture to us, broke bread with us, and opened our eyes.

Like these disciples, we tend to turn inward on ourselves when things are not going our way, and sometimes do not discern Jesus walking right beside us. Jesus is actively present even when we do not see him, even when we struggle with doubt, even when we think he has abandoned us, even though we may have abandoned him (see the Glory Story and the Cross Story below). Jesus listens attentively, patiently, quietly when we pour out our hearts in prayer. He encourages us to tell him everything that is on our hearts.

Jesus invites us to hear the Word of God while he opens Scripture to us, so we learn to recognize God’s voice and to discern God’s active presence. The Bible is not just another book, not just another collection of poems and stories and history. Jesus also

gives us Holy Communion, so we remember his sacrificial, self-giving love. We experience his real, active presence, and our faith grows when we eat this bread and drink this cup, which are given for us. (See Liturgy and Witness below.) Henry Nouwen writes:

What then do we celebrate? The simple signs, which cannot satisfy all our desires, speak first of all of God's absence. He has not yet returned; we are still on the road, still waiting, still hoping, still expecting, still longing. We gather around the table with bread, wine, and a book to remind each other of the promise we have received and so to encourage each other to keep waiting in expectation for his return. But even as we affirm his absence we realize that he already is with us. We say to each other: "Eat and drink, this is his body and blood. The One we are waiting for is our food and drink and is more present to us than we can be to ourselves. He sustains us on the road, he nurtures us as he nurtured his people in the desert." Thus, while remembering his promises in his absence we discover and celebrate his presence in our midst.⁵

In Jesus' apparent absence, we experience his active presence. Like these disciples, we respond by telling the story (see Missional Imagination and Witness below).

The Book of Ruth

The book of Ruth begins during the time of the Judges when chaos and apostasy reign in Israel. There has been a famine, forcing Naomi, her husband, and their sons to migrate from Israel to Moab. National tragedy becomes a personal tragedy when Naomi's husband dies along with both sons, leaving her alone with her Moabite daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth. Upon hearing that the LORD ended the famine in Israel, Naomi moves forward in faith and decides to return home, urging her daughters-in-law to remain and find new husbands. "Go back, each of you, to your mother's home. May the LORD show you kindness [*hesed*], as you have shown kindness [*hesed*] to your dead husbands and to me" (1:8). Ruth refuses. "Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I

⁵ Nouwen, *The Living Reminder*, 46.

will be buried” (1:16b-17a). Naomi and Ruth cause quite a stir when they arrive in Bethlehem and recount their troubles. “Don’t call me Naomi . . . Call me Mara, because the Almighty has made my life very bitter. I went away full, but the LORD has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi? The LORD has afflicted me; the Almighty has brought misfortune upon me” (1:20-21). Naomi honestly voices her bitterness as well as her frustration with God.

Soon thereafter, Ruth meets Boaz, a pillar of the community, in a field during harvest. Seeing and hearing how Ruth has shown faithfulness (*hesed*) to Naomi, Boaz graciously feeds Ruth at his table and prays a blessing over her (2:11-12). Subsequently, he discreetly instructs his harvesters to help Ruth glean barley and not rebuke her. When Naomi sees how Boaz has blessed Ruth, she quickly discerns God’s active presence, moving from despair to hope. “The LORD bless him! . . . He has not stopped showing his kindness [*hesed*] to the living and the dead” (2:20). Naomi’s emptiness is being filled.

Naomi and Ruth take the initiative by making plans for Ruth to woo Boaz. Ruth washes, puts on perfume, and dresses in her finest clothes before going to the threshing floor where she finds Boaz asleep. She lies beside him and, when he awakens in the middle of the night, proposes to him. “I am your servant Ruth . . . Spread the corner of your garment over me, since you are a guardian-redeemer of our family” (3:9). Boaz promises to redeem her and to marry her, “The LORD bless you, my daughter. . . . This kindness [*hesed*] is greater than that which you showed earlier: You have not run after the younger men, whether rich or poor. And now, my daughter, don’t be afraid. I will do for you all you ask” (3:10-11b). Boaz eventually marries Ruth, who will bear him a son, Obed, who is a grandfather of King David and an ancestor of Jesus.

Throughout the book of Ruth, God never speaks, no prophet announces the word of the LORD, and there are no dramatic miracles. Nevertheless, Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz do not hesitate to talk about God to each other and their neighbors. They experience the active presence of God amid bitterness, suffering, and emptiness through *hesed*, which is variously translated as kindness, loving kindness, faithfulness, mercy, steadfast love, or unfailing love.⁶ God demonstrates *hesed* in the everyday lives of ordinary people in and through the loving actions (ministry) of others in a paradox of opposites: famine and abundance, emptiness and fullness, bitterness and joy, death and new life (see the Cross Story below). As the adage says, “Coincidences are miracles where God chooses to stay anonymous.” Katharine Doob Sakenfeld observes, “The Hebrew term [*hesed*] is a strong one. It refers to care or concern for another with whom one is in relationship, but care that specifically takes shape in action to rescue the other from a situation of desperate need, and under circumstances in which the rescuer is uniquely qualified to do what is needed.”⁷ The Holy Spirit moves—sometimes in powerful and overt ways, while other times more subtly. God shows up.

Peter and Cornelius: Acts 10:1-11:18

Acts chapter ten recounts the story of God’s encounter with Cornelius, a Roman centurion and Gentile, and the Apostle Peter. Cornelius *sees* an angel who instructs him to send men to bring Peter to his house. Cornelius *hears* and *obeys* God, sending men to find Peter. Meanwhile, while Peter is praying, he *sees* a vision from God regarding clean

⁶ R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1999), 305.

⁷ Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, *Ruth*, ed. James Luther Mays, *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), Kindle Locations 398-400.

and unclean animals. God tells Peter, “Do not call anything impure that God has made clean” (10:15). After alerting Peter that three men are looking for him, the Spirit adds, “Do not hesitate to go with them” (10:20). When the men sent by Cornelius arrive, Peter *hears* and *obeys* God, inviting them into the house and entering into fellowship (*koinonia*) with them even though they are unclean Gentiles. They travel together to Cornelius’ house the next day where they engage in dialogue: Peter *listens* to Cornelius’ story, and when the time is right, Peter *witnesses* to Cornelius, his relatives, and close friends. Peter tells God’s story and his own story, proclaiming the Good News of the active presence of God in Jesus, “Everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name” (10:43). While Peter is speaking, “the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message” (10:44), and then they are baptized with water. Peter’s missional imagination is transformed. Peter and Cornelius model discernment and dialogue by seeing, hearing, knowing, and saying.

Theological Lenses

Four theological lenses have guided this research in conjunction with the above biblical lenses. They are Discernment and Dialogue, the Glory Story and the Cross Story, Missional Imagination, and Liturgy and Witness.

Discernment and Dialogue

Since the research question focuses on increasing our capacity to perceive the triune God’s active presence and talk about God, the first theological lens is discernment and dialogue, which is grounded in seeing, hearing, knowing, and saying. The Biblical Lenses above explored this theme. Discernment is perceiving the active presence of the triune God in Scripture, in our lives, in the lives of those close to us, in our community, in

the world, and in the church, as we ask, “What is God up to?” The phrase *active presence* is vital as the transcendent impinges on the immanent: God is truly *present* here and now in the everyday lives of ordinary people, not out there somewhere “watching us from a distance.”⁸ Not only is God genuinely present, but God is *actively* engaged in history in the lives of real people in direct opposition to both MTD and the narrative of maturation of the Closed World Structure in the immanent frame (see Secularity in chapter two). The goal of discernment is that “the church becomes so caught up in the *missio Dei* that its members are naturally ‘detectives of divinity.’”⁹

Dialogue is two-way communication between people in fellowship, both in the church and with others in the broader web of our relationships. The creation account in Genesis is structured around the statement, “And God said . . . And it was so.” However, when humanity is created in Genesis 1:28, it is written, “God blessed them and said to them . . .” Unlike other creatures, humanity is addressed by God and given “response-ability,” that is, God provides us with the *ability to respond*.¹⁰ The clear implication is that God is listening to us. Dialogue—listening, speaking, conversing, storytelling, and witnessing—is intrinsic to what it means to be created in the *imago Dei* and to live in community (*koinonia*). This is evident in the stories of Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz, the disciples on the road to Emmaus, Jesus and the criminal on the cross, the healing of the blind man, and God encountering Peter and Cornelius (see Biblical Lenses above). Discernment and dialogue go hand-in-hand; they are two sides of the same coin.

⁸ Julie Gold, “From a Distance” (Wing and Wheel Music & Julie Gold Music (BMI), 1987). The song was made famous by Bette Midler in 1990.

⁹ Keifert and Rooms, *Forming the Missional Church*, 12.

¹⁰ Ray Sherman Anderson, *On Being Human: Essays in Theological Anthropology* (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 1982), 34-37.

Harvey Kwiyani instructs us that “to be a leader here means that you are always engaged in the business of spiritual discernment, further, it is to lead a community of discerners.”¹¹ Thus the pastor is not solely responsible for discernment. The active presence of the Holy Spirit is essential to this iterative process:

In our current age, the main skill individuals and Christian communities require to lift anchor faithfully and sail into the unknown, adaptive, exciting, challenging journey of the *missio Dei* is discernment. Put simply this involves asking and finding answers to the question, “What is God up to?” Such skill is not learnt overnight, since we can never be sure where Christ (or God) is not. The double negative here means that no place or context within or without the church is devoid of the possibility of being inhabited by the living God. Yet, we cannot simply bless every good thing. Discernment is a spiritual practice, or holy habit, which is learnt by trial and error, experiment and failure, reflection and action. It is, in essence, a journey in and of itself.¹²

As this community of discerners seeks to answer the question, “What is God up to?” discernment entails judging whether an event, experience, or utterance is an example of the transcendent impinging in the everyday lives of ordinary people in the immanent frame. Nancey Murphy delineates three criteria that she maintains are normative among various Christian communities engaged in discernment and dialogue: consistency, circumstances, and consequences.¹³

In terms of *consistency* of an event with Scripture, the Bible cautions us to “not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God” (1 John 4:1b). Do the spirits acknowledge Jesus as Lord—that Jesus is both fully divine and fully human? Is the message consistent with Scripture, in particular, the teachings of Jesus?

¹¹ Kwiyani, “Umunthu and the Spirituality of Leadership,” 46.

¹² Keifert and Rooms, *Forming the Missional Church*, 11.

¹³ Nancey C. Murphy, *Beyond Liberalism and Fundamentalism*, 121. Note that the order of Murphy's last two criteria have been switched to work better with the flow of this paper.

Are the spirits encouraging us to obey God or to disobey God? Are we being challenged to follow Jesus or follow our sinful desires?¹⁴

Circumstances seek to fit the event, experience, or utterance into the flow of the overarching biblical, theological, and communal narrative. For example, we turn to the Theology of the Cross (see Glory Story and Cross Story below) to recognize the circumstances where God makes Godself known in unexpected places, such as in suffering, as well as in and through the ministry of someone else. Andrew Root posits, “This coming [of Christ] to them I call Christopraxis, which is the continued ministering presence of Christ. The very shape of God’s coming to people takes the form of ministry; encounters with divine action come as ministry. . . . Ministry is the shape of divine action itself. God is minister.”¹⁵ The Apostle Paul writes:

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God. For just as we share abundantly in the sufferings of Christ, so also our comfort abounds through Christ. If we are distressed, it is for your comfort and salvation; if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which produces in you patient endurance of the same sufferings we suffer. And our hope for you is firm, because we know that just as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our comfort. (2 Cor. 1:3-7)

Consequences evaluate whether an event, experience, or utterance produces the fruit of the spirit, helps people be conformed to the image of Christ, and strengthens unity in the church. We receive the compassion, comfort, and steadfast love of God not only for

¹⁴ A portion of this section on consistency is reproduced from Schlecht, *Where Am I? God in the Details of Life* (Scott Valley, CA: CreateSpace, 2016), 173.

¹⁵ Andrew Root, *Christopraxis: A Practical Theology of the Cross* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2014), Kindle Location 111-121. “By ministry I do not mean clerical or institutional functions, but a relational, personal, and embodied (even emotive) encounter of love and care, a willingness to share in the other, to join in the concrete experiences of homelessness, imprisonment, and hunger, to enter the experiences of suffering for the sake of participating in the transformation toward new life. In these acts of ministry that join concrete humanity, Jesus is present through the ministerial action of the Spirit (Matthew 25).”

our benefit but for the sake of our neighbor. As Christ himself is present with us, we also are present with others. For us, just as it was for Paul, this is a transcendent encounter within the immanent frame experienced as a union between us and Christ (Gal. 2:20).

Andrew Root portrays faith “as an encounter with divine action that transforms us at the level of being.”¹⁶ This occurs through experience and personhood. Experience happens when we encounter the risen Christ ministering to us, either directly, through others, or by hearing their story. Very few people in the Bible had a direct encounter with God, which is why witnessing is vital (see Liturgy and Witness below). Often our encounters with Christ involve a “death experience,” such as suffering, rejection, loss, sickness, sin, fear, loneliness, broken relationships, depression, addiction, or mortality. Root describes this as cruciform faith where we surrender to Jesus (Gal. 6 and 2 Cor. 5):

When we confess these experiences, we find the risen Christ coming near us, giving us new life out of death, ministering to us out of God’s own experience of death on the cross. . . . You have faith, not when you overcome your experiences of death, but when you turn them over to Jesus, allowing him to give you life through the experience of ministry.¹⁷

Personhood means to be “in Christ,” that is, “to have an experience of the person of Jesus encountering our own person.”¹⁸ Root refers to Paul’s experience of the person of Jesus on the road to Damascus in Acts as a profound, mystical union wherein he was transformed. The Apostle Paul encountered the person of Jesus and was never the same.¹⁹

¹⁶ Root, *Faith Formation in a Secular Age*, 135.

¹⁷ Root, 136-37.

¹⁸ Root, 137.

¹⁹ Root, 139. “To be ‘in Christ,’ then, is not a concept. On the road to Damascus, Paul encounters not a new idea but the very person of the living Christ, who calls him by name, coming to his own person, to bind Paul’s person with Jesus’s [*sic*] own resurrected and transcendent person. Faith itself is to have your being (your person) *in* the person of Jesus Christ. Faith is the experience of sharing in the person of Christ.

Craig Van Gelder focuses on the communal process of discernment in missional leadership. His goal is equipping congregations to not only engage in discernment and dialogue but to make decisions and take action. One of his most critical observations is that we must keep God in the conversation, remembering God is not an object but rather “an acting subject through the presence of the Holy Spirit in the midst of the community.”²⁰ God is on the move, actively present in the church, our lives, and the world. Van Gelder suggests four dimensions to discernment: texts, context, community, and action.²¹

Texts: The church witnesses to the fact that the Old and New Testaments are the inspired Word of God and “are the only rule and norm according to which all doctrines and teachers alike must be appraised and judged.”²² Scripture has authority over us and, as such, is central to how we hear God and engage in theological reflection. Other historical religious texts offer a reflection on the meaning and application of the biblical texts. Discernment involves reading Scripture, ancient texts, praying, worshipping, reflecting, and listening. The Holy Spirit forms and shapes our theological imagination.

Context: Faith is lived out in the particular realities of families, neighborhoods, communities, and the world, not in an idealized, imaginary utopia—the way the world is rather than the way we wish it would be. This reality necessitates using every tool at our disposal, such as drawing on social sciences as a means of studying and analyzing the

If faith is fidelity and loyalty to a new realm, this realm is nothing more than the very person of Jesus himself. To be ‘in Christ’ is not to be in a religious or clairvoyant state, but is to be in the person of Jesus, given back your own person in a communion of other persons who are loved and therefore love one another through the ministry of Jesus’s [*sic*] humanity” (emphasis original).

²⁰ Van Gelder, *The Ministry of the Missional Church*, 99.

²¹ Van Gelder, 105.

²² Theodore G. Tappert and Jaroslav Pelikan, eds., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, 11th ed. (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1976), 464.

context, for example, demographics, history, and culture. This includes awareness of secularity, the immanent frame, and the transcendent (see Secularity in chapter two).

Community: A congregation is a community of faith that exists within a broader community with sub-communities and complex interrelationships within and without (see Missional Imagination below). Discernment is not done in isolation but through dialogue with members of the congregation, the community at large, and the Holy Spirit. To that end, Van Gelder asks two critical questions: “What is God doing?” (faith and discernment) and “What does God want to do?” (wisdom and planning). Discernment is a communal, spiral process that entails attending, asserting, agreeing, acting, and assessing.²³

Action: Faith is more than a feeling, thought, or dream. Faith impels us to make decisions and take steps that are “communally discerned, biblically and theologically framed, and theoretically informed.”²⁴ We incarnate Christ to the world through the presence of the Holy Spirit, who lives with us and in us. Jesus promises, “On that day you will realize that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you” (John 14:20).

This community of discerners is comprised of detectives of divinity engaged in dialogue around the question, “What is God up to?” As noted in chapter one, lyrics from the song “Do You Hear What I Hear?” provide a framework for exploring discernment and dialogue: “Do you see what I see? Do you hear what I hear? Do you know what I know? Listen to what I say.”²⁵ The Holy Spirit equips us with four spiritual capacities: see, hear, know, and say as illustrated in 1 John 1:1-3 (emphasis added):

²³ Van Gelder, 116-119.

²⁴ Van Gelder, 105.

²⁵ Regney and Shayne Baker, “Do You Hear What I Hear?”

That which was from the beginning, which we have *heard*, which we have *seen* with our *eyes*, which we have *looked at* and our hands have *touched*—this we *proclaim* concerning the Word of life. The life *appeared*; we have *seen* it and *testify* to it, and we *proclaim* to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has *appeared* to us. We *proclaim* to you what we have *seen* and *heard*, so that you also may have *fellowship* with us. And our *fellowship* is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ.

Do You See What I See?

To see does not mean to see the face of God. As God told Moses when he asks to see the LORD's glory, "You cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live" (Exod. 33:20). Instead, Moses stands in a cleft of rock, and the LORD covers Moses with his hand until the LORD passes. When God removes his hand, Moses sees God from behind (Exod. 33:23). As with Moses, God shields us with his hand, and we see God's backside (*posteriora Dei*)—we see where God has been and the impact of God's active presence.

We also see God in the last place we would look—suffering and the cross.²⁶ Peter Steinke writes, "The cross puts to the test any and every insinuation of 'seeing' God. It is not possible to have God in full view and with complete certainty. This is merely an expression of human fear and desire."²⁷ The Apostle Paul writes, "For we live by faith, not by sight" (2 Cor. 5:7). And what is faith? "Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see" (Heb. 11:1). The divine paradox of the hiddenness and revealedness of God is explored under the Glory Story and the Cross Story below.

Letty Russell recounts the story of Hagar and Sarah in Genesis and offers an essential insight regarding seeing divine action from multiple perspectives—from the

²⁶ Gerhard O. Forde and Martin Luther, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross: Reflections on Luther's Heidelberg Disputation, 1518* (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 1997), 71-81. See theses 19 and 20.

²⁷ Steinke, *Preaching the Theology of the Cross*, 9.

center of the story, in the middle, at the margins, and frankly, from outside the margins. As Russell observes, “It is very important to recognize that what you see depends on where you are standing.”²⁸ What does God see when he looks at us? What do we see when we look at ourselves and others? What happens when we see with their eyes? What happens when we see with God’s eyes? Likewise, Martin Luther, in writing about Mary’s *Magnificat* in Luke 1, reminds us to rethink where we expect to see the Lord’s active presence, “God’s work and his eyes are in the depths, but man’s only in the heights.”²⁹ We dream of power and prestige, yet God comes to the meek and lowly as a servant.

Do You Hear What I Hear?

The Hebrew word for hear is *shema*, which is also the name of an ancient Hebrew prayer whose first words are from Deuteronomy 6:4, “*Shema*, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD alone.”³⁰ Faithful Jews have been saying this prayer for thousands of years, and Jesus would have recited this prayer every morning and evening. Hearing is foundational to faith and our communal identity—specifically hearing the word of God, which comes to us as the written word (Scripture), the proclaimed word (law and gospel),

²⁸ Letty M. Russell, *Church in the Round: Feminist Interpretation of the Church*, 1st ed (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993), 29.

²⁹ Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works. 21: The Sermon on the Mount and the Magnificat*, ed. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann, vol. 21 (Saint Louis, MO: Concordia Publ. House, 1999), 302.

³⁰ Duane L. Christensen, *Word Biblical Commentary. Deuteronomy 1-21:9*, vol. 6A (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 2001), 142. “The six words of v 4 have been translated in numerous ways, each of which may have a measure of truth in the poetic form of the present text: ‘Yahweh is our God, Yahweh is One’ (C. H. Gordon, JNES 29 (1970) 198); ‘Our God is Yahweh, Yahweh alone!’ (S. D. McBride, Int 27 (1973) 274); and (translating the whole verse) ‘Obey, Israel, Yahweh. Yahweh our God is the Unique’ (M. Dahood, RSP 1:361).” With Christensen’s scholarship in mind, imagine the Israelites wandering through the wilderness and Moses declares, “God is one.” To newly freed slaves, this would have been incoherent. “One what?” Realistically, after living in Egypt surrounded by their menagerie of false gods, it would have made more sense to be told, “*Shema*, O Israel: the LORD our God, the LORD alone” (my translation).

and the living word (Jesus). We learn to recognize God's voice by listening to God's word in Scripture, songs, liturgy, sermons, the witness of others, and the Holy Spirit in a posture of openness, attentiveness, and expectation while being prepared for surprises.

Shema means more than merely collecting sound vibrations with the hammer, anvil, and stirrup in the ear. *Shema* also means to pay attention, understand, and obey. Imagine a parent asking a child to do chores, but nothing happens. The parent reacts, "Are you listening to me?" They believe the child should do what they have been asked to do. Hearing results in action.³¹ Patrick Keifert calls this listening deeply:

Attending to the nature and mission of God is a matter of spiritual discernment and critical theological reflection. Such spiritual discernment and critical theological reflection begin by listening. Listening deeply to the word of God in scriptures, tradition, culture, society, and in the experience of the faithful, both personal and communal, sustains a conversation that leads to reinforcing present behavior or proposing new behavior. Therefore, in a very practical and concrete sense, spiritual discernment and theological reflection, understood together, are critical to the faithful and effective life of the congregation.³²

Martin Luther wrote that we hear the Word of God as both law and gospel.³³ In its simplest form, the law is the list of do's and don'ts while the gospel is the Good News of God's grace, love, and forgiveness. The law is warning while the gospel is promise. The law judges, while the gospel saves. The law exposes our sin while the gospel grants us pardon. The law guides our life together while the gospel tells us of God's faithfulness. Dr. Rolf Jacobson at Luther Seminary once said to me, "The law is what God expects us to do for one another while the gospel is what only God can do for us."

³¹ Lois Tverberg and Bruce Okkema, *Listening to the Language of the Bible: Hearing It through Jesus' Ears* (Holland, MI: En-Gedi Resource Center, 2004), 2-4.

³² Patrick R. Keifert, "The Trinity and Congregational Planning: Between Historical Minimum and Eschatological Maximum," *Word & World* XVIII, no. 3 (Summer 1998): 282-90.

³³ Tappert and Pelikan, *The Book of Concord*, 108.

Law and gospel always exist together. Imagine you see a sign that reads, “No smoking.” Do you hear law or gospel? Warning or promise? If you have asthma, it is gospel, while to a smoker, it is law—unless they are trying to quit. How about this: “Drive on the right side of the road.” This keeps us safe, and we learn to trust other drivers, so do you hear law or gospel? Now turn back to Scripture: “Have no other gods. Remember the Sabbath. Honor your father and mother. Do not murder. Do not commit adultery. Do not steal. Do not lie.” These keep us safe, and we learn to trust one another, so do you hear law or gospel? Here is a challenging one: “Jesus died for your sins.” What does that make you? A sinner. A forgiven sinner. Do you hear law or gospel? Judgment or pardon? Do you resent hearing that you are a sinner who needs to be forgiven? Or is forgiveness sweet music to your ears?³⁴

Do You Know What I Know?

The Hebrew word *yada* is often translated as “know,” which we, in turn, interpret as collecting information and then storing the data in our brains for retrieval, analysis, and manipulation. In addition to consisting of mental activity and collecting facts, however, *yada* also speaks of commitment, loyalty, trust, understanding, experience, and relationship, and then acting based on that knowledge.³⁵ “When used in terms of knowing

³⁴ Schlecht, 234-35.

³⁵ Gerhard Kittel, G. W Bromiley, and Gerhard Friedrich, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 1964), 698. “Above all, however, יָדַע is used for acknowledgment of the acts of God (Dt. 11:2; Is. 41:20; Hos. 11:3; Mi. 6:5). And it bears the same sense when used of the recognition that Yahweh is God (Dt. 4:39; 8:5; 29:5; Is. 43:10; Ps. 46:10). To know Him or His name is to confess or acknowledge Him, to give Him honour and to obey His will (1 S. 2:12; Is. 1:3; Jer. 2:8; 9:2-5; Ps. 9:10; 36:10; 87:4; Job 18:21; Da. 11:32). The ‘knowledge of God’ (Hos. 4:1; 6:6; Is. 11:2, 9), or ‘knowledge’ in the absolute (Hos. 4:6; Prv. 1:7; 9:10), is almost identical with the fear of God with which it is linked in Is. 11:2, and it implies the doing of what is right and just (Jer. 22:16).”

people, it can mean caring for someone, even being intimate sexually.”³⁶ For example, “Adam *knew* Eve his wife”(Gen. 4:1, KJV). In a similar vein, consider having the “knowledge of God” (*da’at elohim*). “As Westerners we may think this means to prove God’s existence and establish a theological model to explain God’s nature. But the Hebrew view is that ‘knowledge of God’ is having a life in relationship with him.”³⁷ This relationship (or fellowship in 1 John 1:3 quoted above) is rooted in the trinitarian nature of God (see Missional Imagination below).

Jesus says, “All things have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him”—that is, Jesus makes God fully known (Matt. 11:27). “To know” in Greco-Roman culture meant to use the five senses in conjunction with reason to verify reality via observation, analysis, and examination, in order to take action. Jesus is Jewish, however, which means that his sense of the word “know” is broader and deeply rooted in his relationship with the Father rather than proving the existence of God.³⁸ Timothy Wengert writes, “. . . Luther understood faith relationally (experientially) as confidence or trust, arising in the midst of trials. He distinguished it from mere intellectual assent to doctrinal truths . . .”³⁹ Gerhard Forde observes that true

³⁶ Tverberg and Okkema, *Listening to the Language of the Bible*, 5.

³⁷ Tverberg and Okkema, 5.

³⁸ Gerhard Kittel, G. W Bromiley, and Gerhard Friedrich, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 1964), 690. “The execution of γινώσκειν is not primarily related to a particular organ or limited to any particular mode. It takes place in man’s dealings with his world, in experience . . . It is achieved in all the acts in which a man can attain knowledge, in seeing and hearing, in investigating and reflecting (γινῶθι σαυτόν). Thus γινώσκειν can also mean personal acquaintance and friendship with persons.”

³⁹ Martin Luther, *The Freedom of a Christian 1520*, ed. Timothy J. Wengert, The Annotated Luther Study Edition. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2016), 487n54.

knowledge of God comes through Christ's suffering. "[The cross] attacks and inflicts us. Knowledge of God comes when God happens to us, when God does himself to us. We are crucified with Christ (Gal. 2:19)."⁴⁰ We die and are given a new life (Rom. 6:1-14). Thus, knowing is centered on faith, in a relationship (*koinonia*) built on trust, and is experienced in everyday life (see the Book of Ruth in Biblical Lenses above), often in suffering (see the Glory Story and the Cross Story below).⁴¹

To know also means to remember. "To remember" can mean to recount the history of salvation (e.g., God leading the people out of slavery in Egypt), to obey (e.g., remember the sabbath), to recite family genealogies, or to enumerate God's promises. When Jesus tells us, "Do this in remembrance of me," he means more than intellectual recall—he means to participate in and experience Jesus' presence in the present (see Liturgy below). Jesus' story becomes our *narrative habitus*, and his story *emplots* our lives. In our remembering, *interpellation* calls us into living into our identity. What is vital is not just that these events *happened*, but they are *happening*. (See Story and Ritual in chapter two.)

How do we know? Jesus promises to send God's personal presence, the Holy Spirit, whom he portrays as the *Paraclete* (John 14:16, 26; 15:26; 16:7), which means comforter, guide, counselor, helper, advocate, advisor, encourager, and one called beside us.⁴² The Holy Spirit makes known to us what he received from Jesus: he guides us into truth, enables us to understand, helps us remember, and empowers us to testify who Jesus

⁴⁰ Gerhard O. Forde and Martin Luther, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross*, 89-90.

⁴¹ Kosuke Koyama, "'Extend Hospitality to Strangers'—A Missiology of Theologia Crucis," *International Review of Mission* 82, no. 327 (July 10, 1993): 285. "The key insight of Luther's *theologia crucis* is that the true knowledge of God comes from the knowledge of the suffering of Jesus Christ. This happened concretely when Christ loved strangers and gave his life for them (Rom. 5:6-8)."

⁴² George R. Beasley-Murray, *John*, ed. Bruce M. Metzger, David Allan Hubbard, and Glenn W. Barker, 2nd ed, vol. 36, World Biblical Commentary (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2002), 256.

is (John 16:12-15). By the active presence of the Holy Spirit, we fulfill Paul's exhortation, "Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will" (Rom. 12:2).

Listen to What I Say

As noted earlier, dialogue is two-way communication grounded in seeing, hearing, knowing, and saying. Saying is the focus of Paul in the tenth chapter of Romans.

But the righteousness that is by faith says: . . . "The word is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart," that is, the message concerning faith that we proclaim: If you declare with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved. . . . for, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. (Rom. 10:6, 8-9, 13)

Righteousness does not mean obedience to the law, but rather knowing we are in a right relationship (or fellowship in 1 John 1:3 above) with God by grace through faith (Eph. 2:8-9). Because of this right relationship, God's word lives in us, and we speak the word through the active presence of the Holy Spirit.

It would be a mistake, however, to understand this as an isolated, privileged encounter with God for our private edification. Faith comes through the speaking of God's word in conjunction with the witness of fellow disciples in and for the community and the world (see Liturgy and Witness below). Paul continues in Romans 10:14-15, 17:

How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching [proclaiming, announcing] to them? And how can anyone preach [proclaim, announce] unless they are sent? As it is written: "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!" . . . Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word about Christ.

People cannot hear what has not been spoken, so Christ both commands and promises: “you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). We live into our calling (see *interpellation* in chapter two) by saying, proclaiming, preaching, witnessing, singing, and testifying as to what we see, hear, and know not by our own wisdom, power, or understanding, but through the *Paraclete*.

The Glory Story and the Cross Story

Drawing on the writings of Martin Luther, Gerhard Forde maintains that there are two opposing Christian stories: the glory story and the cross story. The glory story is about the salvation of our “souls.” When we die, our immortal souls will be released from our mortal bodies and return to the presence of God in heaven. Forde elaborates, “We came from glory and are bound for glory. Of course, in between we seem somehow to have gotten derailed—whether by design or accident we don’t quite know—but that is only a temporary inconvenience to be fixed by proper religious effort. What we need is to get back to ‘the glory road.’”⁴³

The key to the glory story is to possess knowledge which, in conjunction with exercising our “free will” by doing good deeds and generally righteous behavior, will liberate the soul or spirit when we die. The glory story “operates on the assumption that we are not seriously addicted to sin, and that our improvement is both necessary and possible. We need a little boost in our desire to do good works.”⁴⁴ Even someone who is “spiritual but not religious,” as well as those who are non-Christians or agnostics, find this story appealing. After all, people are good and deserve to live forever, hence the belief in the

⁴³ Forde and Luther, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross*, 5.

⁴⁴ Forde and Luther, 16.

eternal soul. God loves us just the way we are and leaves us that way. Authenticity, tolerance, and acceptance are the maxims. We work our way up to God; Jesus gives us grace in case we cannot make it all the way. Our souls epitomize our true, inner selves.

We can deduce the existence of God through creation and use reason to ascertain divine attributes. Signs of God's presence include virtue, success, power, health, wisdom, and wealth. Human progress, social justice, and scientific advancement demonstrably prove the arrival of the Kingdom. This is the theology of glory (*theologia gloriae*).

Luther unequivocally rejects the glory story and embraces the cross story. He contends that the key to discerning the entire biblical narrative from Genesis to Revelation is the cross. We are mistaken to think of the "cross" as merely an inanimate object composed of two pieces of wood. The cross is a symbol for the entire narrative about the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ, as foretold in the Old Testament⁴⁵ and proclaimed in the New Testament.⁴⁶ While the glory story presupposes a "free will," the cross story presupposes the "bondage of the will." We are enslaved to sin and cannot free ourselves (John 8:34-36; Rom. 6:6-7, 15-23). Forde observes:

Either [the cross story] claims us or it doesn't. If it does, it is the end of the glory story. We see in the death of Jesus our death, and we remember that we are dust. We can begin to take the truth. We learn dying. Our story is not that of the exit from and return to glory of an undying soul. The cross destroys all that. It "destroys the wisdom of the wise." "Ashes to ashes, dust to dust." That marks the parameters of our story as far as human possibility is concerned. We see, as Luther puts it, the way things really are. We look at all things through "suffering and the cross". . . Yet we also see in the death of Jesus on the cross our rebellion against that life, and we note that there is absolutely no way out except one. God

⁴⁵ Forde and Luther, 8. Forde highlights a few examples from the Old Testament, such as "Exod. 33:18-23, Deut. 32:39-42, 1 Sam. 2:6-7, the Psalms, especially the penitential and lament psalms, Isa. 28:21; 45; 53."

⁴⁶ Forde and Luther, 1.

vindicated the crucified Jesus by raising him from the dead. So the question and the hope come to us. “If we die with him shall we not also live with him?”⁴⁷

We are mortal, including the soul. Death is a reality, but death is not the end of the story. Jesus promises: “I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die” (John 11:25-26). Death is a reality, but “death has been swallowed up in victory” (1 Cor. 15:54b). We are raised imperishable, both body and soul (1 Cor. 15:12-58), just as Jesus was physically resurrected. God accepts us just the way we are, but he does not leave us that way. We are transformed.

Jesus, God in the flesh, makes known what God is up to in lowliness, weakness, foolishness, and suffering as signs of God’s active presence. Peter Steinke writes, “The cross puts an end to every human attempt to take the *initiative* in finding God, whether through experience, achievement, sight, emotion, or will” (emphasis original).⁴⁸ Instead, we trust in God’s promises. Jesus—not the good works of humanity—embodies the Kingdom of God. This is the theology of the cross (*theologia crucis*).

Martin Luther introduces the theology of glory and the theology of the cross in the *Heidelberg Disputation*. In disputation twenty, he notes, “He deserves to be called a theologian, however, who comprehends the visible and manifest things of God seen through suffering and the cross.”⁴⁹ Embedded within the theology of the cross is Luther’s paradox of the hiddenness of God (*Deus absconditus*). Steven Paulson expounds:

⁴⁷ Forde and Luther, 9.

⁴⁸ Steinke, *Preaching the Theology of the Cross*, 9.

⁴⁹ Forde and Luther, 78-79. Luther writes, “The manifest and visible things of God are placed in opposition to the invisible, namely, his human nature, weakness, foolishness. The Apostle in 1 Cor. 1[:25] calls them the weakness and folly of God. Because men misused the knowledge of God through works,

It is not so much that God cannot be seen that concerns Luther, but that God actually and actively *hides*. God hides in order not to be found where humans want to find God. But God also hides in order to be found where God wills to be found . . . God also does something to us by hiding. It is not the case that God benignly rests in heaven with a substance of some high and spiritual sort ultimately unreachable by human minds, and there waits for us to make some effort at knowing him by analogy or speculation. God hides in this world.⁵⁰

Paulson develops an insightful analogy to explain the hiddenness of God: playing hide-and-seek. Initially, the child does not want to be found, but ultimately, she runs to home base and shouts, “Here I am!”

Similarly, God hides in Jesus Christ. Discernment and dialogue hinge on answering the question, “What is God up to?” The last place we expect to find answers is in a baby lying in a manger among the animals and born to an unwed woman and her carpenter fiancé in a no-nothing town in Israel; or in an itinerant preacher wandering from town to town dependent on others for hospitality, followed by a motley group of fishermen, tax collectors, prostitutes, and sinners; or in a cursed man wearing a crown of thorns who dies a shameful death hanging on a cross as a criminal, abandoned by his

God wished again to be recognized in suffering, and to condemn wisdom concerning invisible things by means of wisdom concerning visible things, so that those who did not honor God as manifested in his works should honor him as he is hidden in his suffering (*absconditum in passionibus*). As the Apostle says in 1 Cor. 1[:21], ‘For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe.’ Now it is not sufficient for anyone, and it does him no good to recognize God in his glory and majesty, unless he recognizes him in the humility and shame of the cross. Thus God destroys the wisdom of the wise, as Isa. [45:15] says, ‘Truly, thou art a God who hidest thyself.’”

⁵⁰ Paulson, “Luther on the Hidden God,” 363-64. “Let it first be said Luther doesn’t think of God’s hiddenness as one attribute of God’s being among others. It is not as if he suggests that God is love, God is omnipotent, God is good, and then adds that God is also hidden. That would make ‘hiddenness’ merely an adjective modifying the noun ‘God.’ If Luther did use hiddenness in that way it would simply reiterate the obvious fact that God is invisible. Any child who closes her eyes to pray knows that much . . . Hiding is an activity of God, a verb whose subject is God. That is why it is a ‘fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God’ (Heb 10:31). When God can’t be found it is because God does not want to be found and quite literally hides from would-be seekers. Such a God is living, personal, and fearful because this God is in control of the verb ‘to hide.’ God also does something to us by hiding. It is not the case that God benignly rests in heaven with a substance of some high and spiritual sort ultimately unreachable by human minds, and there waits for us to make some effort at knowing him by analogy or speculation. God hides in this world.”

disciples.⁵¹ The cross is a promise that God is actively present in the suffering, despised, crucified, and risen Son of God. God reveals Godself in lowliness rather than greatness, weakness rather than strength, foolishness rather than wisdom.

The story of Jesus and the two criminals hanging on the cross witnesses to this astounding reality (see Biblical Lenses above). Why does God choose to reveal Godself through suffering and the cross? Steinke explicates Luther:

One reason, . . . is our need to be purged of sin, the need of the proud to be humbled. Suffering and humiliation allow faith to trust the sufficiency of God's grace. The worst kind of trouble is to have no trouble. Trouble keeps faith in motion—hoping, trusting, and loving. 'The cross puts everything to the test.' Nonetheless, Luther rejects suffering itself as being a good work or another deduction of God's presence. Luther would not boast of his own cross (suffering and humiliation) but rather of God's grace in the cross of the believer.⁵²

As Jesus tells Paul, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor. 12:9). Luther does not classify suffering as intrinsically evil—even good things can cause suffering, such as love, beauty, and children—nor does he emphasize the typical, painful travails of life. Instead, he focuses on the "sufferings of the spirit, the pangs of conscience, the terrors of temptation (*Anfechtungen*) . . . [and] the kind of death experienced when the wrath of God assaults the sinner."⁵³ We suffer when we realize we cannot save ourselves, and all our good works to buy God's favor are but "filthy rags" (Isa. 64:6; also Rom. 3:20; 7:18). We suffer when God acts against our self-sufficiency, self-centeredness, self-gratification, and self-aggrandizement (Rom. 1:18). We suffer when we realize that we are not in control and are passive recipients of God's

⁵¹ Martin Luther, Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, and Helmut T. Lehmann, *Luther's Works. 5: Lectures on Genesis: Chap. 26-30* (Saint Louis, MO: Concordia Publ. House, 1968), 44-45.

⁵² Peter L. Steinke, *Preaching the Theology of the Cross: Sermons and Worship Ideas for Lent and Easter* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Pub. House, 1983), 9-10.

⁵³ Forde and Luther, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross*, 86.

amazing grace (Eph 2:8-9). We suffer when the “Lord brings death and makes alive” (1 Sam. 2:6).⁵⁴

We neither boast about nor sentimentalize our suffering; instead, suffering humbles us and purges us of sin. Our suffering does not redeem us—we are redeemed by Christ and his suffering, for “if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed” (John 8:36). God does not abandon us to suffering but promises to meet us where we are, including when we experience rejection, loneliness, pain, violence, temptation, and death. Sin and death do not get the last word for the Holy Spirit draws us into the Father’s preferred and promised future in Jesus Christ.

Henry Nouwen touches on the paradox between God’s revealedness and hiddenness, presence and absence. Regarding Holy Communion, he writes, “As we become aware of [Jesus’] absence we discover his presence, and as we realize that he left us we also come to know that he did not leave us alone. . . . The minister is not called to cheer people up but modestly to remind them that in the midst of pains and tribulations the first sign of the new life can be found and a joy can be experienced which is hidden in the midst of sadness.”⁵⁵ What is God up to? God is hiding in a man hanging on a cross. God is hiding in the waters of Baptism and in the bread and wine of Holy Communion and in the Word of God. God is hiding in the acts of ministry (Christopraxis) that are done in Christ’s name for those who suffer (Matt. 25:31-46). God shouts, “Here I am!”

⁵⁴ Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works. 31: Career of the Reformer I*, ed. Harold John Grimm, Helmut T. Lehmann, and Jaroslav Jan Pelikan (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1957), 53. Luther writes, “This is clear: He who does not know Christ does not know God hidden in suffering. Therefore, he prefers works to suffering, glory to the cross, strength to weakness, wisdom to folly, and, in general, good to evil. These are the people whom the apostle calls ‘enemies of the cross of Christ’ [Philippians 3:18], for they hate the cross and suffering and love works and the glory of works. Thus they call the good of the cross evil and the evil of a deed good. God can be found only in suffering and the cross, as has already been said.”

⁵⁵ Nouwen, *The Living Reminder*, 47.

Missional Imagination

Encouraging congregations to be open to the Holy Spirit forming our collective missional imagination is one of the challenges of missional leadership. Patrick Keifert succinctly describes this missional imagination as “God’s preferred and promised future.”⁵⁶ In a similar vein, Dwight Zscheile writes:

Missional Christian formation means cultivating a posture of wonder: wonder about the Bible’s narrative of God’s surprising and powerful acts in history; wonder about the mystery of God’s presence and movement in our own lives; wonder about what God might be up to in our neighborhoods and world. . . . It invites us to open our hearts and hands to God, one another, and our neighbor. It expects surprise. It anticipates God’s promised future of reconciliation and communion to break into the present.⁵⁷

This missional imagination of “wonder” is rooted in the personhood of our triune God and looks forward to God’s preferred and promised future while being embodied in the reality of our day-to-day existence in community.

“Community” describes what it means to be created as human persons in the *imago Dei* to live in fellowship (1 John 1:3). In terms of the church, community refers to the forgiven sinners (*ergo* saints) gathered, centered, and sent by the Holy Spirit. Finally, community includes the broader relationships and social networks among people and groups, such as a family, neighborhood, city or town, and region. Our theological understanding of community is grounded in the trinitarian personhood of God “who creates humanity for community with God, one another, and the rest of creation and offers a fruitful starting point for reconceiving spiritual formation.”⁵⁸ A hermeneutic is a theory of

⁵⁶ Patrick Keifert, *We Are Here Now: A New Missional Era: A Missional Journey of Spiritual Discovery* (Eagle, ID: Allelon Publishing, 2007), 64-68.

⁵⁷ Zscheile, *Cultivating Sent Communities*, 23.

⁵⁸ Zscheile, 14.

interpreting something, such as a concept or story. Jürgen Moltmann notes, “We understand the Scriptures as the testimony to the history of the Trinity’s relations of fellowship, which are open to men and women, and open to the world. This Trinitarian hermeneutics [*sic*] leads us to think in terms of relationships and communities . . .”⁵⁹

Throughout the centuries people have created analogies to help us understand the Trinity. While they all fall short, one of the analogies that helps engage our missional imagination is the Russian icon, “*Troitsa*” or

“The Trinity,” by Andrei Rublev shown in figure 4.⁶⁰ The Trinity is embodied as three persons sitting in a circle around a table.⁶¹

God is the social Trinity in relationship, fellowship, and communion—*koinonia*.

Notice the in-between spaces in the icon. The persons of the Trinity do not form a closed circle. The point is this: The triune God is a personal God—not an impersonal force—

who desires to have a personal relationship

with us. God invites us to sit in the in-between spaces, individually and communally.



Figure 4. "The Trinity" by Andrei Rublev
Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow, Russia

⁵⁹ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom: The Doctrine of God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993), 19.

⁶⁰ Andrei Rublev, *Troitsa*, 1425-27, tempera on wood, H: 141.5 cm; W: 114 cm, Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow, Russia, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=13500406>.

⁶¹ One of the limitations of this analogy is that it can be misinterpreted as portraying three gods (tritheism). However, this analogy succeeds in emphasizing the personhood (*hypostasis*) of each member of the Trinity and the invitation to enter into a personal relationship with God. God exists in communion (*koinonia*).

God's invitation is grounded in *koinonia* as we are drawn into this divine life. The Father invites us to enter God's presence, the Son reaches out his wounded hand, beckoning us to the table, and the Spirit encourages us to move to the in-between spaces.⁶² We can know God by entering into fellowship as Catherine LaCugna observes, "God is by nature self-communicating. The incomprehensible God *is* God by sharing, bestowing, diffusing, expressing Godself. . . . the gift is nothing other than God's own self" (emphasis original).⁶³ We are invited to commune with the triune God and share in the divine relationship with others. God is *with us* and *for us*.

What finally matters is this: Will we take a risk and accept the invitation? Will we approach God's table and enter the circle? Will we plunge into the mystery and engage in communion with the triune God? However, this is not a private party. Will we join with God and enter into fellowship with our neighbor? Will we dare to reach out our hands and join someone else, even a stranger, at the in-between spaces? Will we dare to be Christ's witnesses through the Holy Spirit? *Koinonia* is not restricted to worship, coffee hour, or Bible study; God is present in a full range of relational possibilities. After all, Ruth and Boaz did not meet in the synagogue, but while working in a field during harvest, and Cleopas and another disciple did not encounter Jesus at the synagogue after his resurrection, but while walking along the road to Emmaus (see Biblical Lenses above).

⁶² Catherine Mowry La Cugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life*, (New York, NY: Harper San Francisco, 2006), 260. "First, God's ultimate reality cannot be located in *substance* (what it is in itself), but only in *personhood*: what God is toward another. God exists as the mystery of persons in communion; God exists hypostatically in freedom and ecstasis [continual movement outward]. Only *in communion* can God be what God is, and only *as communion* can God be at all. The revelation of God in Jesus Christ is the basis for this principle; Jesus Christ is God's 'beyond-self' in whom everything was created and now is being restored to communion with God" (emphasis original).

⁶³ La Cugna, 210.

This understanding of the personhood of God as *koinonia* is deepened through the doctrine of *perichoresis*.⁶⁴ As Van Gelder and Zscheile observe, “The Orthodox tradition, in particular, has stressed the generative, outward-reaching love (*ekstasis*) and communion (*koinonia*) of the three persons. . . . Moreover, the concept of *perichoresis*, or the mutual indwelling/interpenetration of the three persons in a dynamic, circulating movement, has offered rich analogies for human interdependence and relational community.”⁶⁵

This relationship is apparent when Jesus teaches, “I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15:5). Jesus expands this imagery when he prays, “As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me” (John 17:21). The Apostle Paul testifies, “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Gal. 2:20). These images describe the mutual indwelling of the church and the triune God.

This *perichoretic* relationship leads us to imitate Christ through *kenosis*—Jesus’ sacrificial life where he is emptying himself into us—as illustrated by Paul:

In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in

⁶⁴ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom: The Doctrine of God*, Fortress Press ed (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993), 175. Moltmann describes *perichoresis*, “By virtue of their eternal love they live in one another to such an extent, and dwell in one another to such an extent, that they are one. It is a process of most perfect and intense empathy. Precisely through the personal characteristics that distinguish them from another, the Father, the Son and the Spirit dwell in one another and communicate eternal life to one another.”

⁶⁵ Craig Van Gelder and Dwight J. Zscheile, *The Missional Church in Perspective: Mapping Trends and Shaping the Conversation*, The Missional Network (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 104.

appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross. (Phil. 2:5-8)

Discipleship is thus cruciform in character. Luther’s insight—that we are simultaneously lords and servants, free and obedient—transforms our missional imagination as we live in partnership with the Holy Spirit and our neighbor by changing the way we see, hear, know, and say.⁶⁶ This is what Kosuke Koyama calls "hierarchy-in-reverse."⁶⁷ Jesus comes to us in the person of a stranger or neighbor (Matt. 25:31-46). God is always our unseen guest who is “close and distant, stranger and friend, present and absent, hidden and revealed.”⁶⁸ Missional imagination involves discerning and responding to these invitational opportunities for ministry: see the stranger, hear our neighbor, know their suffering, and say words of comfort, salvation, and hope.

A trinitarian understanding of God shapes our missional imagination by changing our mental models and reframing our understanding of community and ecclesiology.⁶⁹ *Koinonia*, *perichoresis*, and *kenosis* affect life within a congregation as well as our relationship with the broader community. Missional imagination involves seeing God as the chief agent in history and perceiving the world the way God perceives it rather than the way our secular culture tells us to perceive it. Such a mindset entails the willingness to wonder while believing something we have never seen because we trust in

⁶⁶ Luther, *The Freedom of a Christian 1520*, 1:1:488-89.

⁶⁷ Koyama, “Extend Hospitality to Strangers,” 285.

⁶⁸ Keifert, *We Are Here Now*, 63.

⁶⁹ La Cugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life*, 403. Catherine La Cugna reminds us, “The nature of the church should manifest the nature of God. Just as the doctrine of the Trinity is not an abstract teaching about God apart from us but a teaching about God’s life with us and our life with each other, ecclesiology is not the study of an abstract church but a study of the actual gathering of persons in a common faith and a common mission. We are all members of a church on the way toward the full realization of God’s life; communion is an eschatological hope. This not an invitation to complacency but the opposite . . . The mission of the church is to assist us on the way to this destiny.”

God's promises in Jesus Christ. This missional imagination reframes the world, our experiences, what we know, and what we do not know into a cohesive, theocentric frame constructed on an Open World Structure rather than a Closed World Structure (see Secularity as well as Mental Models and Reframing in chapter two). We discern where God is and what God is up to, while living a life grounded in faith, hope, and love.

Often when we seek to discern the active presence of the triune God, we look to the future, imagining *what might be* rather than discerning *what is*. Missional imagination entails looking to the future while concurrently having “a definition of vision that is immediate, as being at hand, and as appearing on the scene as it unfolds.”⁷⁰ Perhaps we can think of this as the concretization of God's imagination.⁷¹ As Jesus proclaims, “The Kingdom of God has come near! Repent and believe the Good News” (Mark 1:15). The Kingdom of God is already—specifically through the birth, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus, God's Word, Baptism, Holy Communion—and not yet.

Jesus' missional imagination did not match people's mental models (Luke 7:34; 39), as noted in chapter two regarding Mental Models and Reframing. The Gospels repeatedly describe Jesus crossing boundaries and freely sharing the Good News of the Kingdom of God during meals with prostitutes, sinners, and tax collectors. Jesus was

⁷⁰ Craig Van Gelder, ed., *The Missional Church and Leadership Formation: Helping Congregations Develop Leadership Capacity*, Missional Church Series (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 2009), 170.

⁷¹ In fashioning this term “concretization of God's imagination,” I am indebted to the architectural theorist Christian Norberg-Schulz who coined the term “concretization of existential space.” Earlier in my career I was an architect and first learned this concept in reading his book *Meaning in Western Architecture*, Revised ed. (New York, NY: Rizzoli International Publications, Inc., 1980). For an excellent summary, read the article by Farah Habib and Sayyed Mohammad Khosro Sahhaf, “Christian Norberg-Schulz and the Existential Space,” *International Journal of Architecture and Urban Development* vol. 1, no. 3 (Winter 2012): 45-50. The authors note that this term is grounded in phenomenology, Gestalt psychology, the socialization of perception and the process of schematization.

dependent on strangers as well as friends for shelter, food, water, and financial support. If we adopt Jesus' posture, we enter into fellowship (*koinonia*) in a position of equality and relational interdependence (*perichoresis*) as we empty (*kenosis*) ourselves, becoming weak (2 Cor. 12:8-10) and vulnerable (Luke 10:3), for the sake of our neighbor. In such a humble posture, we risk rejection (Luke 10:10). We do not merely become *like* Jesus; we *are* Jesus for our neighbor. In the same way, Christ meets us in strangers, and they *are* Jesus for us. The Holy Spirit tethers us to Christ and the world, so faith is not merely an event or experience inside our minds (see Secularity in chapter two), but a concrete lived experience—or in the words of Horton, “a person’s a person, no matter how small.”⁷²

Richard Osmer proposes a missional imagination founded on David Bosch's concept of the church as an ellipse with two foci: the church gathers for worship/prayer and disperses for service/mission/evangelism where the church engages the world. Both base their missional ecclesiology on Jürgen Moltmann's theory of centered openness.⁷³ The church is a *perichoretic* community of disciples who witness to the Kingdom of God by striving to live out Jesus' vision (e.g., the Sermon on the Mount in Matt. 5-7) and a *kenotic* community of openness, self-giving, and solidarity with the vulnerable. These expressions of a missional imagination recall Jesus' parable comparing himself to the good shepherd (John 10:1-18). Where do the sheep live? In the sheep pen? No, in the pasture. The sheep are centered on the good shepherd—Jesus—who lays down his life for them, and the sheep are repeatedly sent beyond the permeable boundary of the sheepfold into the world.

⁷² Dr. Seuss, *Horton Hears a Who!*

⁷³ Richard R. Osmer, “Formation in the Missional Church,” in *Cultivating Sent Communities: Missional Spiritual Formation*, ed. Dwight J. Zscheile, Missional Church Series (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2012), 51. See also Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 395.

Alan Hirsch develops these concepts by arguing that a dualistic spirituality paradigm has distorted our experience of God by limiting God to the realm of the church. More specifically, people imagine that there are two spheres of life: the sacred and the secular—what Taylor would refer to as the transcendent and the immanent (see Secularity in chapter two). The church thereby becomes a mediating institution between these two spheres of life, as illustrated in Hirsch’s diagram in figure 5.

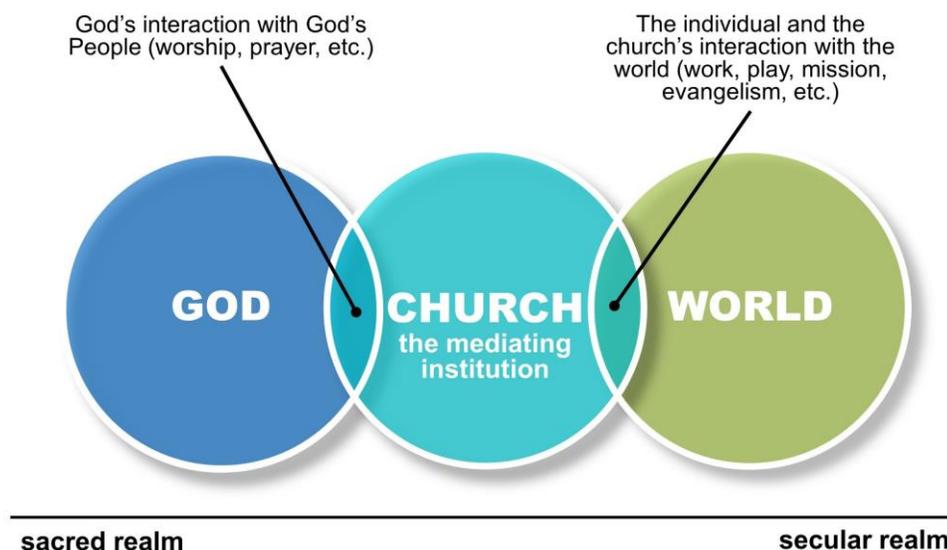


Figure 5. The dualistic Christendom model

Adapted from Alan Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating the Missional Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2006), 96 and 237.

The danger, Hirsch argues, is that this results in practical polytheism in that there are “different gods that rule the different spheres of our lives, and the God of the church in this view is largely impotent outside of the privatized religious sphere.”⁷⁴ Rejecting this dualistic paradigm, he advocates an all-of-life perspective that integrates the different spheres of life under the triune God that he calls the “Missional-Incarnational *Communitas* Approach.” Based on the ideas of anthropologist Victor Turner, Hirsch defines *communitas* as the “dynamics of a Christian community inspired to overcome their instincts to ‘huddle

⁷⁴ Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways*, 97.

and cuddle’ and to instead form themselves around a common mission that calls them into a dangerous journey . . . where they encounter God and one another in a new way.

Communitas is therefore always linked with the experience of liminality”—a transitional, in-between, marginal state.⁷⁵ He illustrates this paradigm in figure 6.

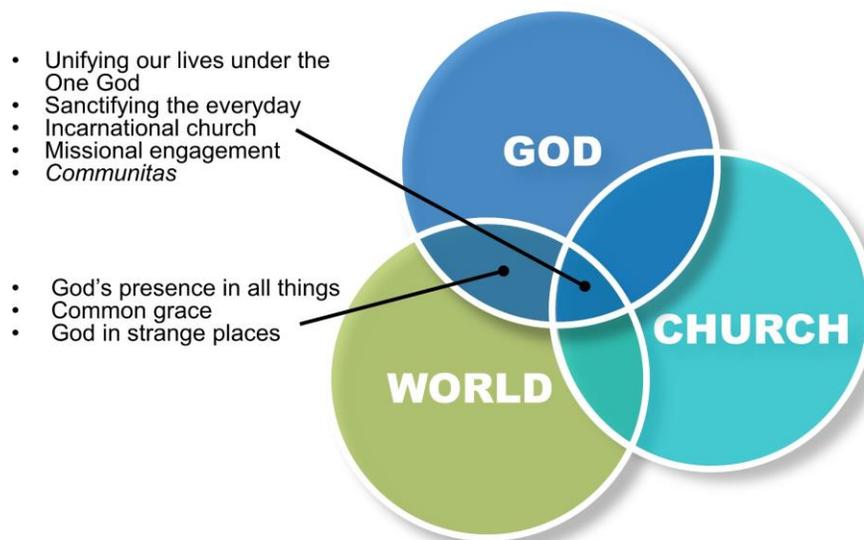


Figure 6. Missional-incarnational communitas approach

Adapted from Alan Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating the Missional Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2006), 96 and 239.

Hirsch contends that this diagram reimagines the church not as a mediating institution between the two realms of the sacred and secular, but rather as an incarnational community that participates with the triune God in the ministry of Jesus for the world. There are two difficulties with his diagram: first, it shows places in the world and the church where God is absent; and second, it implies that we can live in the sweet spot in the center where all three spheres of life converge by our hard work—the Glory Story.

A proposed alternative to Hirsch’s Missional-Incarnational *Communitas* Approach is the Missional Imagination illustrated in figure 7. The Kingdom (Reign) of God includes all of creation (John 3:16; Col. 1:15-20). There is no sacred-secular or transcendent-

⁷⁵ Hirsch, 221.

immanent divide as all things are under the reign of the triune God who is actively present, redeeming creation with the promise that one day there will be a new heaven and a new earth (Isa. 65:17 and 66:2; 2 Pet. 3:12-13; Rev. 21:1-5). God makes Godself known (“Here I am!”) even in places we would not expect to find God (see the Cross Story above). The church is created by the Holy Spirit to participate in God’s mission by witnessing (see Liturgy and Witness below) in word and deed to the Father’s redeeming (John 8:36) and reconciling work (2 Cor. 5:16-21) through God’s Son, Jesus Christ. The church, centered and sent, is an incarnational community with a permeable boundary (represented by the dashed outline of the circle). God’s story becomes our story.

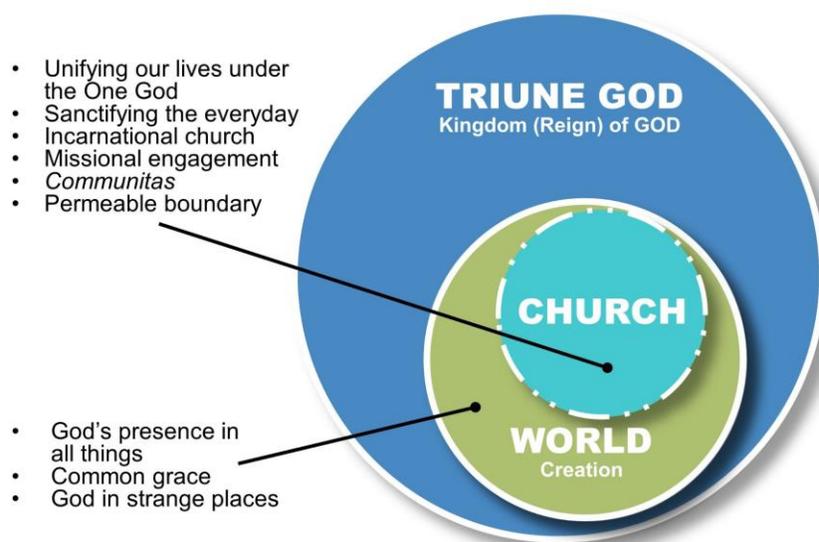


Figure 7. Missional imagination

This missional imagination involves cultivating community grounded in *koinonia*, *perichoresis*, and *kenosis*. Patrick Keifert observes that “healthy congregations are not families, they are open systems with open boundaries that provide a sense of belonging but are much more permeable so as to allow people to move in and out.”⁷⁶ The Holy Spirit

⁷⁶ Keifert, *We Are Here Now*, 144.

gives us eyes to see, ears to hear, and softens our hardened hearts, so we remember and recognize when God's presence is revealed, and his promises are fulfilled in the world—not just in the church (see *Healing a Blind Man in Biblical Lenses* above). We see, hear, know, and say as we discern the triune God's active presence in Scripture, in our lives, in the lives of those close to us, in our community, in the world, and in the church.

Liturgy and Witness

Dorothy Bass and Craig Dykstra researched the importance of Christian practices in faith formation. Building on Alasdair MacIntyre's work regarding social practices,⁷⁷ they define Christian practices as “things Christian people do together over time in response to and in the light of God's active presence for the life of the world.”⁷⁸ Christian practices are communal experiences that reframe our view of the transcendent and the immanent (see *Secularity* in chapter two). Patrick Keifert notes, “The Christian imagination is the critical link between spiritual discernment/theological reflection and the practical faithfulness and effectiveness of the congregation and hence the life of the Christian. The shared Christian imagination is formed most consistently in the perduring activities of word and sacrament ministry.”⁷⁹ Worship is central to faith formation, discernment, and dialogue as we liturgically rehearse Christian practices so they can be

⁷⁷ Robert Muthiah, “Christian Practices, Congregational Leadership, and the Priesthood of All Believers, Vol. 2, No. 2, Spring 2003,” *Journal of Religious Leadership* 2, no. 2 (Spring 2003). “By a practice MacIntyre means any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended.” Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 187.

⁷⁸ Bass and Dykstra, “Practicing Our Faith,” 5.

⁷⁹ Keifert, “The Trinity and Congregational Planning: Between Historical Minimum and Eschatological Maximum,” 284.

lived out in our daily lives (see Ritual in chapter two). This final lens focuses on the Christian practices of liturgy and witness, thus forming a chiasm with the theoretical lens of story and ritual at the end of chapter two.

Liturgy refers to ritual words and actions typically performed during worship. Bass writes that “in liturgy at its best—in the common work of the people assembled to hear the Word of God and celebrate the sacraments—the meaning of all the [Christian] practices appears in a form that is thick and tasty, darker and richer than we get in most everyday situations.”⁸⁰ In the Lutheran theology of worship, the main actor is God, not us. In the liturgy, God graciously offers the gifts of Word, sacraments, forgiveness, life, salvation—in fact, God’s very self—and we respond by praising God in song and prayer.⁸¹ As Grimes observes, “Liturgy begins with the ritual cultivation of being and is typified by a deep receptivity.”⁸² The Holy Spirit changes our mental models by reframing how we see, hear, know, and say (see Mental Models and Reframing in chapter two). Thomas Long notes:

But worship is about more than spiritual motivation. It is about vision and hearing, and worship gives us new eyes and ears, a new set of lenses to look at the world, a new vocabulary allowing us to listen afresh and speak what we could not have said before. To see and hear differently is to live differently, to have the ways we think and feel, make decisions and act as Christians transformed.⁸³

Liturgy, one of Grimes’ six modes of ritual (see Ritual in chapter two), actualizes biblical stories and helps us remember through participation, so these stories are woven into the fabric of our stories (e.g., Baptism, Holy Communion, confession, absolution). Grimes refers to liturgies as “‘re-presenting’ events and ‘event-ualizing’ structures” that reveal the

⁸⁰ Bass and Dykstra, “Practicing Our Faith,” 9.

⁸¹ Tappert and Pelikan, *The Book of Concord*, 376.

⁸² Grimes, *Beginnings in Ritual Studies*, 44-45.

⁸³ Long, *Testimony*, 41.

way things really are,⁸⁴ while Charles Taylor uses the phrase “embodied, ‘enfleshed’ forms of religious life.”⁸⁵ At the last supper, Jesus tells us, “Do this in remembrance of me.” Jesus means more than intellectual recall. “Remember” literally means to member again, to put back together, to reconnect. Remembrance means to participate in and experience Jesus’ presence in the present.⁸⁶ (See Do You Know What I Know above).

Henry Nouwen contends that remembering from a distance frees us to experience people and events in a new way. He recalls Jesus’ promise in his farewell discourse, “But very truly I tell you, it is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you” (John 16:7). He writes:

They listened to his words, they saw him on Mount Tabor, they heard him speak about his death and resurrection, but their ears and eyes remained closed and they did not understand. The Spirit, his spirit, had not yet come, and although they saw and heard, smelled and touched him, they remained distant. Only later when he was gone could his true Spirit reveal itself to them. In his absence a new and more intimate presence became possible, a presence which nurtured and sustained in the midst of tribulations and which created the desire to see him again. The great mystery of the divine revelation is that God entered into intimacy with us not only by Christ’s coming, but also by his leaving. Indeed, it is in Christ’s absence that our intimacy with him is so profound that we can say he dwells in us, call him our food and drink, and experience him as the center of our being.⁸⁷

Often it is in remembering, in looking backward, that we can put the pieces together and connect our story with God’s story. In the Gospels and Book of Acts, for instance, the

⁸⁴ Grimes, *Beginnings in Ritual Studies*, 45.

⁸⁵ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 554.

⁸⁶ Nouwen, *The Living Reminder*, 29, 37-38. “The strategy of the principalities is to disconnect us, to cut us off from the memory of God. . . . To remember is not simply to look back at past events; more importantly, it is to bring these events into the present and celebrate them here and now. For Israel, remembrance means participation. Bernard S. Childs writes: ‘The act of remembering serves to actualize the past for a generation removed in time from those former events in order that they themselves can have an intimate encounter with the great acts of redemption.’”

⁸⁷ Nouwen, 42.

disciples do not discern who Jesus truly is or the full implications of his identity until after his death, resurrection, and ascension (John 12:16) and their anointing with the Holy Spirit.

Hans Schwarz and Robert W. Jenson elaborate on liturgy as participation and actualized story:

A liturgy is to be a word of the gospel; the gospel is primally a story. Putting the two characterizations together, a liturgy is dialogic narrative. That is, a liturgy is a *drama*: Its coherence is of the sort possessed by a play or an opera. Whether a particular liturgy is a brief kiss of peace between two believers parting or a papal mass at a eucharistic congress, its coherence is dramatic in character. Insofar as we are responsible for liturgies, we will attend to the same matters of pace and sequence and transition with which theatrical directors work. Here too is the primary reason for liturgy's ineradicable penchant for heightened language, music, costume, choreography, and decoration, a penchant it shares with all drama (emphasis original).⁸⁸

God creates us as physical beings who experience the world through our senses—we hear, see, touch, smell, and taste. In Holy Communion, we hear the words of Jesus; we see the bread and wine as well as our neighbor; we touch the elements and hold them, maybe touching the hand of the person serving us or rubbing shoulders with the person beside us; we smell and taste the bread and wine. Holy Communion reminds us in a tangible way that Jesus' love is not just words; his love led him to the cross.⁸⁹ Likewise, in Baptism we hear the promises of God; we see the water, the people gathered, and the baptismal washing; we feel the wetness of the water and the hands that bless us or we touch the person being baptized as we lay hands on them to bless them; we smell the anointing oil as a finger traces the sign of the cross on our forehead. Baptism is a tangible expression of our identity as children of God with whom he is well pleased: we are born again, cleansed of sin, receive the Holy Spirit, and inherit the Kingdom of God. These sacraments are our

⁸⁸ Schwarz and Jenson, "The Means of Grace," 312.

⁸⁹ Schlecht, *Where Am I?*, 352.

narrative habitus—the stories that live in us and within which we live. Liturgy uses *interpellation*—it hails us to acknowledge and act on our identity as disciples of Jesus. Liturgy *emplots* our lives by igniting our missional imagination (see Story in chapter two).

Liturgy and story take on added depth through the lens of witness as a central Christian practice. The words translated as witness are *eid* in Hebrew and *martus* in Greek, which mean someone who avers what they have seen, heard, or known, such as facts, truths, views, or experiences, by telling others (testifying).⁹⁰ Throughout the biblical story, God calls for people to bear witness. God brought the people out of slavery in Egypt and appointed the Israelites to bear witness to the nations regarding who God is and what God has done (Isaiah 43:10-12; 44:8). God raised up prophets to witness (Deut. 18:15-18). John the Baptist bears witness to Jesus (John 1:6-9). Both God the Father and Scriptures testify about Jesus (John 5:31-40). Jesus bears witness to the coming of the Kingdom of God (Mark 1:15). The Holy Spirit raises up witnesses in the book of Acts (Acts 1:8).

Witnessing is, at heart, telling a story. “But story does more than just convey information about someone. Rather, when someone tells her story, she reveals her person. Stories are the tentacles of personhood that reach out to share and be shared in. We enter into each other’s lives . . .” (see Missional Imagination above).⁹¹ The Christian practice of intentionally sharing our stories as a personal witness seems rare within the Lutheran church. This rarity may reflect the impact of secularity since faith has become individualistic, inner, private, and excarnational rather than communal, outer, public, and incarnational (see Secularity in chapter two). As a result, people often avoid engaging in

⁹⁰ Kittel, Bromiley, and Friedrich, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 477.

⁹¹ Andrew Root, *Faith Formation in a Secular Age*, 143.

dialogue about God even in the church. Thomas Long concludes, “We need, then, to think of ourselves as more than just ‘church people,’ as more than people who go about our daily business and who have a quiet, almost secret compartment in our lives where we are religious. We cannot be human, much less faithful to God, if we keep silent. We must begin to think of ourselves—dare we claim the name?—as witnesses.”⁹² The key is to create space within the life of a congregation for people to bear witness to the active presence of the Father in the person of Jesus through the Holy Spirit.

The Nobel laureate and holocaust survivor Eli Wiesel pens, “God made man because he loves stories.”⁹³ The Bible is the story of God acting in human history—the transcendent impinging on the immanent frame. God’s story intersects with our story. God’s preferred and promised future becomes our reality. Thomas Hoyt, Jr., highlights the critical links among story, remembering, testimony, and the Bible:

Moreover, the overall story of the Bible provides the framework for African Americans to perceive the activity of God in their own history. The stories African Americans learn in the Bible tell them how to look at their own story, what questions to raise, and even how to recognize an answer when it appears. Through hearing and reading the story of the Jews, African Americans come to understand their own story. . . . The Bible’s testimony provides a confession of what God has done in the history of another people, thus evoking testimony about what God has done in African American history and what God will do for their freedom.⁹⁴

Andrew Root proposes that as Christians we are given Jesus’ story as a gift, so Jesus’ story is our story. He observes concerning the Apostle Paul’s encounter with Jesus on the Road to Damascus in Acts 9:1-22, “Paul’s mystical experience is the encounter with the Word of God, with the very person of Jesus. Jesus invites Paul to share in his life by

⁹² Long, *Testimony*, 20.

⁹³ Elie Wiesel, *The Gates of the Forest*, trans. Frances Frenaye (New York, NY: Schocken Books: Distributed by Pantheon Books, 1995).

⁹⁴ Thomas Hoyt, Jr., “Testimony,” in *Practicing Our Faith*, 96.

seeing Paul's life through the narrative shape of Jesus's death and resurrection. . . . Paul is left blind; not only can he not see, but worse, he's lost in the darkness of the negation of his story (he has lost identity and meaning). The narrative arc of his life has been crucified."⁹⁵

To speak of the narrative arc of our lives being crucified means to take Jesus' story as our story: we live in, dwell in, and are immersed in his story. Christ lives in us and we live in Christ (see Missional Imagination above) as we are given a new identity and experience the life of faith as cross and resurrection (see Glory Story and Cross Story above). Root writes:

Faith is the gift to trust that the narrative shape of Jesus's death and resurrection is the constitution of reality. . . . Faith is not knowing, or even committing to, information or religious participation but is rather experiencing the very narrative shape of your life through the *experience* of cross and resurrection. To pass on faith, from [the Apostle] Paul's perspective, isn't about adding adjectives [e.g., authentic faith, saving faith, vital faith]. Rather it is inviting the young and old to interpret the story of their lives through the cross and resurrection of the person of Jesus, empowered to do so by the ascended Christ, who sends the Spirit to minister union . . . Faith is encountering the living Christ through your own or others' direct experience of the personhood of Jesus that comes in the shape of cross and resurrection.⁹⁶

Interpreting our story through the cross and resurrection of the person of Jesus mirrors Martin Luther's doctrine of the great exchange wherein Jesus, the Son of God, swaps places with us.⁹⁷ Through Baptism, God looks at us and sees the perfect righteousness, sinlessness, and holiness of his Son. What belongs to Jesus belongs to us.

⁹⁵ Root, *Faith Formation in a Secular Age*, 143.

⁹⁶ Root, 145.

⁹⁷ Martin Luther, *Luther's Works, Vol. 51: Sermons I*, ed. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann, vol. 51 (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1999), 316. Luther writes, "Is not this a beautiful, glorious exchange, by which Christ, who is wholly innocent and holy, not only takes upon himself another's sin, that is, my sin and guilt, but also clothes and adorns me, who am nothing but sin, with his own innocence and purity? And then besides dies the shameful death of the Cross for the sake of my sins, through which I have deserved death and condemnation, and grants to me his righteousness, in order that I may live with him eternally in glorious and unspeakable joy. Through this blessed exchange, in which Christ changes places with us (something the heart can grasp only in faith), and through nothing else, are we freed from sin and death and given his righteousness and life as our own."

Baptism enables us to reimagine our identity daily, what it means to flourish, and our preferred and promised future. The Gospel of Jesus Christ transforms our story. Thus reflecting Arthur Frank's concept that stories emplot our lives (see Story in chapter two).

Our lives bear witness as the prophet proclaims, “[The LORD] has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God” (Mic. 6:8). Actions matter: we love and minister to our neighbors as Christ loves and ministers to us.⁹⁸ Sometimes we use this as an excuse not to speak, making the dubious claims that we should “preach the gospel at all times and use words if necessary” (falsely attributed to Saint Francis) or that “actions speak louder than words.” Words and actions are not mutually exclusive.⁹⁹ A church in south Minneapolis sponsored a Laotian family in the 1970s. The church provided them with a home, food, and jobs while helping them assimilate into their new community. After several years, the time came for the family to set out on their own. The church asked for feedback, “How did we do? What could we have done differently?” The family responded, “You never shared with us your faith. We wish you had . . .”

Witnessing takes multiple forms that are not restricted to the role of pastor, preacher, or deaconess (1 Pet. 2:9). Thomas Hoyt, Jr., describes personal testimony:

Testimony is basic to human community. . . . In a world where bad news gets more attention than good, a testimony like this tells the truth. It also ties individuals to communities. Although only one person may be speaking at a time, that person's speech takes place within the context of other people's listening, expecting, and

⁹⁸ James 2:14-17, “What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them? Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,’ but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.” See also Matt. 25:31-46; Luke 10:25-37; John 13:12-17 and 15:9-13; 2 Cor. 1:3-7; etc.

⁹⁹ Luke 10:8-9, “When you enter a town and are welcomed, eat what is offered to you. Heal the sick who are there and tell them, ‘The kingdom of God has come near to you.’” See also Matt. 28:16-20; John 15:26-27 and 20:21-23; Acts 1:7-8; Rom. 1:16-17; etc.

encouraging. In testimony, a believer describes what God has done in her life, in words both biblical and personal, and the hands of her friends clap in affirmation. Her individual speech thus becomes part of an affirmation that is shared.¹⁰⁰

We witness by singing hymns, psalms, and spiritual songs; by worshipping, confessing, forgiving, remembering, and gathering for Baptism and Holy Communion; by dwelling in Scripture and connecting the biblical story to our own story; by preaching, teaching, and making disciples; by ministering to others in Jesus' name; and by sharing our personal witness. None of these Christian practices are restricted to worship or the church as we are called to freely engage in them with others in the broader web of our relationships.¹⁰¹ Like the disciples on the road to Emmaus, we are witnesses who must not remain silent.¹⁰²

Summary

This chapter engaged the five biblical lenses. The four theological lenses used to shape the research process were also reviewed: Discernment and Dialogue, the Glory Story and the Cross Story, Missional Imagination, and Liturgy and Witness. Chapter four explores in detail the Participatory Action Research (PAR) methodology employed in conjunction with the four interventions designed by the PAR team.

¹⁰⁰ Hoyt, Jr., "Testimony," in *Practicing Our Faith*, 93-94.

¹⁰¹ 1 Peter 3:14-16, "But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. 'Do not fear their threats; do not be frightened.' But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander."

¹⁰² Long, *Testimony*, 66. "So when the blessing has been pronounced, the last strains of the postlude are dying out, and we are gathering our coats and purses to leave the church, we are to think of ourselves as missionaries, as those who are sent. What are we sent to do? To be witnesses. How are we to do that? In listening, in telling the truth and in hearing honest secrets, in words of awe and wonder and in attending to the heartfelt words of others, we bear witness to God, whose Word we have encountered in worship, and to Christ, the Word become flesh (John 1:1, 14). Where are we to go? To the world, of course, and for most of us, the world is not a mission field in some distant land but an ordinary place—a home, an office, a school—and the missionary witness begins on Monday morning when the alarm clock sounds."

CHAPTER FOUR
RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND DESIGN

Introduction

Chapter one introduced Charles Taylor’s term “secularity three.” People in general struggle to discern divine action, lack a missional imagination, and avoid engaging in dialogue about God with one another. This context, in turn, framed the research question. *How might Participatory Action Research interventions increase our capacity to discern the triune God’s active presence and engage in dialogue with others?*

Chapter two explored the historical background of the congregation, which is situated in a bedroom community in a small town and rural setting. Additionally, four theoretical lenses were explored: Secularity, Adaptive Change, Mental Models and Reframing, and Story and Ritual.

Chapter three engaged the biblical and theological lenses of Discernment and Dialogue, the Glory Story and the Cross Story, Missional Imagination, and Liturgy and Witness. These lenses help to discern the ramifications of the spiritual capacities—see, hear, know, and say—within the realm of faith formation and discipleship.

This chapter delves into the Participatory Action Research methodology, which employed a concurrent mixed methods approach. The methods included both qualitative and quantitative data collection in conjunction with four interventions that were designed by the Participatory Action Research team (PAR team): Sunday Worship, Lent, Sunday School, and Story and Dialogue.

Methodology

This section begins by exploring the theological warrants which framed the selection of the methodology. We then proceed to an overview of Participatory Action Research (PAR), followed by a detailed description of the Research Design.

Theological Warrants

Missional leadership is team-oriented and collaborative. When Jesus sends out the seventy-two disciples ahead of him to proclaim, “The kingdom of God has come near to you,” he sends them in pairs, two by two (Lk 10:1-16). Jesus further advises them, “The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.” The triune God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—invites us to participate with God as God transforms the world and ushers in the Kingdom. In John 17:20-21, Jesus prays, “My prayer is not for [the disciples] alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me.” Ministry is not an individual sport or a solo endeavor.

Missional leadership is also a process, not a destination, formula, or program. In fact, Northouse explicitly defines leadership as “a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal.”¹ Furthermore, leadership is not a set of characteristics limited to charismatic individuals. As Northouse also observes, “The process viewpoint suggests that leadership is a phenomenon that resides in the context of the interactions between leaders and followers and makes leadership available

¹ Peter Guy Northouse, *Leadership: Theory and Practice*, Seventh edition (Los Angeles, CA: SAGE Publishing, 2015), 6.

to everyone.”² Everyone is called to be both a leader and a follower, depending upon calling, context, and circumstances. This paradigm reflects the theological doctrine of the priesthood of all believers (Exod. 19:6, Isa 61:6, and 1 Pet. 2) central to Lutheran theology.³ For these reasons, Participatory Action Research was the chosen methodology.

Participatory Action Research

Action Research involves conducting research to effect cultural change within an organization. A. B. Shani and W. A. Pasmore observe:

Action research may be defined as an emergent inquiry process in which applied behavioural science knowledge is integrated with existing organizational knowledge and applied to solve real organizational problems. It is simultaneously concerned with bringing about change in organizations, in developing self-help competencies in organizational members and adding to scientific knowledge. Finally, it is an evolving process that is undertaken in a spirit of collaboration and co-inquiry.⁴

There are four steps in the process: assess, plan, act, and evaluate. The research is typically iterative as well as collaborative in that the people in the organization being studied are actively engaged.⁵ *Participatory* Action Research takes this process one additional step as it empowers people within the organization to collaborate by developing interventions, implementing the interventions, and evaluating the outcomes. As noted in chapter two under Adaptive Change, this collaborative approach is a central

² Northouse, 8.

³ Martin Luther, Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, and Helmut T. Lehmann, *Luther's Works. 40: Church and Ministry: 2*, American ed. (Saint Louis, MO: Concordia Publ. House, 1958), 19. Martin Luther writes, “a priest, especially in the New Testament, was not made but was born. He was created, not ordained. He was born not indeed of flesh, but through a birth of the Spirit, by water and the Spirit in the washing of regeneration (John 3:6f.; Titus 3:5f.). Indeed, all Christians are priests and all priests are Christian.”

⁴ A. B. Shani and W. A. Pasmore, “Organization Inquiry: Towards a New Model of the Action Research Process,” in *Fundamentals of Organization Development*, ed. David Coghlan and A. B. Shani, vol. 1 (London: SAGE Publishing, 2010), 439.

⁵ Coghlan and Brannick, *Doing Action Research*, 174.

tenant of adaptive leadership that focuses on cultural change and giving the work back to the people. This stance gave birth to a Participatory Action Research Team (PAR team).

The PAR team included both current and former members of BLC with a balance of gender, marital status, and reflecting a range of ages from eighteen to sixty-nine. Table 2 describes members of the PAR team.

Table 2. PAR team members' profile

Member	Years Attending BLC	Religious Profile	Gender	Age Range	Marital Status	Profession
PAR 1	50+	Lutheran, Evangelical	Male	60-69	Married	Farmer
PAR 2	5	Catholic, Lutheran	Male	50-59	Remarried (Widower)	Pharmacist
PAR 3	11	Lutheran	Female	50-59	Married	Retired School Administrator
PAR 4	40+	Lutheran	Female	40-49	Married	Teacher
PAR 5	20+	Lutheran	Female	40-49	Married	Nurse
PAR 6	7	Lutheran	Male	18-29	Single	Student

PAR team meetings often began with dwelling in the Word using one of the texts from the Biblical Lenses discussed in chapter three. Members of the group engaged in deep listening in pairs and then shared what they heard from their partner. Responses were recorded on a large sheet of paper. The agenda often included a learning session focusing on one of the theoretical or theological lenses before moving into the working session.

Research Design

The research design incorporated *concurrent mixed methods*. The interventions were *concurrent* rather than sequential as one intervention did not affect how the others were conducted. One of the goals was the transformation of the culture of the church relative to increasing participants' capacity to discern the triune God's active presence

and engage in dialogue with others. (See Adaptive Change and Mental Models and Reframing under Theoretical Lenses in chapter two.)

A *mixed methods* approach was utilized since there are limitations and strengths to qualitative and quantitative data collection methods. John and David Creswell observe, “In a sense, more *insight* into a problem is to be gained from mixing or integration of the qualitative and quantitative data. This ‘mixing’ or integrating of data, it can be argued, provides a stronger understanding of the problem or question than either by itself. Mixed methods research, therefore, is simply ‘mining’ the databases by integrating them” (emphasis original).⁶ Mixed methods research involves collecting qualitative and quantitative data, using rigorous methods for data analysis and interpretation, and integrating the two forms of data.⁷ The research design included interviews, small group activities, and focus groups, in addition to the baseline and end line questionnaires.

Research was conducted between November 10, 2018, and May 31, 2019, at Beloved Lutheran Church. People eighteen years of age and older were invited to participate, including active members and non-members, as well as visitors. There were seven phases to the project: Design, Data Gathering, Intervention 1: Sunday Worship, Intervention 2: Lent, Intervention 3: Sunday School, Intervention 4: Story and Dialogue, and finally Review. Figure 8 offers an overview of the research design.

⁶ John W. Creswell and J. David Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*, Fifth edition (Los Angeles, CA: SAGE Publishing, 2018), 213.

⁷ Creswell and Creswell, 215.

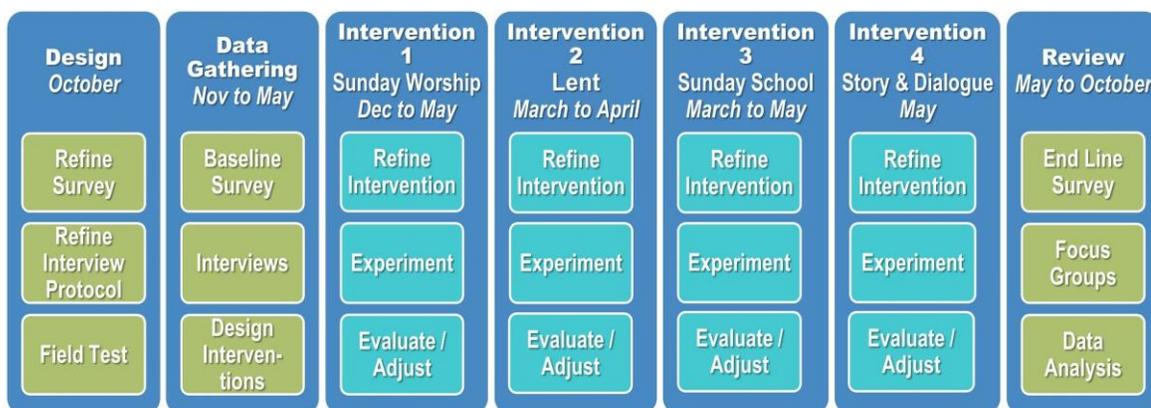


Figure 8. Research design

Design Phase

Baseline and end line surveys were utilized to assess changes resulting from the interventions (also called experiments) designed by the PAR team. The baseline survey instrument was field-tested in October and November of 2018. Copies were distributed electronically to nine people from other local Lutheran congregations, three of whom completed the questionnaire. The PAR team reviewed and fine-tuned the survey questions.

Data Gathering Phase

As noted above, data gathering included a baseline survey and end line survey. Interviews were also conducted with current and former members of BLC.

Baseline Survey

The baseline survey instrument (appendix A) was collected from a census composed of people eighteen years of age and older, including active members and active non-members, as well as visitors via Survey Monkey.⁸ An announcement was made during worship on November 18, 21, 25, 28, and December 2, 2018, explaining the survey and modes of availability. The survey instruments were distributed electronically

⁸ "Survey Monkey," <https://www.surveymonkey.com/>.

as emails and through the church app as well as in paper format during worship. The questionnaires were available for fifteen days. The questionnaire included a question on gender and birthdate to facilitate conducting a paired t-test upon completion of the end line survey. In addition to demographic questions, both the baseline and end line surveys addressed five themes related to the lenses discussed in chapters one to three. These themes were: (1) immanent and transcendent, (2) prayer, (3) biblical story, (4) discernment, and (5) dialogue.

Interviews

I conducted semi-structured life-history interviews with five people (see appendix C for protocol) from November to May. I selected participants based on my knowledge of their faith journey and their prior sharing with me of their discernment of God's active presence.⁹ The goal was to interview people reflecting an age range between eighteen and eighty. Participants included both members of the PAR team as well as others in the congregation. This entailed inviting them to share stories of about where they had seen or heard the triune God active in Scripture, in their lives, in the lives of those close to them, in the community, in the world, or in the church.

Intervention 1: Sunday Worship

This intervention focused on the Sunday worship experience as the primary mode for faith formation and discipleship since it reached the maximum number of people from December 2, 2018, to May 19, 2019. The theme was incorporated into artwork, banners,

⁹ Herbert J. Rubin and Irene Rubin, *Qualitative Interviewing: The Art of Hearing Data*, Third edition (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publishing, 2012), 28–29. “Narrative analysis involves examining people's descriptions of experiences as told in story form. This form of analysis focuses more on ways in which narratives or stories are told than on their content. Narrative analysis examines how people make meaning of their experiences, how they interpret them, and how they share experiences with others.”

music, sermons, website, church app, newsletter, annual report, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube (see appendix K for samples of communication). To kick off the theme, one of my daughters custom designed five banners inspired by the Christmas song “Do You Hear What I Hear?”¹⁰ for Advent and Christmas, as seen in figure 9.¹¹ This design was also incorporated into the graphics for the PowerPoint, newsletter, and Facebook banner.



Figure 9. Advent and Christmas banners

Katharina Louise Ayer, *Do You Hear What I Hear?*, Graphic Design, 2018.

Since this research entailed a cultural change, the congregation was introduced to the theme gradually over time rather than creating an immediate, immersive experience. The PAR team developed a detailed, sequential protocol (see appendix G), which they modified over time as they reflected on the progress and goals of the interventions. Specific interventions included posing an anticipatory set (or an anticipatory question) to the congregation that invited them to listen or look for answers prior to the reading of Scripture, such as: “What is God up to in this reading?” During Advent, we used a video clip with a narrator reading the Scripture from the NIV Bible to help worshipers visualize

¹⁰ Regney and Shayne Baker, “Do You Hear What I Hear?”

¹¹ Katharina Louise Ayer, *Do You Hear What I Hear?*, Graphic Design, 2018.

the biblical story. Beginning in January during Epiphany, members of the PAR team shared what they saw God doing in the Scripture. As the preacher, I did not know what they would say ahead of time, so I extemporarily wove their responses into the sermon. In February, worshippers were invited to share answers to the anticipatory question via *slido* audience interaction software, so their responses appeared on the projection screen anonymously.¹² These approaches were a way of transforming the congregation's missional imagination and helping them to engage with Scripture.

In March, members of the PAR team shared their witness regarding where they had discerned God's active presence in their lives, in the lives of those close to them, in our community, in the world, and in the church. They modeled witnessing for the congregation and changed mental modes so as to transform the culture of the church. On the last Sunday in April, members of the congregation were invited to consider sharing their own testimonies the following week. On May 5, at the end of the sermon, worshippers were invited to come forward and share where they had seen or heard God's active presence. The congregation sang "I Love to Tell the Story," and then four people spontaneously came forward to witness. Holy Communion was canceled during worship to accommodate their testimonies. Two weeks later, a woman shared her witness at the end of the year Sunday School Program that occurred during Sunday morning worship.

Intervention 2: Lent

This intervention focused on Lenten fellowship and worship on Wednesday evenings from Ash Wednesday, March 6 to April 10, 2019. The PAR team developed a detailed protocol (see appendix H). There were three parts to the intervention. Part one

¹² *Sli.Do* (Sli.do S. R. O., 2019), <https://www.slido.com>.

entailed a multigenerational Bible study led by confirmation students that explored discernment. A conversation prompt was placed on a tent in the center of the table as an anticipatory set (question). Parts two and three occurred during worship. On Ash Wednesday, the liturgy from *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*,¹³ the hymnal of the ELCA, was used. The liturgy typically used at the research site for Lenten worship beginning one week after Ash Wednesday was the *Holden Evening Prayer*.¹⁴ We retained this liturgy. Part two was the sermon, which focused on connecting the Scripture reading to discernment and dialogue. Part three incorporated a meditation/visualization to help worshipers reimagine the triune God's active presence. Each week, worshipers were given a business card when they entered the sanctuary. One side of the card was blank while the other side displayed the question, "What is GOD up to?" These cards were used to record their thoughts during the meditations each week so they could take the cards with them to continue this activity. These meditations were typically conducted at the end of the sermon.

Intervention 3: Sunday School

Sunday school teachers (approximately nineteen adults eighteen years of age and older) were given instructions to invite their students (preschool through sixth grade) to become "detectives of divinity" (see Discernment and Dialogue under Theological Lenses in chapter three). The goal was to help students and teachers discern God's active presence in Scripture, in their lives, in the lives of those close to them, in their community, in the world, and in the church as well as engage in dialogue about God.

¹³ Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada, eds., *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, Pew edition (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2006), 251-55.

¹⁴ Marty Haugen, *Holden Evening Prayer* (Chicago, IL: GIA Publications, Inc, 1990).

We showed videos of Sherlock Psalms, a puppet who modeled how to see, hear, know, and say as he perceived God's active presence. Initially, the videos were to be shown in each classroom. The Sunday school leaders requested that the students watch the videos together in the sanctuary. I provided a welcome, introduced the videos, and gave instructions. In retrospect, showing them in the classrooms would have enabled the students to be more attentive. We also showed the videos during worship as part of the children's message. The reasons were threefold: first, to reinforce the message with the children and teachers; second, so parents would be aware of what the children had learned and could enhance the message, including watching the videos via YouTube (e.g., at home, in the car); and third, adults could learn *from* and *with* children, as Jesus said, "I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children" (Matt. 11:25).

The teachers encouraged students to share stories in class that answered the questions, "What is God up to? Where have you seen God active during the past week?" (See appendix I.) A sheet of black cardstock and a set of metallic gel pens designed for use on black paper were distributed to each classroom. Children could write answers or draw pictures. Teachers could write responses for them. Teachers were asked to thank God for the specific examples shared by the children in their class prayers. Drawings were collected and posted in the fellowship hall to create a graffiti wall as a public witness.

Intervention 4: Story and Dialogue

The final intervention was a special event designed to focus on story and dialogue (see appendix J). The event was held on May 5, Cinco de Mayo, with the tag line "Let's TACO Bout God!" An article was included in the newsletter, which stated:

Do you love tacos? Do you love Jesus? Let's get together after Sunday Worship on Cinco de Mayo—the 5th of May—to eat tacos, hang out together, and TACO Bout God! Mark your calendar and reserve the date. We'll gather in small groups in the Fellowship Hall after worship from 11:15 AM to 1:00 PM. This event is a way for all of us to come together to help Pastor Andrew with his thesis for his doctorate and grow in sharing our faith. Please RSVP to Pastor Andrew by April 28, so we are sure to have enough food by completing the YES card at worship or sending him an email at email.com. Also, let us know if you need childcare. See you there! Peace, [*The names of PAR team members were listed.*]

Information was included in the bulletin, projected announcements before worship, and announcements during worship, as well as via website, Facebook, emails, and push notifications on the church app. An electronic sign-up was set up online. During the event, participants worked in groups of three. The meal was catered by a local restaurant so that participants did not need to prepare, serve, or clean up. A Thrivent Action Grant of \$250 for educational purposes was used to pay for most of the cost of the meal.

Review Phase

During the final research phase, the PAR team conducted an end line survey. They helped to interpret data and reflected over the course of the research process.

End Line Survey

The end line survey instrument (appendix B) was distributed in May 2019 to a census composed of people eighteen years of age and older, including active members and active non-members as well as visitors. As noted under the baseline survey above, the questions addressed five themes: (1) immanent and transcendent, (2) prayer, (3) biblical story, (4) discernment, and (5) dialogue. An announcement was made during worship on May 12, 15, 19, 22, and 26, 2019, explaining the survey and modes of

availability. The instruments were distributed electronically via Survey Monkey¹⁵ as emails and through the church app as well as in paper format. Emails were sent to the congregation on May 12 and 19, 2019. The email address list from the baseline survey was used, plus any additions or modifications from the previous six months. Visitors and friends of BLC were not sent the message, nor was anyone under the age of eighteen.

The questionnaires were available for fifteen days. The survey instrument included a question on gender and their birthdate to facilitate conducting a paired t-test with the baseline survey completed in November 2018 during the Data Gathering Phase. There was a glitch in Survey Monkey in the baseline survey regarding birthdays that interfered with entering dates, although the problem appeared to be limited to Apple devices. Therefore the Survey Monkey default format for entering birthdays was revised from a drop-down menu to manually typing the month, date, and year into three boxes.

Focus Groups

Near the end of May, an announcement was made to the congregation during worship asking for volunteers eighteen years of age and older to participate in one of two focus groups. Focus Group 1 was explicitly for teachers, while Focus Group 2 was open to anyone who had attended Sunday worship, Wednesday Lenten worship, or “Let’s TACO Bout God.” A clipboard was passed around with the date, time, and description to form this non-probability convenience sample. The protocol for the focus groups is in appendix D.

¹⁵ “Survey Monkey.”

Data Analysis

Analysis and evaluation of the overall process were conducted in conjunction with the PAR team. This research project used concurrent mixed methods by employing a combination of quantitative and qualitative research. As appropriate, descriptive statistics were calculated, including total population (N), frequency ($Freq.$) of response by category (n), percentages (%), the mean where appropriate (M), and the mean difference (MD). SPSS¹⁶ statistical software was used to analyze the quantitative data.

Independent t-tests and paired t-tests were conducted to analyze the responses to the baseline and end line surveys to determine whether there had been a statistically significant change (p) as well as the effect size (d) over the course of the study. Where possible, each person completing the end line questionnaire was matched with their baseline responses based on their date of birth, enabling SPSS to compare two means for the same sample of people for the paired t-tests.

Qualitative data from interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed using *Tem*,¹⁷ an online speech recognition software. Participants in Intervention 4 completed worksheets that were collected at the end of the event, after which I transcribed the data. Focus group sessions involved recording participant comments on large sheets of paper. Data were analyzed with *NVivo*¹⁸ qualitative analysis software using the coding outline developed by Kathy Charmaz: word-by-word, line-by-line, incident-with-incident. These *in vivo* codes were then grouped into focused codes, which were coalesced under axial

¹⁶ *IBM Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) Software*, version 25 (IBM, 2017), <https://www.ibm.com/products/spss-statistics>.

¹⁷ *Tem Advanced Speech Recognition Software*, version 1 (Tem), <https://www.temi.com/>.

¹⁸ *NVivo*, version 12 (QSR International), <https://www.qsrinternational.com/nvivo/home>.

codes. Theoretical coding clarified the relationships between these axial codes.¹⁹

Observations were documented using memos to identify trends, keywords, and themes.²⁰

Next Steps

Near the end of the research process, the members of the PAR team were invited to determine the next steps regarding where this process might lead. What parts of the research process should we continue? What should we change? What have we learned? How do we move forward in this learning process even though the actual research has been completed? Where have we discerned the triune God's active presence? How has our ability to engage in conversation about God been transformed? What has the Holy Spirit been up to?

Summary

This chapter delineated the concurrent mixed methods approach employed in this study. This approach included both qualitative data (interviews and focus groups) and quantitative data (surveys). The PAR team implemented four interventions: Sunday Worship, Lent, Sunday School, and Story and Dialogue. Chapter five provides a detailed discussion of the results and interpretation of this study. Chapter six summarizes major findings considering the theoretical lenses from chapter two, along with the biblical and theological lenses from chapter three.

¹⁹ Kathy Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*, Second edition, Introducing Qualitative Methods (London; Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publishing, 2014), 124-54.

²⁰ Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*, 169-70.

CHAPTER FIVE

RESULTS AND INTERPRETATION

Introduction

Chapter four detailed the Participatory Action Research methodology and design, which utilized a concurrent mixed methods approach to answer the research question. *How might Participatory Action Research interventions increase our capacity to discern the triune God's active presence and engage in dialogue with others?* The Participatory Action Research Team (PAR team) designed and implemented four interventions.

This chapter reviews the data collected during the study. The research design included collecting quantitative data, specifically baseline and end line questionnaires, in addition to qualitative data from interviews, small group activities, and focus groups. Rigorous methods for data analysis and interpretation, as well as the integration of the two forms of data, are utilized.

Overview and Timeline

Research was conducted between November 10, 2018, and May 31, 2019, at BLC. People eighteen years of age and older were invited to participate. There were seven phases to the project: Design, Data Gathering, Intervention 1: Sunday Worship, Intervention 2: Lent, Intervention 3: Sunday School, Intervention 4: Story and Dialogue, and finally Review. A detailed explanation of each phase of the research design is delineated in chapter four and appendices G through J. The baseline survey (appendix A)

was conducted in November 2018 while the end line survey (appendix B) was conducted in May 2019.

Quantitative Participants

Baseline and end line surveys were utilized to assess changes resulting from the interventions (also called experiments) designed by the PAR team. Regarding the baseline survey, emails were sent to the congregation on November 18 and 26, 2018. The original email address list included 269 active addresses. The list was reviewed and pared down prior to messages being sent. Visitors and friends of BLC were not sent the message, nor was anyone under the age of eighteen. For the first email, there were 187 recipients with a 49.4% open rate (percent of people who opened the email), and 59.6% click rate (percent of people who clicked on the link to the survey) with 3.7% returned (bounced and undelivered). For the second email, I deleted the addresses of the returned messages. There were 180 recipients with a 43.3% open rate and a 29.5% click rate, with 0.0% returned.

In addition, the survey link was posted on the BLC Church App via a push message that was sent to thirty-one App users on November 18, 2018, stating, “Pastor Andrew is currently working towards a doctorate. Would you please assist him by taking a seven-minute survey? Thanks and blessings!” The survey was automatically closed at midnight on the morning of December 3. A total of 68 questionnaires were completed, 11 were print versions, and 57 were electronic. Table 3 summarizes the electronic baseline distribution.

Table 3. Electronic baseline survey distribution

	Date	Total Sent	Open Rate	Click Rate	Returned (Bounced)
Email #1	11/18/18	187	49.4%	59.6%*	3.7%
Email #2	11/26/18	180	43.3%	29.5%	0.0%
App	11/18/18	31	Unknown	Unknown	NA

* Unexpectedly, the click rate is higher than the open rate; perhaps people clicked a second time to complete the survey.

For the end line survey, emails were sent to the congregation on May 12 and 19, 2019. The email address list from the baseline survey was used, plus any additions or modifications that may have been made during the previous six months. Visitors and friends of BLC were not sent the message, nor was anyone under the age of eighteen. For the first email, there were 183 recipients with a 38.8% open rate and a 37.7% click rate, with 2.7% returned (bounced). The second email was sent only to people who did not click on the link in the original email. There were 154 recipients with a 45.1% open rate and a 34.8% click rate, with 0.6% returned (bounced).

The survey link was posted on the BLC Church App via a push message which was sent to 62 App users on May 12, 2019, stating, “God is up to something. Let us know how you discern God’s active presence. Would you please assist Pastor Andrew by taking a seven-minute survey? Thanks and blessings!” The survey was inadvertently closed at midnight on the morning of May 20 and reopened at 12:20 pm that same day. The survey was automatically closed at midnight on the morning of May 27, 2019. A total of 67 questionnaires were completed, 13 were print versions, and 54 were electronic. Table 4 summarizes the electronic end line survey distribution.

Table 4. Electronic end line survey distribution

	Date	Total Sent	Open Rate	Click Rate	Returned (Bounced)
Email #1	5/12/19	183	38.8%	37.7%	2.7%
Email #2	5/19/19	154	45.1%	34.8%	0.6%
App	5/12/19	62	Unknown	Unknown	NA

The following tables 5 to 11 summarize the descriptive statistics from the baseline and end line surveys. Data included total number completing the questionnaire (*N*), the total number who answered a particular question (*n*), the frequency of responses (*Freq.*), percentages of responses (%), and the mean where appropriate (*M*).

Intervention 1 transpired as part of weekly Sunday morning worship. The survey participants' worship attendance appears in table 5. The mean worship attendance for the baseline was 2.6 times per month from September 1 to November 30, 2018, and 2.5 times per month from December 1, 2018, to May 5, 2019, for the end line.

Table 5. Survey participants' Sunday worship attendance

	Baseline <i>N</i> = 68		End Line <i>N</i> = 67	
	<i>Freq.</i>	%	<i>Freq.</i>	%
Usually every week	25	36.8	27	41.5
Three times a month	14	20.6	10	15.4
Twice a month	17	25.0	13	20.0
Once a month	2	2.9	4	6.2
Once or twice total	6	8.8	NA	NA
No less than once but no more than five times	NA	NA	7	10.8
Never	4	5.9	4	6.2
Total (<i>n</i>)	68	100.0	65	100.0
Mean (<i>M</i>)	2.6 times per month		2.5 times per month	

Note: NA means Not Applicable, as the response was not included in the particular questionnaire.

Intervention 2 occurred during Lent. The end line survey inquired how many times the participants attended Lenten Wednesday worship services from Ash Wednesday, March 6, 2019, to April 10, 2019. Table 6 indicates that the participants' mean worship attendance was 2.5 times over the six-week season of Lent. This mean matched the mean of the participants' Sunday worship attendance for the end line survey (see table 5 above).

Table 6. Survey participants' Lenten worship attendance

	End Line <i>N</i> = 67	
	<i>Freq.</i>	%
Every week for six weeks	6	9.2
Five times	9	13.9
Four times	7	10.8
Three times	9	13.9
Two times	9	13.9
One time	8	12.3
Never	17	26.2
Total (<i>n</i>)	65	100.0
Mean (<i>M</i>)	2.5 times	

Intervention 4 “Let’s TACO Bout God” was attended by twenty-one people on May 5, 2019. Table 7 indicates fourteen of the end line survey participants attended this event, which is 66.7% of those who attended Intervention 4 and 21.5% of responders.

Table 7. Survey participants’ “Let's TACO Bout GOD” attendance

Participation	End Line <i>N</i> = 67	
	<i>Freq.</i>	%
Yes	14	21.5
No	51	78.5
Total (<i>n</i>)	65	100.0

Table 8 records the participants’ length of time attending Beloved Lutheran Church. Note that 50.0% of the participants have been attending fifteen years or more for the baseline survey, but that percentage decreased to 44.8% for the end line survey.

Table 8. Survey participants’ length of time attending BLC

Length of time attending BLC	Baseline <i>N</i> = 68		End Line <i>N</i> = 67	
	<i>Freq.</i>	%	<i>Freq.</i>	%
Less than 2 years	3	4.4	5	7.5
At least 2 years but less than 5 years	14	20.6	13	19.4
At least 5 years but less than 10 years	11	16.2	10	14.9
At least 10 years but less than 15 years	6	8.8	9	13.4
15 years or more	34	50.0	30	44.8
Total (<i>n</i>)	68	100.0	67	100.0

The survey participants’ religious profile is illustrated in table 9. They were asked, “Over the course of your life, what has been your religious background?” Eighteen options were provided, including agnostic (Unsure of the existence of God.), atheist (Certain there is no God.), nothing in particular, and other. The table lists only those options which were selected by the participants. The total of all responses exceeds 100% since responders could choose more than one answer. The four most frequent responses from the survey participants for religious background in both the baseline and end line

surveys match the four largest denominations in the county, as noted under Historical Background in chapter two: Lutheran, Roman Catholic, Evangelical, and Methodist.

Table 9. Survey participants' religious profile

Religious background	Baseline <i>N</i> = 68; <i>n</i> = 68		End Line <i>N</i> = 67; <i>n</i> = 66	
	<i>Freq.</i>	% ^a	<i>Freq.</i>	% ^a
Lutheran/Free Lutheran	62	91.2	63	95.5
Moravian	0	0.0	1	1.5
Methodist	6	8.8	8	12.1
Roman Catholic	10	14.7	11	16.7
Baptist	1	1.5	2	3.0
Presbyterian	4	5.9	2	3.0
Evangelical	6	8.8	10	15.2
Jehovah's Witness	1	1.5	1	1.5
Agnostic	0	0.0	1	1.5
Nothing in particular	0	0.0	1	1.5
Gideons	0	0.0	1	1.5
Congregational	2	2.9	0	0
Total Responses	92	^b	101	^b

^a Percentage is calculated based on the number of responders (*n*), not the total number of responses.

^b Total percentage not shown as it exceeds 100% since responders could choose more than one answer.

The gender profile of the participants for both the baseline and end line surveys is shown in table 10. Of valid responses, 73.5% were female, and 26.5% were male in the baseline survey, while 72.7% were female, and 27.3% were male in the end line survey.

Table 10. Survey participants' gender profile

Gender	Baseline <i>N</i> = 68		End Line <i>N</i> = 67	
	<i>Freq.</i>	%	<i>Freq.</i>	%
Female	50	73.5	48	72.7
Male	18	26.5	18	27.3
Total (<i>n</i>)	68	100.0	66	100.0

The age profile of survey participants is shown in table 11. For the baseline survey, the mean age was 59.3, while the mean age for the end line survey was younger at 49.1, a difference of 10.2 years. In the baseline survey, there was a lack of participants in the 18-29 age category (*Freq.* = 0) and a lower number of participants in the 30-39 age category (*Freq.* = 4) relative to the number of participants in the end line survey in the

18-29 age category (*Freq.* = 6) and the 30-39 age category (*Freq.* = 15). This differential may have been due to the glitch in Survey Monkey during the baseline survey that interfered with respondents entering their birth year. The person who pointed out the glitch used an iPhone and was 39 years old. While the problem appeared to have been limited to Apple iPhones, the glitch resulted in twenty-five people who could not use the drop-down menu for their birth years: twenty-one were recorded as 2018, two as 2017, one as 2019, and one as 0001. Five of these baseline questionnaires could be paired with the end line using the IP address, gender, and birthdates. This problem likely raised the mean age for the baseline survey.

Table 11. Survey participants' age profile

	Baseline <i>N</i> = 68		End Line <i>N</i> = 67	
	<i>Freq.</i>	%	<i>Freq.</i>	%
18-29	0	0.0	6	9.1
30-39	4	8.3	15	22.7
40-49	16	33.3	18	27.3
50-59	5	10.4	8	12.1
60-69	12	25.0	12	18.2
70-79	4	8.3	4	6.1
80-89	7	14.6	3	4.5
Total (<i>n</i>)	48	100.0	66	100.0
Mean (years)	59.3		49.1	

Quantitative Data

Both the baseline and end line surveys addressed five themes related to the lenses discussed in chapters one to three: (1) immanent and transcendent, (2) prayer, (3) biblical story, (4) discernment, and (5) dialogue. Descriptive statistics included total population (*N*), frequency of response by category (*n*), the mean where appropriate (*M*), and the mean difference (*MD*). Inferential statistics entailed conducting both independent t-tests and paired t-tests. The t-scores (*t*) were evaluated as to whether there had been a

statistically significant change (p) as well as the Cohen's effect size (d) for each of the interventions.¹

Immanent and Transcendent

Five of the questions in the surveys reflected the immanent and transcendent frames of the participants per Charles Taylor's theory of secularity three (see chapter two). A five-point Likert scale was utilized with 5 representing always and 1 representing never (see appendices A and B). The higher the score, the more likely the participant was to be open to the transcendent. A summary of the independent t-test results is shown in table 12.

Table 12. Immanent and transcendent independent t-test results
(baseline $N = 68$; end line $N = 67$)

	Mean <i>M</i>	<i>n</i>	Mean Diff. <i>MD</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>d</i>
1.1 God is actively involved in <u>your life</u> .							
Baseline	4.60	68					
End Line	4.55	67	(0.05)	0.443	133	.659	(0.1)
1.2 God is actively involved in the <u>lives of those close to you</u> .							
Baseline	4.25	68					
End Line	4.36	67	0.11	0.891	133	.374	0.2 [†]
1.3 God is actively involved in the <u>community</u> .							
Baseline	4.10	67					
End Line	4.27	67	0.17	1.310	132	.192	0.2 [†]

¹ Paul D. Ellis, *The Essential Guide to Effect Sizes: Statistical Power, Meta-Analysis, and the Interpretation of Research Results* (Cambridge; New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2010), Kindle Location 121-163. "The primary purpose of research is to estimate the magnitude and direction of effects which exist 'out there' in the real world. . . . Within the social science disciplines there is a growing recognition of the need to report effect sizes along with the results of tests of statistical significance. As with other aspects of statistical reform, psychology leads the way with no less than twenty-three disciplinary journals now insisting that authors report effect sizes (Fidler et al. 2004).. . . If history is anything to go by, statistical reforms adopted in psychology will eventually spread to other social science disciplines. This means that researchers will have to change the way they interpret their results. No longer will it be acceptable to infer meaning solely on the basis of p values. By giving greater attention to effect sizes we will reduce a potent source of bias, namely the availability bias or the under-representation of sound but statistically nonsignificant results. It is conceivable that some results will be judged to be important even if they happen to be outside the bounds of statistical significance."

Table 12. Immanent and transcendent independent t-test results, continued
(baseline $N = 68$; end line $N = 67$)

	Mean		Mean Diff.				
	M	n	MD	t	df	p	d
1.4 God is actively involved in the <u>world</u> .							
Baseline	4.04	68					
End Line	4.25	67	0.21	1.394	133	.166	0.2 [†]
1.5 God is actively involved in <u>BLC</u> .							
Baseline	4.74	68					
End Line	4.88	67	0.14	2.062	133	.041 [*]	0.3 [†]

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$

[†] $d \geq 0.2$ (small) ^{††} $d \geq 0.5$ (medium) ^{†††} $d \geq 0.8$ (large)

The mean declined for question 1.1 ($MD = 0.05$) from the baseline to end line.

This decline is not statistically significant. Responses to questions 1.2 through 1.5 show a positive trend with an increase in the means from the baseline to end line. Only the last question 1.5, “God is actively involved in BLC,” where the mean increased ($MD = 0.14$) from 4.74 to 4.88 shows a statistically significant difference ($p = .041$). Cohen’s effect size for question 1.1 ($d = 0.1$) suggests the negative effect of the interventions on the mean was negligible. For questions 1.2, 1.3, and 1.4, the positive effect on participants is small ($d = 0.2$) in the lives of those close to them, the community, and the world. The effect size for question 1.5 suggests the interventions had a small to medium positive effect on participants’ openness to God’s active presence in BLC ($d = 0.3$).

A paired t-test was conducted to identify differences in the means between the baseline and end line for the respondents participating in both the baseline and end line surveys. Responses were paired using participants’ reported birthdays. A summary of the immanent and transcendent paired t-test results is shown in table 13.

Table 13. Immanent and transcendent paired t-test results
(baseline $N = 25$; end line $N = 25$)

	Mean		Mean Diff.		t	df	p	d
	M	n	MD					
1.1 God is actively involved in <u>your life</u> .								
Baseline	4.72	25	(0.12)		1.809	24	.083	(0.2) [†]
End Line	4.60	25						
1.2 God is actively involved in the <u>lives of those close to you</u> .								
Baseline	4.16	25	0.32		1.995	24	.058	0.5 ^{††}
End Line	4.48	25						
1.3 God is actively involved in the <u>community</u> .								
Baseline	4.17	24	0.33		3.391	23	.003 ^{**}	0.5 ^{††}
End Line	4.50	24						
1.4 God is actively involved in the <u>world</u> .								
Baseline	4.04	25	0.36		2.221	24	.036 [*]	0.4 [†]
End Line	4.40	25						
1.5 God is actively involved in <u>BLC</u> .								
Baseline	4.76	25	0.20		2.000	24	.057	0.5 ^{††}
End Line	4.96	25						

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$
[†] $d \geq 0.2$ (small) ^{††} $d \geq 0.5$ (medium) ^{†††} $d \geq 0.8$ (large)

The mean declined for question 1.1 ($MD = 0.12$) from the baseline to end line. This decline is not statistically significant. Responses to questions 1.2 through 1.5 show a positive trend with an increase in the means from baseline to end line. Responses to two of these questions show a statistically significant positive trend. The mean of question 1.3, “God is actively involved in the community,” increased ($MD = 0.33$) from 4.17 to 4.50 ($p = .003$) while the mean for question 1.4, “God is actively involved in the world,” increased ($MD = 0.36$) from 4.04 to 4.40 ($p = .036$). The effect size for question 1.1 ($d = 0.2$) suggests the negative effect of the intervention on the mean was small. For question 1.4, the effect size suggests the interventions had a small to medium positive effect on participants’ openness to God’s active presence in the world ($d = 0.4$). The effect size for questions 1.2, 1.3, and 1.5 suggests the interventions had a medium to large positive effect on participants’ openness to God’s active presence in the lives of those close to them ($d = 0.5$), in the community ($d = 0.5$), and in BLC ($d = 0.5$).

Prayer

Two of the questions in the survey focused on prayer as a Christian practice that reflects the participants' mental models relative to the immanent and transcendent frames as well as discernment and dialogue in their relationship with God. A six-point Likert scale was utilized with 6 representing every day and 1 representing never (see appendices A and B). The higher the score, the more likely the participant is to be open to the transcendent as expressed by thanking God for specific ways God acts in their lives and for help in perceiving God's active presence. A summary of the prayer independent t-test results for the baseline and end line surveys is shown in table 14.

Table 14. Prayer independent t-test results
(baseline $N = 68$; end line $N = 67$)

	Mean <i>M</i>	<i>n</i>	Mean Diff. <i>MD</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>d</i>
2.1 When I pray, I thank God for specific ways God acts in my life.							
Baseline	5.07	68	0.17	1.137	133	.258	0.2 [†]
End Line	5.24	67					
2.2 When I pray, I ask God to help me perceive what God is up to.							
Baseline	4.32	68	0.26	1.175	133	.242	0.2 [†]
End Line	4.58	67					

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$
[†] $d \geq 0.2$ (small) ^{††} $d \geq 0.5$ (medium) ^{†††} $d \geq 0.8$ (large)

Responses show a positive trend with an increase in the mean from the baseline to end line for questions 2.1 ($MD = 0.17$) and 2.2 ($MD = 0.26$). These increases are not statistically significant. The effect size for both questions suggests the interventions had a small positive effect on the participants' prayer life expressed as thankfulness for specific ways God acts in their lives ($d = 0.2$) and asking God for help in perceiving what God is up to ($d = 0.2$).

A paired t-test was conducted to identify differences in the means between the baseline and end line for the respondents participating in both the baseline and end line surveys. A summary of the prayer paired t-test results is shown in table 15.

Table 15. Prayer paired t-test results
(baseline $N = 25$; end line $N = 25$)

	Mean		Mean Diff.		df	p	d
	M	n	MD	t			
2.1 When I pray, I thank God for specific ways God acts in my life.							
Baseline	5.12	25	0.08	0.527	24	.603	0.1
End Line	5.20	25					
2.2 When I pray, I ask God to help me perceive what God is up to.							
Baseline	4.44	25	0.12	0.421	24	.677	0.1
End Line	4.56	25					

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$

† $d \geq 0.2$ (small) †† $d \geq 0.5$ (medium) ††† $d \geq 0.8$ (large)

Responses show a positive trend with an increase in the mean from the baseline to end line for questions 2.1 ($MD = 0.08$) and 2.2 ($MD = 0.12$). These increases are not statistically significant. The effect size for both questions suggests the interventions had a very small positive effect on the participants' prayer life expressed as thankfulness for specific ways God acts in their lives ($d = 0.1$) and asking God for help in perceiving what God is up to ($d = 0.1$).

Biblical Story

Three of the questions in the survey sought to measure participants' discernment of how their story intersects with God's story in their everyday lives. A five-point Likert scale was utilized with 5 representing very easy and 1 representing very difficult (see appendices A and B). The higher the score, the more likely the participant is to be able to talk about the Bible, retell biblical stories, and connect stories from the Bible with their own lives. A summary of the biblical story independent t-test results for the baseline and end line surveys is shown in table 16.

Table 16. Biblical story independent t-test results(baseline $N = 68$; end line $N = 67$)

	Mean		Mean Diff.				
	M	n	MD	t	df	p	d
3.1 How easily can you talk to someone about the Bible?							
Baseline	3.34	68					
End Line	3.46	67	0.12	0.705	133	.482	0.1
3.2 How easily can you retell stories from the Bible?							
Baseline	3.13	68					
End Line	3.33	67	0.20	1.132	133	.260	0.2 [†]
3.3 How easily can you connect stories from the Bible with your own life?							
Baseline	3.21	68					
End Line	3.36	67	0.15	0.937	133	.350	0.2 [†]

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$ † $d \geq 0.2$ (small) †† $d \geq 0.5$ (medium) ††† $d \geq 0.8$ (large)

The responses show a positive trend with an increase in the means from the baseline to end line for questions 3.1 ($MD = 0.12$), 3.2 ($MD = 0.20$), and 3.3 ($MD = 0.15$). These increases are not statistically significant. The effect size for all three questions shows a positive effect on participants in terms of biblical story. The effect size for question 3.1 was a very small positive effect. The effect sizes for questions 3.2 retelling stories from the Bible ($d = 0.2$) and 3.3 connecting stories from the Bible with their own lives ($d = 0.2$) suggest that the interventions had a small positive effect on the participants.

A paired t-test was conducted to identify differences in the means between the baseline and end line for the respondents participating in both the baseline and end line surveys. A summary of the biblical story paired t-test results is shown in table 17.

Table 17. Biblical story paired t-test results(baseline $N = 25$; end line $N = 25$)

	Mean		Mean Diff.				
	M	n	MD	t	df	p	d
3.1 How easily can you talk to someone about the Bible?							
Baseline	3.60	25					
End Line	3.60	25	0.00	0.000	24	.000	0.00

Table 17. Biblical story paired t-test results, continued
(baseline $N = 25$; end line $N = 25$)

	Mean		Mean Diff.				
	<i>M</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>MD</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>d</i>
3.2 How easily can you retell stories from the Bible?							
Baseline	3.36	25	0.16	0.749	24	.461	0.2 [†]
End Line	3.52	25					
3.3 How easily can you connect stories from the Bible with your own life?							
Baseline	3.40	25	0.12	1.000	24	.327	0.1
End Line	3.52	25					

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$

[†] $d \geq 0.2$ (small) ^{††} $d \geq 0.5$ (medium) ^{†††} $d \geq 0.8$ (large)

The mean for the responses to question 3.1 showed no difference from the baseline to end line. The responses to questions 3.2 ($MD = 0.16$) and 3.3 ($MD = 0.12$) show a positive trend with an increase in the mean from the baseline to end line. These increases are not statistically significant. The effect size for question 3.2 ($d = 0.2$) suggests the interventions had a small positive effect on the participants.

An independent t-test was conducted to analyze the responses to these three biblical story questions in the end line survey comparing those who participated in Intervention 4 Story and Dialogue “Let’s TACO Bout God” and those who did not participate. Table 18 summarizes the results.

Table 18. Biblical story independent t-test results for Intervention 4
(end line $N = 67$)

	Mean		Mean Diff.				
	<i>M</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>MD</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>d</i>
3.1 How easily can you talk to someone about the Bible?							
Participate	3.79	14	0.41	1.400	63	.166	0.4 [†]
Not Participate	3.37	51					
3.2 How easily can you retell stories from the Bible?							
Participate	3.64	14	0.43	1.385	63	.171	0.4 [†]
Not Participate	3.22	51					
3.3 How easily can you connect stories from the Bible with your own life?							
Participate	3.57	14	0.30	1.088	63	.281	0.4 [†]
Not Participate	3.27	51					

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$

[†] $d \geq 0.2$ (small) ^{††} $d \geq 0.5$ (medium) ^{†††} $d \geq 0.8$ (large)

Responses to all three questions show a positive trend with an increase in the means. These increases are not statistically significant. The larger effect sizes for all three questions suggest that the intervention had a small to medium positive effect ($d = 0.4$) on those who participated in Intervention 4 concerning biblical story.

Discernment

The next six questions in the survey addressed the issue of discernment. A five-point Likert scale was utilized with 5 representing very easy and 1 representing very difficult (see appendices A and B). The higher the score, the more likely the participant is to be able to discern God's active presence in the Bible, their own life, the lives of those close to them, the community, the world, and BLC. A summary of the discernment independent t-test results for the baseline and end line surveys is shown in table 19.

Table 19. Discernment independent t-test results
(baseline $N = 68$; end line $N = 67$)

	Mean <i>M</i>	<i>n</i>	Mean Diff. <i>MD</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>d</i>
4.1 How easily can you perceive what God is doing in the <u>Bible</u> ?							
Baseline	3.49	68					
End Line	3.31	67	(0.17)	1.218	133	.225	(0.2) [†]
4.2 How easily can you perceive what God is doing in <u>your life</u> ?							
Baseline	3.62	68					
End Line	3.46	67	(0.16)	1.056	133	.293	(0.2) [†]
4.3 How easily can you perceive what God is doing in the lives of <u>those close to you</u> ?							
Baseline	3.31	68					
End Line	3.37	67	0.06	0.487	132	.627	0.1
4.4 How easily can you perceive what God is doing in the <u>community</u> ?							
Baseline	3.13	68					
End Line	3.33	67	0.20	1.463	132	.146	0.3 [†]
4.5 How easily can you perceive what God is doing in the <u>world</u> ?							
Baseline	2.84	68					
End Line	2.99	67	0.15	0.955	133	.342	0.2 [†]
4.6 How easily can you perceive what God is doing in <u>BLC</u> ?							
Baseline	3.84	67					
End Line	3.85	66	0.01	0.095	131	.925	0.0

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$

[†] $d \geq 0.2$ (small) ^{††} $d \geq 0.5$ (medium) ^{†††} $d \geq 0.8$ (large)

The mean declined for questions 4.1 ($MD = 0.17$) and 4.2 ($MD = 0.16$) from the baseline to end line. These declines are not statistically significant. Responses to questions 4.3 through 4.6 show a positive trend with an increase in the mean from the baseline to end line. These increases are not statistically significant. The effect size suggests the negative effect of the interventions was small for question 4.1 ($d = 0.2$) and 4.2 ($d = 0.2$). For question 4.5, the effect size ($d = 0.2$) suggests the positive effect of the interventions was small on perceiving what God is doing in the world. For question 4.4, the effect size ($d = 0.3$) suggests the interventions had a small to medium positive effect on participants perceiving what God is doing in the community.

A paired t-test was conducted to identify differences in the means between the baseline and end line for the respondents participating in both the baseline and end line surveys. A summary of the discernment paired t-test results is shown in table 20.

Table 20. Discernment paired t-test results
(baseline $N = 25$; end line $N = 25$)

	Mean <i>M</i>	<i>n</i>	Mean Diff. <i>MD</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>d</i>
4.1 How easily can you perceive what God is doing in the <u>Bible</u> ?							
Baseline	3.48	25					
End Line	3.40	25	(0.08)	0.700	24	.491	(0.1)
4.2 How easily can you perceive what God is doing in <u>your life</u> ?							
Baseline	3.64	25					
End Line	3.40	25	(0.24)	1.297	24	.207	(0.3) [†]
4.3 How easily can you perceive what God is doing in the lives of <u>those close to you</u> ?							
Baseline	3.36	25					
End Line	3.48	25	0.12	1.141	24	.265	0.2 [†]
4.4 How easily can you perceive what God is doing in the <u>community</u> ?							
Baseline	3.16	25					
End Line	3.40	25	0.24	1.445	24	.161	0.3 [†]
4.5 How easily can you perceive what God is doing in the <u>world</u> ?							
Baseline	2.76	25					
End Line	2.92	25	0.16	0.891	24	.382	0.2 [†]
4.6 How easily can you perceive what God is doing in <u>BLC</u> ?							
Baseline	3.40	25					
End Line	3.96	25	0.56	2.791	24	.010 ^{**}	0.7 ^{††}

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$

[†] $d \geq 0.2$ (small) ^{††} $d \geq 0.5$ (medium) ^{†††} $d \geq 0.8$ (large)

The mean declined for questions 4.1 ($MD = 0.08$) and 4.2 ($MD = 0.24$) from the baseline to end line. These declines are not statistically significant. Responses to questions 4.3 through 4.6 show a positive trend with an increase in the mean from the baseline to end line. The increases are not statistically significant for questions 4.3, 4.4, and 4.5. Only the last survey question 4.6, “How easily can you perceive what God is doing in BLC,” where the mean increased ($MD = 0.56$) from 3.40 to 3.96 shows a statistically significant difference ($p = .010$). The effect size suggests the negative effect of the interventions was very small for question 4.1 ($d = 0.1$) and small to medium for question 4.2 ($d = 0.3$). Similarly, the effect size for question 4.3 ($d = 0.2$) and 4.5 ($d = 0.2$) suggests the positive effect of the interventions on participants was small. For question 4.4, “How easily can you perceive what God is doing in the community,” the effect size ($d = 0.3$) suggests the interventions had a small to medium positive effect on participants. For question 4.6, “How easily can you perceive what God is doing in BLC,” the effect size ($d = 0.7$) suggests the interventions had a medium to large positive effect on participants.

An independent t-test was conducted to analyze the responses to these six discernment questions in the end line survey comparing those who participated in Intervention 4 Story and Dialogue “Let’s TACO Bout God” and those who did not participate. Table 21 summarizes the results.

Table 21. Discernment independent t-test results for Intervention 4
(end line $N = 67$)

	Mean <i>M</i>	<i>n</i>	Mean Diff. <i>MD</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>d</i>
4.1 How easily can you perceive what God is doing in the <u>Bible</u> ?							
Participate	3.57	14					
Not Participate	3.25	51	0.32	1.331	63	.188	0.4 [†]
4.2 How easily can you perceive what God is doing in <u>your life</u> ?							
Participate	3.57	14					
Not Participate	3.43	51	0.14	0.544	63	.589	0.2 [†]

Table 21. Discernment independent t-test results for Intervention 4, continued
(end line $N = 67$)

	Mean		Mean Diff.				
	M	n	MD	t	df	p	d
4.3 How easily can you perceive what God is doing in the lives of <u>those close to you</u> ?							
Participate	3.29	14					
Not Participate	3.43	51	(0.14)	(0.707)	63	.482	(0.2) [†]
4.4 How easily can you perceive what God is doing in the <u>community</u> ?							
Participate	3.50	14					
Not Participate	3.35	51	0.15	0.635	63	.528	0.2 [†]
4.5 How easily can you perceive what God is doing in the <u>world</u> ?							
Participate	3.29	14					
Not Participate	2.96	51	0.33	1.115	63	.269	0.3 [†]
4.6 How easily can you perceive what God is doing in <u>BLC</u> ?							
Participate	4.14	14					
Not Participate	3.82	50	0.32	1.281	62	.205	0.4 [†]

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$
[†] $d \geq 0.2$ (small) ^{††} $d \geq 0.5$ (medium) ^{†††} $d \geq 0.8$ (large)

The mean declined for question 4.3 ($MD = 0.14$). This decline is not statistically significant. Responses to questions 4.1, 4.2, 4.4, 4.5, and 4.6 show a positive trend with increases in the mean. These increases are not statistically significant. The effect size for questions 4.1 ($d = 0.4$), 4.2 ($d = 0.2$), 4.4 ($d = 0.2$), 4.5 ($d = 0.3$), and 4.6 ($d = 0.4$) suggest a small to medium positive effect on those who participated in Intervention 4 concerning discernment as compared to those who did not participate.

Dialogue

The final six questions in the survey addressed the issue of engaging in dialogue, sharing stories, and witnessing. A five-point Likert scale was utilized with 5 representing very easy and 1 representing very difficult (see appendices A and B). The higher the score, the more likely the participant is to be comfortable engaging in dialogue about God, either with someone who attends BLC or someone who does not attend BLC. A summary of the dialogue independent t-test results for the baseline and end line surveys is shown in table 22.

Table 22. Dialogue independent t-test results
(baseline $N = 68$; end line $N = 67$)

	Mean		Mean Diff.				
	<i>M</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>MD</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>d</i>
5.1 How easily can you talk with someone who <u>attends</u> BLC about what you perceive God is doing?							
Baseline	3.64	67					
End Line	3.79	67	0.15	1.032	132	.304	0.2 [†]
5.2 How easily can you talk with someone who does <u>not attend</u> BLC about what you perceive God is doing?							
Baseline	3.40	68					
End Line	3.21	67	(0.19)	1.216	133	.226	(0.2) [†]
5.3 How easily can you talk with someone who <u>attends</u> BLC about your faith in God when <u>they initiate</u> the topic?							
Baseline	4.01	68					
End Line	4.12	67	0.11	0.774	133	.440	0.1
5.4 How easily can you talk with someone who does <u>not attend</u> BLC about your faith in God when <u>they initiate</u> the topic?							
Baseline	3.87	68					
End Line	3.68	66	(0.19)	1.247	132	.214	(0.2) [†]
5.5 How easily can <u>you initiate</u> a conversation with someone who <u>attends</u> BLC about faith in God?							
Baseline	3.65	68					
End Line	3.50	66	(0.15)	0.916	132	.362	(0.2) [†]
5.6 How easily can <u>you initiate</u> a conversation with someone who does <u>not attend</u> BLC about faith in God?							
Baseline	3.12	68					
End Line	3.03	66	(0.09)	0.572	132	.568	(0.1)

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$

[†] $d \geq 0.2$ (small) ^{††} $d \geq 0.5$ (medium) ^{†††} $d \geq 0.8$ (large)

The mean declined for questions 5.2 ($MD = 0.19$), 5.4 ($MD = 0.19$), 5.5 ($MD = 0.15$), and 5.6 ($MD = 0.09$) from the baseline to end line. These declines are not statistically significant. The mean increased for questions 5.1 ($MD = 0.15$) and 5.3 ($MD = 0.11$), showing a positive trend from the baseline to end line. These increases are not statistically significant. The effect size suggests the negative effect of the interventions was very small for question 5.6 ($d = 0.1$) and small for questions 5.2 ($d = 0.2$), 5.4 ($d = 0.2$) and 5.5 ($d = 0.2$). For question 5.1 ($d = 0.2$), the effect size was small, and for 5.3 ($d = 0.1$), the effect size suggests the interventions had a very small to small positive effect on participants.

A paired t-test was conducted to identify differences in the mean between the baseline and end line for the respondents participating in both the baseline and end line surveys. A summary of the dialogue paired t-test results is shown in table 23.

Table 23. Dialogue paired t-test results
(baseline $N = 25$; end line $N = 25$)

	Mean <i>M</i>	<i>n</i>	Mean Diff. <i>MD</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>d</i>
5.1 How easily can you talk with someone who <u>attends</u> BLC about what you perceive God is doing?							
Baseline	3.96	25	0.04	0.214	24	.832	0.1
End Line	4.00	25					
5.2 How easily can you talk with someone who does <u>not attend</u> BLC about what you perceive God is doing?							
Baseline	3.68	25	(0.24)	1.541	24	.136	(0.3) [†]
End Line	3.44	25					
5.3 How easily can you talk with someone who <u>attends</u> BLC about your faith in God when <u>they initiate</u> the topic?							
Baseline	4.42	24	(0.50)	4.153	23	.000 ^{***}	(0.7) ^{††}
End Line	3.92	24					
5.4 How easily can you talk with someone who does <u>not attend</u> BLC about your faith in God when <u>they initiate</u> the topic?							
Baseline	4.17	24	(0.25)	2.015	23	.056	(0.3) [†]
End Line	3.92	24					
5.5 How easily can <u>you initiate</u> a conversation with someone who <u>attends</u> BLC about faith in God?							
Baseline	4.00	24	(0.29)	1.574	23	.129	(0.4) [†]
End Line	3.71	24					
5.6 How easily can <u>you initiate</u> a conversation with someone who does <u>not attend</u> BLC about faith in God?							
Baseline	3.46	24	(0.25)	1.446	23	.162	(0.3) [†]
End Line	3.21	24					

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$

[†] $d \geq 0.2$ (small) ^{††} $d \geq 0.5$ (medium) ^{†††} $d \geq 0.8$ (large)

The mean increased only for question 5.1 ($MD = 0.04$) from the baseline to end line. This increase is not statistically significant. The mean declined for questions 5.2 ($MD = 0.24$), 5.3 ($MD = 0.50$), 5.4 ($MD = 0.25$), 5.5 ($MD = 0.29$), and 5.6 ($MD = 0.25$) from the baseline to end line. The only decline which was statistically significant was for question 5.3 ($p < .001$). The effect size suggests the negative effect of the interventions was small to medium for question 5.2 ($d = 0.3$), 5.4 ($d = 0.3$), 5.5 ($d = 0.4$), and 5.6 ($d = 0.3$). For

question 5.3 ($d = 0.7$), the effect size suggests the interventions had a medium to large negative effect on participants.

An independent t-test was conducted to analyze the responses to these six dialogue questions in the end line survey comparing those who participated in Intervention 4 Story and Dialogue, “Let’s TACO Bout God,” and those who did not participate. Table 24 summarizes the results.

Table 24. Dialogue independent t-test results for Intervention 4
(end line $N = 67$)

	Mean <i>M</i>	<i>n</i>	Mean Diff. <i>MD</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>d</i>
5.1 How easily can you talk with someone who <u>attends</u> BLC about what you perceive God is doing?							
Participate	4.00	14	0.25	1.155	63	.252	0.4 [†]
Not Participate	3.75	51					
5.2 How easily can you talk with someone who does <u>not attend</u> BLC about what you perceive God is doing?							
Participate	3.43	14	0.29	1.090	63	.280	0.3 [†]
Not Participate	3.14	51					
5.3 How easily can you talk with someone who <u>attends</u> BLC about your faith in God when <u>they initiate</u> the topic?							
Participate	4.36	14	0.32	1.372	63	.175	0.5 ^{††}
Not Participate	4.04	51					
5.4 How easily can you talk with someone who does <u>not attend</u> BLC about your faith in God when <u>they initiate</u> the topic?							
Participate	3.69	13	0.00	0.022	62	.983	0.0
Not Participate	3.69	51					
5.5 How easily can <u>you initiate</u> a conversation with someone who <u>attends</u> BLC about faith in God?							
Participate	3.69	13	0.24	0.807	62	.423	0.3 [†]
Not Participate	3.45	51					
5.6 How easily can <u>you initiate</u> a conversation with someone who does <u>not attend</u> BLC about faith in God?							
Participate	3.15	13	0.17	0.630	62	.531	0.2 [†]
Not Participate	2.98	51					

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$

[†] $d \geq 0.2$ (small) ^{††} $d \geq 0.5$ (medium) ^{†††} $d \geq 0.8$ (large)

The mean for question 5.4 was identical ($M = 3.69$) for both groups. There is a positive trend in the mean for the remaining five dialogue questions 5.1 ($MD = 0.25$), 5.2 ($MD = 0.29$), 5.3 ($MD = 0.32$), 5.5 ($MD = 0.24$), and 5.6 ($MD = 0.17$) for those who

participated in Intervention 4 as compared to those who did not participate. These increases are not statistically significant. The effect size for questions 5.1 ($d = 0.4$), 5.2 ($d = 0.3$), 5.3 ($d = 0.5$), 5.5 ($d = 0.3$), and 5.6 ($d = 0.2$) suggests the interventions had a small to medium positive effect on those who participated in Intervention 4 concerning engaging in dialogue about God.

Qualitative Participants

Qualitative data were derived from interviews, Intervention 4, and focus groups. For the interviews, I conducted semi-structured life-history interviews with five people who were selected by me as their pastor based on my knowledge of their faith journey and their prior sharing with me of their discernment of God's active presence. The descriptive statistics of the five interviewees are shown in table 25.

Table 25. Interview participants' profile

Interviewee	Gender	Age Range
Ben	Male	50-59
Michael	Male	60-69
Liam	Male	70-79
Lance	Male	18-29
Karen	Female	40-49

Ben is a pharmacist who was raised Catholic. He began attending BLC after moving to Beloved upon the death of his first wife. Having remarried, Ben now lives in the adjacent midsize city where he and the family attend a Lutheran church. They have two adult children and three children under the age of eighteen.

Michael is a farmer, businessman, and housing developer. His family was one of the founding members of BLC, where he was baptized and confirmed. About twenty

years ago, the family began attending an Evangelical Free Church in the adjacent midsize city. They returned to BLC about ten years ago and have three adult children.

Liam, the oldest interviewee, is a farmer who married a widow with three children. He is a lifelong Lutheran, having been a member of BLC since birth. Fifteen years ago, Liam was diagnosed with a type of non-Hodgkin's lymphoma and given five years to live. He was miraculously healed. They have four adult children.

Lance, the youngest interviewee, is a college senior working on a double major in gerontology and psychology. He is a lifelong Lutheran and began attending BLC in the ninth grade. Since being confirmed, Lance has assisted in leading the confirmation class for the past five years. He is engaged to be married to his high school sweetheart.

Karen, the only female interviewee, is a registered nurse who specializes in serving in the intensive care unit, often with terminally ill patients. She has been a member of BLC for nearly twenty years and is a lifelong Lutheran. She has been married for about twenty years and has three children, the eldest of whom is a college freshman.

Tables 26 and 27 give a comprehensive view of all the qualitative participants. Data include the total number participating (*N*), the total number of participants for whom data is available (*n*), the frequency of responses (*Freq.*), percentages of responses (%), and the mean where appropriate (*M*). The mean difference (*MD*) is provided where suitable for comparison purposes.

Table 26 recaps the gender profile of the qualitative participants. For Intervention 4, "Let's TACO Bout God," there were seven males and fourteen females. Focus Group 1 was restricted to teachers and included three female participants. Focus Group 2 was open to anyone who had participated in Sunday morning worship, Wednesday Lenten

suppers and worship, or “Let’s TACO Bout God.” This group included four females and one male participant. The combined gender profile for all four groups was 35.3% male and 64.7% female. This was a higher male participation rate than both the baseline (26.5% male) and end line (27.3% male) surveys (see table 10 above).

Table 26. Qualitative participants’ gender profile

	Interviews <i>N</i> = 5		Intervention 4 <i>N</i> = 21		Focus Group 1 <i>N</i> = 3		Focus Group 2 <i>N</i> = 5		Total <i>N</i> = 34	
	<i>Freq.</i>	%	<i>Freq.</i>	%	<i>Freq.</i>	%	<i>Freq.</i>	%	<i>Freq.</i>	%
Male	4	80.0	7	33.3	0	0.0	1	20.0	12	35.3
Female	1	20.0	14	66.7	3	100.0	4	80.0	22	64.7
Total (<i>n</i>)	5	100.0	21	100.0	3	100.0	5	100.0	34	100.0

Table 27 summarizes the age profile of the qualitative participants. The mean age for the combined groups included in the qualitative data was 56.4 years, which was lower than the baseline survey ($M = 59.3$; $MD = -2.9$ years) but higher than the end line survey ($M = 49.1$; $MD = 7.3$ years) (see table 11 above).

Table 27. Qualitative participants’ age profile

	Interviews <i>N</i> = 5		Intervention 4 <i>N</i> = 21		Focus Group 1 <i>N</i> = 3		Focus Group 2 <i>N</i> = 5		Total <i>N</i> = 34	
	<i>Freq.</i>	%	<i>Freq.</i>	%	<i>Freq.</i>	%	<i>Freq.</i>	%	<i>Freq.</i>	%
18-29	1	20.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	1	2.9
30-39	0	0.0	4	19.0	3	100.0	0	20.0	7	20.5
40-49	1	20.0	3	14.3	0	0.0	0	10.0	4	11.8
50-59	1	20.0	3	14.3	0	0.0	1	15.0	5	14.7
60-69	1	20.0	6	28.6	0	0.0	4	30.0	11	32.4
70-79	1	20.0	1	4.8	0	0.0	0	5.0	2	5.9
80-89	0	0.0	4	19.0	0	0.0	0	20.0	4	11.8
Total (<i>n</i>)	5	100.0	21	100.0	3	100.0	5	100.0	34	100.0
Mean (years)	50.2		59.1		36.7		62.8		56.4	

Qualitative Data

Qualitative data were analyzed with NVivo² qualitative analysis software using the coding outline developed by Kathy Charmaz: word-by-word, line-by-line, and incident-

² NVivo, version 12 (QSR International), <https://www.qsrinternational.com/nvivo/home>.

with-incident to generate *in vivo* codes that were the actual words and phrases of the participants. These *in vivo* codes were grouped under focused codes and then coalesced under axial codes. Theoretical coding clarified relationships among these axial codes.

Interviews and Intervention 4

Clusters of open-ended questions were used for interviews and Intervention 4 “Let’s TACO Bout God” (see appendices C and J for protocols). These clusters typically included a primary question along with follow-up questions to encourage sharing. Tables 28 to 39 summarize the axial codes and corresponding focused codes.

When Faith Became Important

The first question, “Tell me a funny story about you or a family member when you were a child or youth,” was an ice-breaker to move participants into storytelling mode, and therefore those responses were not coded. The second question cluster was, “When did faith become important to you? Who was important in your faith formation?” The axial codes and corresponding focused codes are shown in table 28.

Table 28. Axial codes: when faith became important

Axial Codes (AC) and corresponding Focused Codes
AC1: Forming faith in relationships
Always had faith
Being part of a Christian community
Modeling of family and friends
Wrestling with questions
AC2: Forming faith through Christian practices
Praying and being prayed for
Receiving sacraments
Worshipping
Witnessing of others
AC3: Forming faith through life experiences
Experiencing a crisis
Experiencing a miracle
Transforming life experience

Participants stressed that the primary environment for faith formation was in their relationships with a parent, friend, family member, coach, Sunday school teacher, or pastor who modeled faith and created space to wrestle with the difficult questions of life. Central to faith formation was being in a community that engaged in Christian practices, such as worshipping, praying, receiving sacraments, and witnessing. Karen shared:

Religion, in itself, has always been important to me. It's always been a big part of my life. . . . It grew on and on throughout my life. When you have your first child, you have that feeling [of being] closer to God, feeling more grateful. So I think [that] throughout the years, I've had events that have made me appreciate God and appreciate what he's given to me.

For many, faith became critical when they faced a crisis or a life change, for instance, marriage or the birth/adoption of children. Lance recounted how his faith grew during his father's transformation after being treated for alcoholism:

I think we all grew in our faith through that just because I don't think any of us knew where else to turn with it. We had done everything that we could do to get him to go to treatment. . . . I think that's just kind of how we coped with it is, you know, we prayed that he'd never fall back into that kind of a state and he hasn't since. And I think he really grew in his faith. I probably more than any of us through that. I think ever since then it's been, I mean, we've always been religious and went to Sunday school and everything, but I think after that, seeing his transformation and what God can do to help people and help our family just in every aspect basically. I think that's what really, that's where [my faith] really took off.

Michael observed after nearly losing his wife and son in a car accident, “[It] occurred to me that trying to understand these things was pretty much a waste of time and that you have to, you've got to lean on your faith. Asking the whys don't seem to get you very far.”

The Kingdom of God

The third cluster of questions was, “What is your understanding of the Kingdom (or Reign) of God? Where do you see the Kingdom (or Reign) of God during your life?”

Table 29 summarizes the axial codes and corresponding focused codes.

Table 29. Axial codes: discerning the active presence of the Kingdom of God

Axial Codes (AC) and corresponding Focused Codes
<p>AC4: God is creating the Kingdom now Challenging to explain what the Kingdom is Being given as a gift by the grace of God Seeing in creation Being present now</p>
<p>AC5: God is inviting us to participate with God Being God's hands and feet and voice in the ordinary circumstances of life</p>
<p>AC6: Seeing, hearing, knowing that God is real God is changing our perspective Experiencing the presence of God Recognizing that God is present in the little things</p>
<p>AC7: Discerning the Kingdom of God through Christian practices Experiencing the Kingdom through the sacraments God is coming through prayer into our world Understanding the Kingdom through the Bible</p>
<p>AC8: God is welcoming us into the Kingdom for eternity Living eternally in God's presence</p>

Participants initially struggled to explain the term “Kingdom of God.” Perhaps this is because a kingdom is typically associated with European monarchies, mid-Eastern caliphates, and children’s fables. We live in a democratic republic where the concept of royalty is theoretically anathema. Eventually, they were able to formulate a response.

There was a certitude that we live in the Kingdom of God now and that the Kingdom is all around us, despite the brokenness we experience. Ben observed, “That's God's kingdom in the here and now, but not all the way because God hasn't taken away all that sickness, hasn't taken away all the tears and all the grief and the death. It's still there, but in a way, it's being redeemed.” The Kingdom of God was seen as a gracious gift of God and not something we create. Ben observed that living in the Kingdom began with his baptism. The Kingdom of God is already and not yet. Eventually, its fulfillment will come when we receive the gift of eternal life. Michael remarked, “It's those fleeting moments when you have that peace.” For some, the Kingdom could be recognized in

“God’s handiwork,” such as in nature, watching their crops grow, or in the wonders of a living creature. Liam noted, “When I pick up a little kitten and look at its perfect ears, I look at God’s creation in these beautiful little creatures.” God’s active presence was discerned in the everyday, mundane experiences as well as significant events, such as miracles. The Kingdom was also experienced through Christian practices in community, such as in Baptism, Holy Communion, the Bible, and prayer.

However, the Kingdom was not perceived as a passive event—we are invited to respond by participating with God and being God’s hands and feet and voice in the ordinary circumstances of life. Michael mused, “Maybe it’s the responding differently, just a little differently, to circumstances than you normally would, or would expect yourself to [respond].”

Discerning God’s Active Presence in the Bible

The fourth cluster of questions centered on God’s active presence in Scripture. Interviewees were asked, “Tell me about a time when you perceived what God—Father, Jesus, Holy Spirit—was doing in the Bible. One of those Aha! moments.” The axial codes and corresponding focused codes are identified in table 30.

Table 30. Axial codes: discerning God’s active presence in the Bible

Axial Codes (AC) and corresponding Focused Codes

AC9: Discerning Scripture is best done with others in community

Discerning the Bible in community
 Understanding the Bible on our own is difficult

AC10: God is working and present

God is changing our perspective
 God is teaching us how to live life as his disciples
 God is revealing Godself as present and active since creation
 God is actively involved in our lives
 God is creating faith

Participants believed that understanding Scripture was challenging. As a result, discernment was best done with others in community. Liam noted, “I don't think that reading it on my own I benefited as much as when we would have a men's study in the church, and then we'd understand Ecclesiastes so much better than if I would try to delve into it and figure it out on my own.” Ben similarly emphasized the importance of gathering together with other Christians to study the Bible, but examined the need for discernment and testing the spirits within the group:

It's like Lewis says in *Mere Christianity*, you got to get out of the hall of Christianity, you got to pick a room. So you got to pick, you know, Methodism or Anglicanism or Lutheranism, Catholicism, Pentecostalism, whatever it is, you got to pick a room, but pick a room and get into a room because you can't forsake the gathering of yourselves together. You got to be together. So I temporarily picked Methodism with [my wife] because that was what tradition said, and we went through Bible studies and were leading a Bible study there . . . There were two retired Methodist pastors in there with us, and at the end of one of [the classes], I said [to my wife], “I can't do this anymore. . . .” I said, “It's not that it's wrong; it's just the emphasis is so misplaced from where I'm at, and it's so misplaced from what I hold to be the way Jesus would place the emphasis. It's not wrong, but it's just, it's like looking at a sunset and concentrating on the tree off to the far-right side that you can barely see the sunset anymore.”

We are called to be open to the movement of the Spirit in community. At the same time, we are called to pray so our love will abound, so we will gain more knowledge and depth of insight, and so that we may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ (Phil. 1:9-10).

The participants stressed that God is working and present through the Bible by changing our perspective, teaching us how to live as disciples, and revealing Godself as genuinely present. God creates faith, as Ben observed:

So I think, and again, it's all, is it something we do? Yes. But it's also something God is continually doing and working in us. And work out your faith with fear and trembling for it is [God] that worketh in you, and it's this continual presence of God working in you to realize what John 3:16 means.

Discerning God's Active Presence Last Tuesday

Question cluster five centered on an awareness of God's immediate, active presence. Participants were asked, "Where were you and what were you doing last Tuesday morning at 9 AM? Where was God, and what was God doing then?" The axial codes and corresponding focused codes are identified in table 31.

Table 31. Axial codes: discerning God's active presence last Tuesday

Axial Codes (AC) and corresponding Focused Codes
<p>AC11: God is revealing Godself Experiencing God in nature Experiencing God in ordinary circumstances God is getting our attention</p>
<p>AC12: God is acting in our lives and the world God proclaiming God is helping God is giving and inviting God is creating opportunities for us to witness</p>
<p>AC13: Reflecting theologically in community Reflecting back</p>

Responses required self-awareness, discernment, and theological reflection.

Talking about God's active presence moved from an abstraction to a concrete reality during a mundane, everyday experience rather than in a mystical or dramatic event. The participants focused not on their own actions but rather on God as an active agent in their lives: God was proclaiming, helping, giving, inviting, and creating opportunities for the participants to witness. Michael noted, "I think God was tugging on us, telling us that we need to be looking for God in a different way We need to be connecting differently to each other, and he's trying to get our attention to do that." Participants also observed that typically they discovered God's active presence not in the moment but instead in reflecting back over their experiences. Believing is seeing (see Mental Models and Reframing in chapter two).

Discerning God’s Active Presence in the Midst of a Crisis

Luther’s theology of the cross (see the Glory Story and the Cross Story in chapter three) took center stage in the sixth cluster of questions. Interviewees were asked, “If you think back over your life, share with me one crisis or critical moment in your life. What happened? Where was God in the midst of that experience?” The axial codes and corresponding focused codes are identified in table 32.

Table 32. Axial codes: discerning God’s active presence in the midst of a crisis

Axial Codes (AC) and corresponding Focused Codes
<p>AC14: Experiencing God in a crisis or death experience Experiencing God in a health scare Experiencing God in the death of a friend or loved one</p>
<p>AC15: Experiencing God in and through ministry Experiencing God through our ministry to others Experiencing God through the ministry of others</p>
<p>AC16: God carrying, guiding, holding, filling, healing, redeeming, and saving God carrying, guiding, holding, comforting God healing God redeeming God saving</p>
<p>AC17: Responding to God’s presence Surrendering and trusting in God Talking to God through prayer Talking about God</p>

As noted above under cluster question two, “When did faith become important to you?”, participants relayed stories describing God’s active presence in the midst of a tragedy, for themselves or someone close to them, or some other painful experience, such as a broken relationship or addiction. Karen recalled, “But I think my relationship with God became more faithful and more important and more active when [my husband’s] sister was diagnosed with cancer.”

God made Godself known. Sometimes God acted through the participant to minister to others; at other times, God ministered through another person to the

participant. They experienced God's tangible presence, which they variously described as God carrying, guiding, holding, comforting, healing, redeeming, and saving. Ben depicted his experience in the midst of his wife's suffering before her death:

I remember just putting my head down on a hay bale, and I was sitting out in the snow, and she was in the hospital. This was maybe like time twenty, so we still got forty to go, and I remember just lying on the hay bale and just saying, "God, I'm empty. I've got nothing left from here on out. This is all you." And I just gave it all to him. And from that day, I mean even before that day, he was always present and carrying me. But that was like a conscious . . . submission, a conscious awareness of my need for him to carry me and the thanksgiving that he was carrying me . . . [and] it made it so I didn't have to do it anymore. I mean, I still had to do it, but he was doing it all in me.

Experiencing God's presence sometimes entailed a human response, such as surrendering and trusting God through faith, talking to God, engaging in a conversation about God, or discerning what God was doing. Being in a relationship with God often involved prayer, as Karen shared, "At that time, I developed the daily or hourly discussions with God, and when things were at its worst, when things were at its best, God was the first one I thought of, and he was the one that I wanted to lay the burdens to because there wasn't anything to do."

Witnessing and talking about God during times of crisis was also an essential part of coping and experiencing God's presence. Ben describes the night before his wife died:

The primary thing [my wife and I] talked about was we talked about Christ and what he's done for us, and it made everything right. I mean, it made everything okay—as okay as it can be in this broken world—because it certainly wasn't God's original design to have [her] die.

Discerning God's Active Presence in the Community, World, and Church

The seventh cluster of questions sought the interviewees' discernment of God's active presence in a broad spectrum of contexts, from the personal to the global, from the secular to the sacred. They were asked, "Share a story about a time when you perceived

what God—Father, Jesus, Holy Spirit—is doing in your life. In the lives of those close to you. In the community. In the world. In the church.” The axial codes and corresponding focused codes are identified in table 33.

Table 33. Axial codes: discerning God’s active presence in the community, world, and church
Axial Codes (AC) and corresponding Focused Codes

AC18: God bringing people together and blessing the community
God's timing in bringing people together in our community
God blessing the community with opportunities
AC19: God acting in the chaos and turbulence even when we do not understand
Not seeing God working in the world at large
God acting in the chaos and turbulence
AC20: God is forming faith in the church and working through us right where we are
God forming faith
God answering prayers
God working through us as members of the body of Christ
God working in parental relationships
God sustaining people in the death of a loved one

From their personal experience, participants often returned to God’s presence in times of crisis and prayer. As they shifted to a broader perspective, they identified God’s active presence at work, church, and in the community. Lance, in particular, struggled to discern God’s active presence in the world at large. Some participants expressed frustration at the status of the world from a political, social, or cultural perspective.

Discerning God’s Active Presence in a Neighbor or Stranger

God makes Godself known in unexpected circumstances such as through the ministry of a neighbor or a stranger (e.g., Jesus’ parable of the sheep and the goats in Matt. 25:31-46; Jesus’ parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:25-37). Thus, the eighth question was, “Tell me about a time when you found God—Father, Jesus, Holy Spirit—present and active in and through your neighbor or a stranger.” The axial codes and corresponding focused codes are identified in table 34.

Table 34. Axial codes: discerning God's active presence in a neighbor or stranger

Axial Codes (AC) and corresponding Focused Codes	
AC21: God ministering through Christians and non-Christians	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> God is the one acting God acting through Christians and non-Christians
AC22: God ministering through individuals and the community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> God serving through the community God serving through other individuals God healing through other people Ordinary acts of kindness Serving others is our calling
AC23: God changing our perspective	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Looking through Jesus' goggles Seeking God's will

One of the most striking observations is that participants focused on God's actions more than the actions of individuals. They witnessed that God is the one acting and is the ultimate source of goodness, healing, and power. Ben recognized that God acts through Christians as well as non-Christians, "I was going to say every act of kindness, it's hard to discern whether it's coming from a Christian foundation or not, but I guess it's irrelevant because if it's a good act, God is the one that's acting." Sometimes God comes to us through miracles and signs and answered prayers. God is also actively present in and through the ministry of individuals and the community at large, including ordinary acts of kindness. Karen commented, "I would still think of the people that have touched my life at work: patients and mostly the families of patients just because the patients couldn't always talk. So they would always give me perspective." Karen also shared the story of one of her neighbors, a single mother, who witnessed to the power of prayer, "We've talked about God and how God has done things in our lives more often than many other people. . . . Every struggle that she has, she will turn to God, and she won't pray for what she wants. She'll ask God what he wants. And I think that's just so unselfish in a selfish world" Looking at all the new residents, Michael discerned God's active presence in

the community, “I think there's people that are moving into Beloved that are supposed to be in Beloved and, and for whatever reason it may be, God's bringing people together in a unique and special way here. And I don't know, we all have a small piece of that . . .”

Experiencing God's Presence

The ninth cluster of questions was, “Have you ever had an experience of God's presence? What happened?” This cluster related closely to the previous questions but served as a catch-all question to give an additional opportunity to talk about discerning God's active presence. Depending on the answers to the previous questions and the flow of the conversations, this cluster was not always asked of the participants. The axial codes and corresponding focused codes are identified in table 35.

Table 35. Axial codes: experiencing God's presence

Axial Codes (AC) and corresponding Focused Codes
AC24: Experiencing God in ordinary circumstances Experiencing God daily
AC25: Experiencing God's presence in crises Experiencing God in someone's death Experiencing God through healing
AC26: Experiencing God in Christian practices Experiencing God through signs Experiencing God while praying God speaking

The focused and axial codes reflect some of the themes from the previous questions. Participants experienced God's active presence in the ordinary circumstances of life as well as in crises, dramatic healings, signs, and miracles. They also highlighted the centrality of Christian community and Christian practices such as prayer. Lance relayed a story of his encounter with God when he was about sixteen years old:

I don't know what it was, but I'd be fine all day long. But once I'd get home, it was just yuck—this terrible mood. I don't know. It was just very strange. And one night, I just snapped. I can't remember what it was. I know it was something just

stupid. But we just got in this huge fight as a family, mainly everyone against me. Well, that's how it felt, anyway. And finally, I'm like, "I gotta go take a shower." I don't know why, but I had to go take a shower for some reason. So I got into the shower, and I had to pray for some reason, and the words were just gone. I couldn't come up with the first word of the Lord's Prayer. I couldn't; I mean nothing. It was just an empty space in my mind, and I tried over and over and over, and I couldn't do it. And finally, it was, there's just this internal voice that, and I perceive it as God's voice. It sounded like my own voice, but "pray again." That's all of it: "pray again." And I had all the words just like that. And I prayed, and I started crying, and it was just [the] weirdest feeling came over me, and relief is how it felt. It was like a cloud had come off of me.

Dialogue about God

Without consciously realizing it, the participants had been witnessing by sharing their faith stories. The interviews now turned specifically to addressing dialogue. The participants were asked, "How do you feel about sharing what you believe about God, telling a faith story, with a family member or friend? Tell me about a time when you talked to someone about God." The axial codes and corresponding focused codes are delineated in table 36.

Table 36. Axial codes: dialogue about God with a family member or friend

Axial Codes (AC) and corresponding Focused Codes

AC27: Jumping through the hoop to witness

Challenging to talk about faith and God

AC28: Sharing faith in relationship

Relating shared experiences

Being in relationship

Being present

Interacting with strangers

Ministering in a crisis

Avoiding competing with one another over faith stories

AC29: Engaging in Christian practices

Dwelling in the Word

Praying and being prayed for

Acknowledging God's presence

Participants confessed that sharing faith stories and talking about God was challenging. Michael observed:

[I am] becoming more comfortable with [sharing my faith]. I guess I don't necessarily go out of my way to share my faith, but if it becomes part of the conversation, I'm certainly willing to share my thoughts. It's being able to gauge how receptive the other party is to the conversation. . . . Being the good Scandinavian Lutheran that I had been brought up to be . . . making people uncomfortable isn't something we like to do. And so if somehow in the process, if it's any feeling like I'm crossing that boundary, that's certainly something that I kind of hold back from.

Karen described this as “jumping through the hoop.” Karen shared one of her experiences, “And so it was, it was changing our relationship, and it really wasn't changing our relationship, but it felt like it was different, it was going to be different. It was a different thing. So that was hard. There was a lot of prayer and seeking opportunities. So it was jumping [through the hoop].” For Karen, engaging in dialogue about God was grounded in God’s Word, prayer, and acknowledging God’s active presence. This posture necessitated humility, active listening, empathy, and knowing when to speak and when to remain silent.

Liam wanted to share two miracles that had a significant impact on him. In 2004, he was diagnosed with Waldenstrom macroglobulinemia, a rare type of cancer that begins in the white blood cells. His oncologist gave him five years to live. That was fifteen years ago. The second miracle he shared occurred in the spring of 2018. He was planting his last field, but the monitor indicated the seed tank was empty. Since it was late on Friday afternoon, he was not sure if the seed store would still be open. Then to his surprise, the seed kept flowing, and he finished planting the final forty acres. Liam shared:

And I said [to myself], “God is putting seed in that tank.” And I thought, “If God is putting seed in that tank, I'm not going to stop and second guess him and decompress that thing.” They're under air pressure to push the seed out. “I'm not going to decompress it and raise the lid and see what, can I go another round? I'm going to let God keep putting the seed in that tank.” And I had forty acres left that I kept seeding and all from the little tank, 100% of the seed is flowing from the little tank. Mass flow is indicating full amount of seed that you desired. I get to the northeast corner of the field when I'm all done. Then I climbed back there and

looked in my tank, and it's empty. I really felt that it was a miracle, and I told people about it. I wasn't hesitant to share it. I was so convinced, [that] I shared at the counter at [the local farm equipment store]. I shared that with [my wife], of course. I shared it with a number of people because it really impacted me. It was a miracle that I could really wrap my hands around right now. I knew it happened. I was there and saw it. I didn't have to wait years for it to manifest itself.

Liam trusted God's surprising intervention. When asked how people reacted to his witness,

Liam's reply disclosed why sharing one's faith in secularity three can be challenging:

Oh, I think they thought I was a little loopy. . . . Probably because they themselves had not witnessed such a thing. You know, if they had experienced a miracle of whatever sorts they probably would have been inclined to tell me. "Well, you know, Liam, something happened to me that I'd like to share with you comparable to your seed experience." But none of them did. . . . They just kind of smile and "Wow, come on back again when you're feeling better."

Witnessing was also grounded in shared experiences, such as pain, suffering, sickness, and death. Ben described his encounter with a woman at the hospital where he worked after his wife had died:

There was a patient whose baby was dying, and I had the opportunity to speak with her, and it's like "God's got this," and you can't be crass and short, but you can do it with grace,. . . there's a comfort that is there that's nowhere else. . . . We had multiple conversations as the journey progressed, and she was a church-going believer without any experience in that brokenness, that significant of a brokenness. And I said, "You know, let me tell you about my walk a little bit. Not that we can compare, but I can at least share a little bit about what has happened in my life and how God walked with me and carried me through this."

However, participants observed that sharing faith stories was not limited to miracles or during a crisis, but could be a natural part of who we are. Lance described this as "just weaving God into all aspects of life." Witnessing could include conversations with the gas station attendant, coworker, fellow student, and family member. Ben discussed his struggles when sharing his faith with strangers:

I always think about my interaction with the gas station attendant. That's my biggest apologetic struggle is how do I speak to the gas station attendant in such a way that I not only exude kindness—because it could just mean I'm a nice person—but how do I get God into this? You know, how do I lift them up in such

a way that they know that Christ is the one behind it? And I don't have a great answer for that. My standard answer is I ask them how they're doing, and then I engaged with wherever that goes. So I try to listen empathetically, and if they say, "Oh my so and so is sick," I'll submit, "Do you want a prayer, or do you want to pray?" But that usually doesn't happen. Usually, it's more benign than that, but every once in a while will be something where he or she will start a conversation, and I'll let a few people go by and then go back. So I try to engage, and then it always ends with "God bless," or "Have a blessed day," or something like that. But there's a blessing in there. And although that isn't perfect because it's not "Jesus bless you." God bless, and God looks like different things to different people. But it's something; you know what I mean?

Michael offered some wisdom and caution concerning how our sinful nature can distort discernment and dialogue. He was wary about talking about God with people with whom he does business. "I've been in a couple of situations where you walk into a [Christian] business, and they've got religious music playing, and unfortunately, I've been involved in a couple of situations where it was just done to manipulate people . . ." When he and his family attended an Evangelical Free Church, he observed that sometimes it seemed like people were competing with one another in terms of who had the most dramatic faith story:

Sometimes I got the feeling that it was almost a one-upping each other as far as who could have God the most in their, the most presence in their life, and it just got a little funny that way. And . . . if you didn't have some great moving story in your life, you hadn't found God.

Focus Groups

Two focus groups were conducted in May (see the protocol in appendix D). The purpose was to reflect on the interventions and learn from their experiences. The data were used to generate *in vivo*, focused, and axial codes, as well as undertake theoretical coding. The following summary offers a greater depth of understanding by sharing the perceptions of the participants regarding the impact of the interventions on discernment and dialogue.

Focus Group 1

Three female Sunday school teachers attended Focus Group 1. The axial codes and corresponding focused codes are identified in table 37.

Table 37. Axial codes: Focus Group 1

Axial Codes and corresponding Focused Codes
<p>AC30: Engaging in dialogue More open to talking about God Asking questions about God</p>
<p>AC31: Discerning God's presence and actions Actively looking to see what God is up to Being more aware of God's presence</p>

The participants observed that at first, it was hard for the children to answer the question, “What is God up to?”, especially the boys. Sometimes writing answers and coloring pictures took too long. Occasionally the children would argue, such as “Don’t copy me!” They suggested either having at least two pieces of paper or giving each child a smaller piece of paper so they could complete it more quickly. The students loved the paint markers, but they took a long time to dry.

The *Detectives of Divinity* videos featuring Sherlock Psalms “helped students understand a lot.” The children were excited to see where Sherlock would be (e.g., the school, “He is in my classroom!”), and their responses changed based on the video. It was beneficial to see Sherlock going outside the church. If he had stayed in the church, it would not have been as effective. For preschool to second grade, they suggested showing the videos in the classrooms rather than the sanctuary to keep the children focused.

One of the teachers noted that she had never thought about where God was active. “This was eye-opening.” Another woman realized all the things she has taken for granted. “I always knew God is there, but now it is different—I am looking for him.” The third

woman observed that this made her more aware, and now she finds herself “looking to see what God is up to.”

All of the teachers felt that as a result of this experience, they were more open to talking about God and wrestling with questions. One teacher noted that the kids were asking more questions, and the questions were getting harder to answer. “Where is God? What is God doing? Where did God come from?” Another noted that her third-grade son now knows it is okay to be mad at God, and God will still love him. Her son also discovered that prayers are not always answered the way we want. The third teacher observed that her daughter told her, “God will love me even if I’m naughty.”

Focus Group 2

Five participants attended Focus Group 2. All five had participated in Intervention 1: Sunday worship and Intervention 2: Lent (both Bible study and worship). Three participated in Intervention 4: Story and Dialogue (“Let’s TACO Bout God”). The axial codes and corresponding focused codes are identified in table 38.

Table 38. Axial codes: Focus Group 2

Axial Codes and corresponding Focused Codes	
AC32: Telling faith stories	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Writing and speaking are incarnational Pastor modeling being a storyteller Hearing faith stories
AC33: Cultivating new spiritual capacities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Being more aware of God’s presence Overcoming obstacles to growing Learning how to talk about God Reflecting theologically Lay people discerning Scripture
AC34: Linking generations in a faith community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Linking generations Telling each other Bible stories

The participants' most memorable events included retelling Bible stories at "Let's TACO Bout God," the witness talks during Sunday worship, people sharing what they heard in the Scripture during Sunday worship, and the Sherlock Psalms videos. The participants were also impressed by the youth leading the Bible study during the Lenten suppers. The male attendee emphasized not just the multigenerational nature of the event, but the creation of a *link* between generations. He compared it to the generation-to-generation passing on of Bible stories like the ancient oral traditions. In this case, it was dual-directional—passing things up and down. He suggested doing student-led Bible studies more often during the year. Participants were surprised that the youth could talk about God and their honesty as they wrestled with the texts. One woman shared that as a result of this event, two of her grandchildren asked her if it was hard talking to people about God. She told them that it depends. At church, it was easy because it is safe. She described an experience in the hospital when she was a nurse. A patient who was in his late 50s and dying was mad at her because she offered to pray for him.

Participants valued the meditations during Lenten worship, calling them "an eye-opening experience." One woman was struck by the question, "If not for that day . . ." It was the first time she had thought about her father's death when she was about ten years old and how it had impacted her. She observed, "I wouldn't be me." They appreciated the fact that the meditation cards were small enough to carry with them. One woman noted that she keeps finding them in her purse. Another woman remarked that the meditation cards guided her "thinking time" in the car on her commute. They concluded that it was beneficial to write down their thoughts—it was "incarnational."

Three of the participants attended Intervention 4: “Let’s TACO Bout God.” They appreciated the retelling of Bible stories. One woman noted that the three people in her group did not tell the story the same way as different details stood out for different people. They had to work together to make the storytelling work, and they learned from one another. They also valued hearing other people’s faith stories. Participants believed the event helped them learn how to “converse with one another about God.”

For Intervention 1, Sunday morning worship, the participants focused on the sermons. “You (pastor) are a storyteller.” They believed sermons helped them to understand things differently and see more ways of interpreting a story while being personal, informative, and history lessons. “You explain the Bible in a story-way,” and “your sermons are stories.” Sermons made things personal, they related to today, were easy to understand, and made us think. “We listen and don’t daydream.”

Participants admitted that sharing faith stories was challenging. One of the women recounted a story about how she had experienced “a God thing with my mother when we moved her to a new nursing home last week.” Another person commented that she had “learned to pray whenever I can,” emphasizing that when the “window is open,” you should seize the opportunity and pray. All the participants observed that they have lots of other opportunities to talk about God. They admitted, however, that it is not easy and it depends on the setting. One of the women declared, “One of the best things I ever did was Stephen Ministry training. I learned how to listen and when to talk. It’s not scary anymore to pray out loud.”

Participants discussed how the interventions had affected their perceptions of God’s active presence. One woman observed that she knew “Jesus loves ME. . . . I

regularly thanked God but had never thought about loving God until now.” She surmised that perhaps it was because she was Norwegian, and her parents did not tell her that they loved her. While they believed that it is good to turn to a neighbor and share your thoughts during worship, they were not sure everyone would agree. Participants observed that we could not make them, “People can either be open and honest or clam up.” However, they also believed that people “need to be uncomfortable sometimes in order to grow—like exercising a muscle.” They also remarked that sometimes it is easier to talk about everyday stuff (kids, grandkids, weather) to people you know than speak to them about God because we are too familiar with each other. This familiarity can become a barrier to sharing.

At the end of the conversation, participants stated that the question, “What is God up to?” was very effective. The whole experience made them more aware of God’s presence. They reiterated that they liked listening to people sharing what they heard in the Bible readings and telling stories about God acting in their lives. People could relate to the stories, and the stories helped people get to know each other better.

Final Axial Codes

The above analysis generated thirty-four level-one axial codes by coalescing the focused codes, as recorded in tables 28 through 38. These level-one axial codes were then synthesized into five final axial codes (FAC), which are enumerated in table 39.

Table 39. Final axial codes

Final Axial Codes (FAC) and corresponding Axial Codes

FAC1: Living in a faith community

AC1: Forming faith in relationships

AC3: Forming faith through life experiences

AC9: Discerning Scripture is best done with others in community

AC13: Reflecting theologically in community

AC34: Linking generations in a faith community

Table 39. Final axial codes, continued

Final Axial Codes (FAC) and corresponding Axial Codes	
FAC2: Engaging in Christian practices	
	AC2: Forming faith through Christian practices
	AC7: Discerning the Kingdom of God through Christian practices
	AC26: Experiencing God in Christian practices
	AC29: Engaging in Christian practices
	AC33: Cultivating new spiritual capacities
FAC3: God is acting	
	AC4: God is creating the Kingdom now
	AC8: God is welcoming us into the Kingdom for eternity
	AC14: Experiencing God in a crisis or death experience
	AC16: God carrying, guiding, holding, filling, healing, redeeming, and saving
	AC18: God bringing people together and blessing the community
	AC19: God acting in the chaos and turbulence even when we do not understand
	AC20: God is forming faith in the church and working through us right where we are
	AC24: Experiencing God in ordinary circumstances
	AC25: Experiencing God's presence in crises
FAC4: Discerning God's active presence	
	AC6: Seeing, hearing, knowing that God is real
	AC10: God is working and present
	AC11: God is revealing Godself
	AC12: God is acting in our lives and the world
	AC23: God changing our perspective
	AC31: Discerning God's presence and action
FAC5: The triune God is actively present in, with, and under ministry and witness	
	AC5: God is inviting us to participate with God
	AC15: Experiencing God in and through ministry
	AC17: Responding to God's presence
	AC21: God ministering through Christians and non-Christians
	AC22: God ministering through individuals and the community
	AC27: Jumping through the hoop to witness
	AC28: Sharing faith in relationship
	AC30: Engaging in dialogue
	AC32: Telling faith stories

Triangulation of Data

The data analyzed above included both quantitative and qualitative data. The following summary triangulates the two forms of data.

Immanent, Transcendent, and Prayer

In answering the research question, we first turn to the immanent and transcendent frames of the participants per Charles Taylor's theory of secularity three

(see Secularity in chapter two). Immanent describes the physical, natural, and material world, while transcendent refers to God and a spiritual or supernatural realm. Taylor uses the term cross-pressured to describe the effect of living between these two frames or world structures. Thus, this study addressed an adaptive challenge that required a cultural change involving reframing that was at odds with secularity three.

The quantitative analysis showed a positive trend for the interventions expressed as participants' openness to the transcendent and God's active presence. Although the interventions did not specifically address prayer, it is a Christian practice that reflects participants' mental models relative to the immanent and transcendent frames as well as discernment and dialogue. In other words, people pray because they hope God is listening and will act. Results suggest that interventions had a positive effect on the participants' prayer life with an increase in the frequency of prayer, which was expressed as thankfulness for specific ways God acts in their lives and asking God for help in perceiving what God is up to in various spheres of life.

Data gathered from interviews, Intervention 4, and focus groups—such as when they shared their faith stories and discussed God's active presence—shed light on participants' openness to the transcendent. These data reinforced the positive impacts seen in the quantitative data. Results suggest that the interventions initiated a process of cultural adaptation within BLC as participants became more open to the “vertical” or transcendent dimension of life and began to experience a reframing of their world view.

Discernment

The interventions sought to increase the capacity of participants to discern the triune God's active presence in Scripture, in their lives, in the lives of those close to

them, in their community, in the world, and in the church. The quantitative analysis primarily showed positive results for the interventions concerning the participants' ability to discern God's active presence. The positive impact of the interventions was highest for those who participated in Intervention 4, "Let's TACO Bout God."

Participants asserted that the question, "What is God up to?" was very effective, and the whole experience made them more aware of God's presence. They described the meditations during Lenten worship, which concentrated on discerning God's active presence, as "an eye-opening experience." The meditation cards guided people's prayer and reflection time during the week. One of the teachers noted that she had never thought about where God was active. Another woman realized all the things she has taken for granted, "I always knew God is there, but now it is different—I am looking for him." A third observed that this made her more aware, and now she finds herself "looking to see what God is up to." Sometimes, however, participants altered the question to "Where is God?" Perhaps this subconscious shift was because asserting God's presence—God is everywhere—might be easier and more comfortable than discerning God's actions.

Both adults and children were eager to see where Sherlock would be each week in the *Detectives of Divinity* videos (e.g., the school, "He is in my classroom!"). The teachers observed that seeing Sherlock in the community was a reminder that God is not confined to the church. This depiction helped the church to break from the dualistic Christendom model described by Alan Hirsh, which distorts our experience of God by turning the church into a mediating institution between the sacred-transcendent and the secular-immanent. Instead, they were exposed to the missional imagination model, which affirms that God is already active in all of creation. (See Missional Imagination in chapter three.)

These qualitative data reinforced the positive effects seen in the quantitative data for discernment. Results suggest that the interventions initiated a process of cultural adaptation (see Adaptive Change in chapter two) within BLC as participants were able to more readily discern the triune God's active presence in Scripture, in their lives, in the lives of those close to them, in their community, in the world, and in the church (see Discernment and Dialogue in chapter three). However, some quantitative results showed a negative effect, which are discussed in the next section on Dialogue and Biblical Story.

Dialogue and Biblical Story

Interventions sought to increase the participants' comfort level in engaging in dialogue about God, faith, and the biblical story. Story became a critical lens as the study progressed, such as through storytelling, witnessing, preaching, ritual, and liturgy. The quantitative analysis primarily showed positive results for the interventions concerning how easily the participants could talk to someone about the Bible, retell stories from the Bible, and connect those stories to their own lives. Intervention 4, "Let's TACO Bout God," included having participants retell a biblical story and discuss what God was doing in the story (see appendix J.) The positive effect on participants who attended Intervention 4 was approximately two to three times greater than the effect on those who did not participate. As one might expect, these results suggest that actively engaging in Christian practices and intentionally nurturing spiritual capacities may have a greater positive impact on their development than providing information alone. This was reflected in the comments of the focus group members.

One of the most memorable events for the participants was retelling Bible stories to one another and discussing them at "Let's TACO Bout God." As noted earlier, one woman

observed that each person in her group told the story differently and focused on different details as they worked together to retell the story, and, in the process, they learned from each other. Participants were impressed by the youth leading the Bible study during the Lenten suppers, which created a *link* between generations. Interviewees believed that understanding Scripture was challenging and best explored in a faith community. They suggested that God is working and present through the Bible by changing our perspective, teaching us how to live as disciples, and revealing Godself as truly present.

Next is the issue of engaging in dialogue about God and faith. Interventions were more likely to have a negative effect on participants. However, these results were reversed for the participants in Intervention 4, “Let’s TACO Bout God,” as the responses showed a positive effect on those who participated in Intervention 4 as compared to those who did not participate. Focus group members believed the event helped them learn how to “converse with one another about God.” They also valued hearing other people’s faith stories that were shared during Sunday morning worship in Intervention 1.

Focus group members confessed that sharing faith stories was challenging, and their willingness depended on their comfort level. Most interviewees reiterated these obstacles. One of the interviewees described this as “jumping through the hoop” when she told a story about struggling to talk about God with her sister-in-law who was dying:

We didn't have that relationship of talking about religion and talking about God. So to actually jump through that hoop or over that rock of talking to her and just seeing where she was at . . . It was easier for me to talk to people when I was a nurse at the bedside to a total stranger than it was to my sister-in-law sitting in the bed of my mother-in-law's house.

The first hoop was the reluctance that comes from not being a pastor and feeling ill-equipped to talk about God. The second hoop was questioning if the other person is religious or if they will be receptive to a faith conversation. The third hoop was deciding

whether they were comfortable taking the risk, becoming vulnerable, and speaking. As mentioned in the introduction, Andrew Root writes, “To talk too much about such realities (outside some online chat rooms) makes you sound crazy—literally out of your mind. And now, because reality is mostly constituted in human minds, to be out of your mind is to be untrustworthy, deranged, and mad.”³ This attitude may reflect the impact of secularity three, which rejects the transcendent, discourages us from acknowledging divine action, emphasizes the private nature of faith, and concentrates on the inner realm of the mind.

As enumerated above, the interventions had a mixed effect on participants in terms of dialogue, with some of the survey results showing a decline from the baseline. This decline was unexpected in light of the qualitative remarks from the focus groups. There are several possible explanations. (See also Generalizations and Limitations in chapter six.)

- The first explanation is that perhaps the interventions were ineffectual or poorly executed. People may have been reluctant to criticize their pastor or the PAR team during the focus group meetings, resulting in inaccurate assessments of the interventions. However, note that members of Focus Group 1 had no problem offering constructive suggestions (see Focus Groups above).
- Second, this was an adaptive challenge which involved a cultural change and the reframing of the congregation’s world view. These situations are inherently disruptive and can cause anxiety as people struggle with a sense of loss. For example, participants in Focus Group 2 noted that they believed turning to a neighbor to share one’s thoughts during worship is good. However, they were not sure everyone would agree, “People can either be open and honest or clam up.” However, they also believed that people “need to be uncomfortable sometimes in order to grow—like exercising a muscle.” Physical exercise can lead to sore muscles, temporary physical limitations, and discouragement on the way to improved health. Similarly, a decline in the results is not necessarily a bad sign if it is because participants are at their growing edges.

³ Root, *Faith Formation in a Secular Age*, 110.

- Third, the declines may have been due to inaccuracies with the initial self-assessment since they were subjective. Participants may have made certain assumptions about themselves before the interventions were implemented, such as believing they were very open about sharing their faith. When they experienced witnessing and dialogue via the interventions, their self-image may have changed, resulting in cognitive dissonance. “Well, I thought I was comfortable with this behavior. Now I am not so sure.” Introspection, honesty, and confession are necessary elements of faith formation. These inaccuracies in self-assessment would have affected the results for both the baseline survey (causing a higher mean) and end line survey (causing a lower mean). Again, a decline in the results is not necessarily negative.
- Fourth, participants may have been intimidated after listening to people bear witness. The Christian practice of intentionally sharing faith stories as a personal witness is rare in this context, especially in public during worship. Perhaps participants said to themselves, “I can’t do that. That’s too frightening. I have never experienced a miracle. God hasn’t spoken to me.” As a result, the interventions may have negatively affected responses to the end line survey. Being outside of one’s comfort zone can be a positive experience despite the ostensibly negative results.

During worship on May 19, 2019, for example, a woman spontaneously shared her witness of how Jesus had appeared to her and comforted her after the death of her one-month-old daughter. Someone might ask, “Why her? Why not me? Why did Jesus not make himself known to me?” This response could lead either to self-doubt and questioning one’s faith or confidence in God’s active presence and strengthened faith.

Theoretical Coding

This research addressed an adaptive challenge that sought to cultivate a missional imagination in the people of BLC and change the culture of the church by equipping the people to discern God’s active presence and engage in dialogue around the question, “What is God up to?” The five final axial codes introduced in table 39 are summarized below. Figures 10 to 13 clarify the theoretical relationships among these axial codes.

- **God is acting**
- **Living in a faith community**
- **Engaging in Christian practices**
- **Discerning God’s active presence**
- **The triune God is actively present in, with, and under ministry and witness**

Figure 10 sets the context of secularity three, as discussed in chapter two. Charles Taylor contends that people’s lives are cross-pressured between the transcendent and the immanent (see the arrows at the top and bottom of figure 10). We live in the “immanent frame,” but as Christians, we are open to the “vertical” or “transcendent.” This belief is depicted in the incarnation—Jesus is fully God and fully human—wherein Jesus unites the sacred-transcendent with the secular-immanent. The phrases “Kingdom of God” and “Reign of God” encircling the figure remind us that all things are under the reign of the triune God who is actively present, redeeming creation, and transforming lives with the

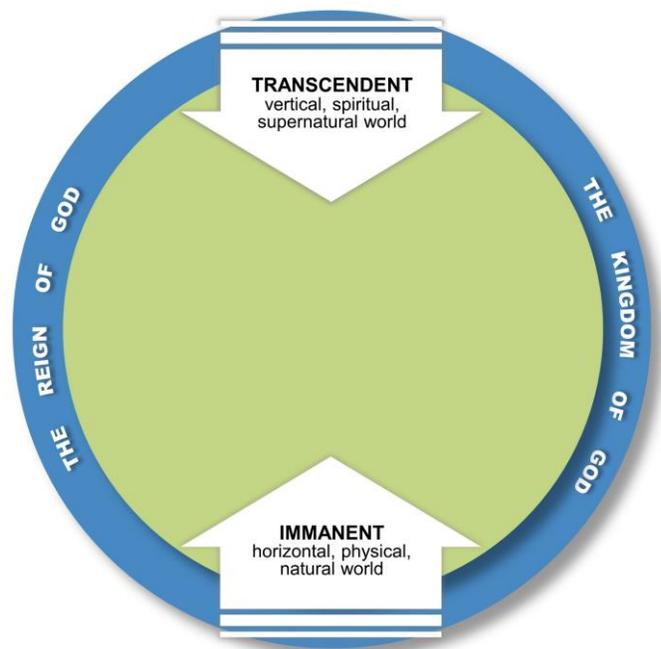


Figure 10. Transcendent and immanent

promise that one day there will be a new heaven and a new earth. This is the world within which we “live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28).

God is acting: At the center of figure 11 is the first axial code, which is the reality that God is acting—God is not the hands-off god of deism who watches us from a distance. Missional imagination (see chapter three) involves seeing God, the chief agent in history, as being actively present in Scripture, in our lives, in the lives of those close to us, in our

community, in the world, and in the church. One recalls Exodus 3:13-14 when Moses stood barefoot before the burning bush in the very presence of God. Moses said to God, “Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ Then what shall I tell them?” God said to Moses, “I am who I am. This is what you are to say to the

Israelites: ‘I am has sent me to you.’” *YHWH*. God is, and God is acting, and God is inviting us to join with God as the Holy Spirit ushers in the Kingdom.

Interviewees noted that God is creating the Kingdom now and is welcoming us into the Kingdom for eternity. We experience God in the ordinary circumstances of life (see Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz in the book of Ruth) as well as in a crisis (see Jesus and the two criminals in Luke 23:32-49). God is acting in the chaos and turbulence and suffering even when we do not understand and find it challenging to discern God’s presence (see the Glory Story and the Cross Story in chapter three). God is bringing people together and blessing the community/neighborhood while forming faith in the church. God is ministering *to* us and *through* us right where we are. To reflect this reality, we responded by beginning to alter our language so that God was the subject of our sentences. This experience was an adaptive change that shifted the participants’ mental model or frame (see

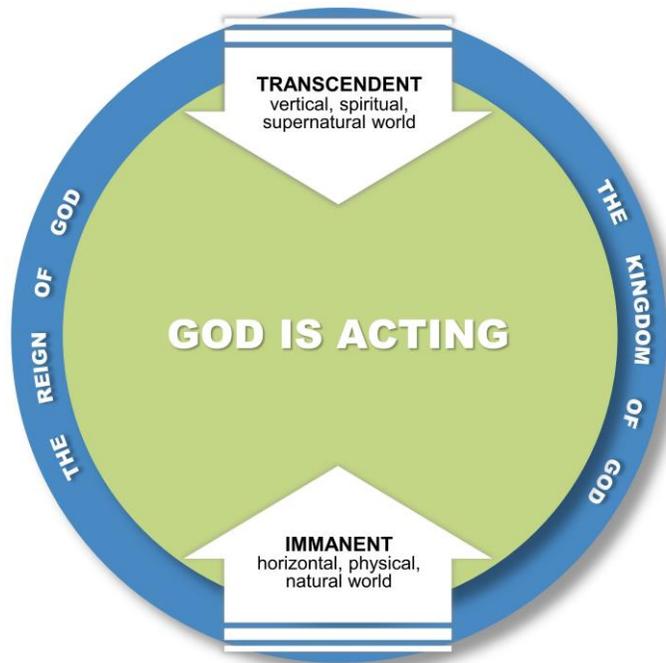


Figure 11. God is acting

Mental Models and Reframing in chapter two), which, in turn, influenced their perceptions, missional imagination, identity, witness, and ministry.

In the center of figure 12 is a circle trisected into three pie-shaped segments that are circumscribed by two curving arrows. Here we find the next three axial codes:

- **Living in a faith community**
- **Engaging in Christian practices**
- **Discerning God’s active presence**

These three segments evoke the triune nature of God. God is a personal God—not an impersonal force—who desires to be in a personal relationship with us, individually and communally.⁴ God’s invitation is grounded in *koinonia* as we are drawn into the divine life (see Missional Imagination in chapter

three). The curving arrows represent the iterative, spiral process of our communal engagement with the triune God, recalling Jürgen Moltmann’s definition of *perichoresis* as “whirl or rotation . . . going from one to another, walking around.” The Holy Spirit forms the church as “an open and inviting community. Here too we find a form of mutuality: the human

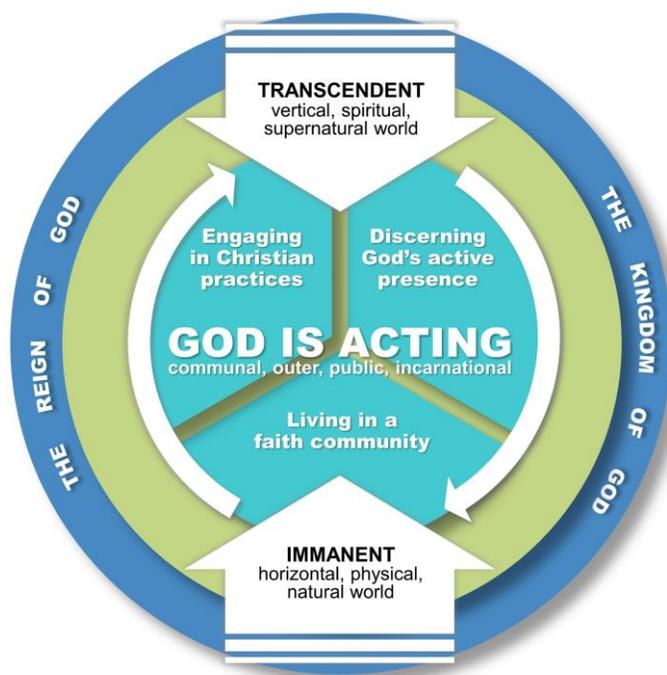


Figure 12. Living, engaging, and discerning

⁴ La Cugna, *God for Us*, 319. “The mystery of God, indeed, the mystery of all existence, is the mystery of communion of God with all, all with God. The heart of Christian life is the encounter with a personal God who makes possible both our union with God and communion with each other. The mystery of God is revealed to be a matter of invitation and incorporation into divine life through Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit; at the same time it is also invitation and incorporation into new relationship with each other, as we are gathered together by the Spirit into the body of Christ.”

community in the divine community, and the divine community in the human community in mutual indwelling.”⁵ The curving arrows also recall Van Gelder’s spiral process of discernment: texts, context, community, and action (see Discernment and Dialogue in chapter three). Inscribed directly below “God is acting” is the phrase “*communal, outer, public, incarnational.*” This phrase conveys our faithful response to God’s invitation through Christ Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit, which is in direct opposition to the tenets of secularism, which attempt to restrict our response to being individualistic, inner, private, and excarnational (see Secularity in chapter three).

Living in a faith community: Participants stressed that the primary setting for faith formation was living in a faith community and their relationships with parents, friends, family members, coaches, Sunday school teachers, or pastors who modeled faith and created space to wrestle with the difficult questions of life. For all practical purposes, it is challenging to live as an isolated Christian, so the Holy Spirit gathers and centers people into a faith community—forgiven sinners (*ergo* saints) who are created as human persons in the *imago Dei* to live in fellowship—and then sends this community into the world to bear witness by word and deed as they participate in the *missio Dei*. This faith community is not isolated but includes our broader relationships and social networks. Our theological understanding of community emerges from the trinitarian personhood of God. This missional imagination involves cultivating community rooted in *koinonia*, *perichoresis*, and *kenosis* (see Missional Imagination in chapter three). Interviewees also observed that discerning God’s active presence in Scripture is best done with others in

⁵ Jürgen Moltmann, “Perichoresis: An Old Magic Word for a New Trinitarian Theology,” in *Trinity, Community, and Power: Mapping Trajectories in Wesleyan Theology*, ed. M. Douglas Meeks (Nashville, TN: Kingswood, 2000), 113, 121-22.

community where we reflect together theologically. Dialogue—listening, speaking, conversing, storytelling, and witnessing—was intrinsic to what it means to be created in the *imago Dei* and to live in community (*koinonia*). The Holy Spirit transforms us in and through our fellowship with the triune God and one another.

Engaging in Christian practices: Christian practices are communal experiences that reframe our view of the transcendent and the immanent (see Liturgy and Witness in chapter three). Central to faith formation for interviewees was living in a community that engaged in Christian practices, such as worshipping, praying, studying Scripture, Baptism, and Holy Communion (see The Road to Emmaus in chapter three). Christian practices are the “things Christian people do together over time in response to and in the light of *God's active presence* for the life of the world” (emphasis added).⁶ Interventions involved publicly engaging in Christian practices, specifically witnessing, discernment, and dialogue, during worship, Sunday school, Bible study, and fellowship events. Discernment and dialogue were integrated into worship as a way for participants to rehearse these Christian practices liturgically so they could be lived out in their daily lives (see Story and Ritual in chapter two and Liturgy and Witness in chapter three).

Discerning God’s active presence: By communally and publicly engaging in discernment and dialogue, the Holy Spirit changed the perspectives of participants, giving them eyes to see and ears to hear, so they could know Jesus and be faithful witnesses (see Healing a Blind Man in chapter three). Discerning God’s active presence was centered on the *missio Dei* as we searched for answers to the question, “What is God up to?” Patrick Keifert and Nigel Rooms observe, “Discernment is a spiritual practice, or holy habit, which

⁶ Bass and Dykstra, “Practicing Our Faith,” 5.

is learnt by trial and error, experiment and failure, reflection and action.”⁷ Participants explored discerning God’s presence during everyday life (see the Book of Ruth in chapter three) as well as in the midst of suffering (see Jesus and Two Criminals in chapter three). The church became a community of discerners that was comprised of detectives of divinity. Their language began to change as God became the subject of their sentences. The Holy Spirit changed people’s mental models by reframing how they see, hear, know, and say (see Mental Models and Reframing in chapter two). As a result, the church could more easily discern the triune God’s active presence in Scripture, in their lives, in the lives of those close to them, in their community, in the world, and in the church.

The triune God is actively present in, with, and under ministry and witness:

The final axial code is circumscribed around the inner ring of figure 13. The phrasing reflects the Lutheran understanding of Holy Communion: Christ is truly present in, with, and under the bread and wine. In the same way, the triune God is actively present in, with, and under ministry and witness, so God’s Kingdom comes, God’s will is done, and God is glorified as people experience the active presence of the Father in the person of Jesus through the Holy Spirit. Jesus calls us to be

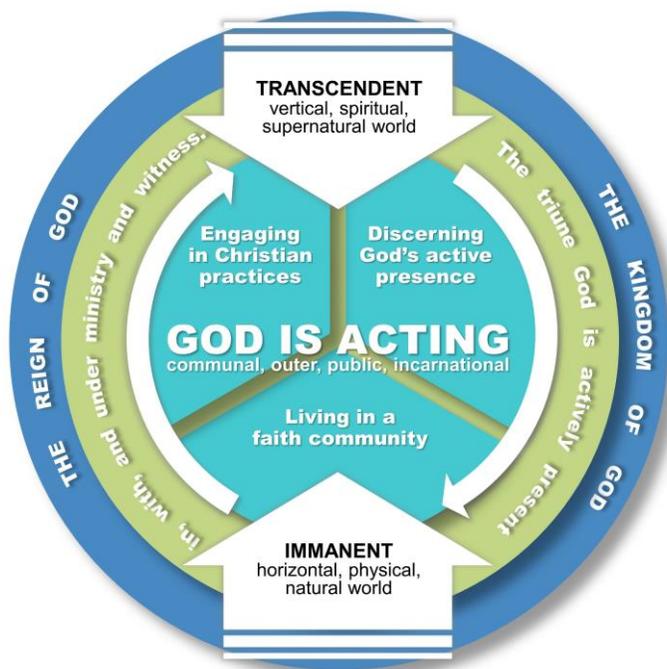


Figure 13. Ministry and witness

⁷ Keifert and Rooms, *Forming the Missional Church*, 11.

his disciples, “Come, follow me, and I will make you fishers of people” (Matt. 4:19). We respond by living in a faith community, engaging in Christian practices, and discerning God’s active presence. We respond by living a life of discipleship that encompasses ministry and witness—not to earn salvation, but in thankfulness for God’s gifts of grace and mercy and steadfast love through Jesus. As Gerhard O. Forde writes, “What shall I do to be saved? Nothing! Just be still; shut up and listen for once in your life to what God the Almighty, creator and redeemer, is saying to his world and to you in the death and resurrection of his son! Listen and believe!” He then asks, “What *are* you going to do now that you don’t have to do anything” (emphasis original)?⁸ We do not build the Kingdom of God—it is a gift that we inherit, receive, enter, and proclaim.

Figure 13 reflects Richard Osmer’s and David Bosch’s concepts of the church: the church gathers for worship and prayer—the tripartite inner circle—and disperses for service, mission, and evangelism where the church engages the world—the inner ring of ministry and witness. Their model is based on Jürgen Moltmann’s theory of centered openness: the church is a *perichoretic* community of disciples who bear witness to the Kingdom of God by striving to live out Jesus’ vision and a *kenotic* community of openness, self-giving, and solidarity with the vulnerable. (See *Missional Imagination* in chapter three.)

Interviewees noted that we experience God’s active presence through individuals and the community, both Christians and non-Christians, in ministry and witness. Andrew Root calls this “Christopraxis,” which is the continued ministering presence of Christ through word and deed (see *Discernment and Dialogue*, and *Liturgy and Witness* in chapter three). He depicts faith “as an encounter with divine action that transforms us at

⁸ Gerhard O Forde, *Justification by Faith: A Matter of Death and Life* (Ramsey, NJ: Sigler Press, 1991), 22, 33.

the level of being.”⁹ We encounter the ministering presence of the risen Christ in a variety of ways, such as miracles, visions, dreams, the loving actions of others, the words of Scripture, the Sacraments, and someone’s faith story.¹⁰ Bearing witness to the living Christ may require “jumping through the hoop” as we share our faith story, imagine how God’s story intersects with our story, and discern “God’s preferred and promised future.”¹¹ God ushers in the Kingdom by the power of the Holy Spirit, and he invites us to participate.

Summary

This chapter reviewed the data collected during the study. The research design included collecting quantitative data, specifically baseline and end line questionnaires, in addition to qualitative data from interviews, small group activities, and focus groups. Rigorous methods for analysis and interpretation were utilized. Chapter six summarizes major findings in light of the theoretical lenses from chapter two, along with the biblical and theological lenses from chapter three.

⁹ Root, *Faith Formation in a Secular Age*, 135.

¹⁰ La Cugna, *God for Us*, 320. “For Christians, the summit of the economy [of salvation], the unveiling of God’s providential plan, is God’s unity with human nature in the person of Jesus Christ. The mystery of this unity between divine and human continues in the ongoing and permanent presence of the risen Christ through the power and activity of the Spirit.”

¹¹ Keifert, *We Are Here Now*, 64.

CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSIONS

Introduction

A Participatory Action Research methodology was implemented to answer the research question. *How might Participatory Action Research interventions increase our capacity to discern the triune God's active presence and engage in dialogue with others?* The PAR team designed and implemented four interventions: Sunday Worship, Lent, Sunday School, and Story and Dialogue. Chapter five reviewed the quantitative and qualitative data. Rigorous methods for analysis and interpretation were utilized. This chapter summarizes major findings in light of the theoretical lenses from chapter two, along with the biblical and theological lenses from chapter three.

Summary of Major Findings

When I was finalizing the writing of this thesis, I spontaneously visited the home of Doreen, a woman in her 80s whose husband had died the previous year. As I walked through the door, I was enthusiastically greeted by Doreen as well as Charlene and Janice, all members of BLC. To my surprise, they exclaimed, "Perfect timing! God brought you here!" Earlier that day, as Charlene and Doreen walked into a restaurant for lunch, they talked about Janice, whose husband had been severely ill for four months. They were concerned that Janice was under extreme stress, so they were contemplating how they could help. Unexpectedly, Janice walked into the restaurant behind them. "God

brought us together!” They invited Janice to join them for lunch, and then all three of them came to Doreen’s house. When I walked in the door, they discerned God’s active presence in bringing me there to be with them as well. I am not sure that these three women would have discerned God’s active presence in these events two years ago. We are not the primary actors in this salvation story—God is.

The answer to the research question is that the results suggest that the Holy Spirit worked through the PAR interventions to increase the capacity of participants to discern the triune God’s active presence and engage in dialogue with others.

- **Cultural Adaptation:** The PAR team initiated a process of cultural adaptation as participants became more open to the “vertical” or transcendent dimension of life and began to experience a reframing of their world view.
- **Missional Imagination:** The church was exposed to the missional imagination church model, which affirms God’s active presence in all of creation.
- **Discernment:** Participants were able to more easily discern the triune God’s active presence in Scripture, in their lives, in the lives of those close to them, in their community, in the world, and in the church.
- **Dialogue:** They could talk more easily to someone about the Bible, retell stories from the Bible, and connect those stories to their own lives.

Four key insights arose from the research: people have a faith story to tell, create space for discernment and dialogue, nurture spiritual capacities, and incarnational transformation.

People Have Faith Stories to Tell

Spend time with people, and they immediately tell a story. We are, indeed, story animals.¹ Often, however, people are intimidated when it comes to sharing their faith

¹ Haven, *Story Proof*, Kindle Location 1961.

stories, especially within the Lutheran tradition. One of the primary challenges to discernment and dialogue is helping people realize that they have a story to tell.

Create Spaces for Discernment and Dialogue

People have faith stories to tell, but we need to create space within the life of the congregation where they can tell those stories. Faith is formed when engaging in Christian practices that enable people to discern the Kingdom of God and become aware of God's active presence, specifically witnessing, discernment, and dialogue, during worship, Sunday school, Bible study, and fellowship events. Discernment and dialogue can be integrated into worship as a way for participants to rehearse these Christian practices liturgically so they can be lived out in their daily lives. The key is to create opportunities for people to bear witness to the active presence of the Father in the person of Jesus through the Holy Spirit.

Nurture Spiritual Capacities

As one might expect, these results suggest that actively engaging in Christian practices and intentionally nurturing the spiritual capacities—see, hear, know, and say—positively influence faith formation and cultivate a missional imagination over against providing information alone. Charles Taylor describes secularity three and the immanent frame wherein interiorization demarcates an inner (mind) and outer (world) distinction. This emphasis on interiorization impacts Christian spirituality by shifting the focus to the inner (mind) aspects of faith formation, which supersede the transcendent.² As a result, our thoughts, ideas, and feelings become the focus of our reality, and we are more likely to

² Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 539 and 554.

dismiss the transcendent as well as the incarnational presence of God. One of the observations that came out of Focus Group 2 was that a “thought” is amorphous and unsubstantial. If we write our thoughts on paper, they become tangible—they are something we can hold in our hands, carry with us, look at, and read. When we speak thoughts aloud to another person, the thoughts become more real. The next step is to act, to engage in the behavior, to be a participant instead of a spectator. Rather than “think our way into a new way of acting, we act our way into a new way of thinking.”³ A member of the PAR team who served as the observer in Focus Group 2 ascribed the term “incarnation” to this faith formation process. In this incarnational transformation, the Holy Spirit transforms us by cultivating new spiritual capacities in individuals and the community (*koinonia*).

Incarnational Transformation

Figure 14 illustrates the incarnational transformation paradigm introduced above and merges it with the missional imagination model of the church from chapter three. Incarnational transformation is not an individualistic event but is experienced in a perichoretic community through the power of the Holy Spirit. Thus, the center circle represents the church as an incarnational community with a



Figure 14. Incarnational transformation

³ Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways*, 122-24.

permeable boundary (exemplified by the dashed outline of the circle). Circumscribed around the perimeter of the circle are the spiritual capacities see, hear, know, and say. (See Discernment and Dialogue as well as Missional Imagination in chapter three.) This paradigm is rooted in neuroplasticity, which describes the ability of the brain to adapt and change in response to stimuli by creating new synaptic connections when we learn new capacities. This paradigm also underscores the classic tension between information and formation. For example, in addition to giving sermons or teaching a lesson (information), we actively engage people in witnessing and sharing faith stories (formation). Otherwise, it would be like talking about football, cooking, fishing, driving a car, or knitting without ever actually engaging in these activities. In secularity three, people often avoid engaging in dialogue about God even in the church. This paradigm provides an alternative way to understand faith formation and the nurturing of spiritual capacities.

Theoretical Lenses

Chapter two reviewed the four theoretical lenses that guided this research process. These lenses were Secularity, Adaptive Change, Mental Models and Reframing, and Story and Ritual.

Secularity Three

Engaging in discernment and dialogue with others requires a high level of comfort and, thus, relational intimacy. Intuitively, we already know this to be true—logically, emotionally, and experientially. This reluctance to talk about God—"to jump through the hoop or over the rock"—reflects Charles Taylor's theory of secularity three and his

concept of the effect of interiorization on social space.⁴ Relationships are bounded by concentric inner to outer circles that define varying intensities of relational intimacy, which are typically gauged by the extent to which people are willing to share their feelings. Often, religious beliefs are relegated to the realm of feelings, and talking about the transcendent can, therefore, be discouraged. This discomfort is further complicated by the fact that faith has become individualistic, inner, private, and excarnational rather than communal, outer, public, and incarnational. (See Secularity in chapter two.) Interventions addressed these challenges in several ways by engaging participants individually, in pairs, in triads, and during worship by modeling spiritual capacities, issuing invitations, and creating space to interact with one another.

Adaptive Change

This project sought to change the culture of BLC by equipping people to discern God's active presence and engage in dialogue around the question, "What is God up to?" In chapter one, Dwight Zscheile argued that the early church's identity was shaped through the Christian practices of witness and service to their neighbors. However, over time the church's identity switched to concentrating on influencing the surrounding culture and preserving the institutional church.⁵ This study sought to transform culture through a series of interventions that emphasized this historical view of the church's identity, particularly discerning God's active presence and bearing witness as core Christian practices.

⁴ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 140.

⁵ Zscheile, *Cultivating Sent Communities*, 9.

As noted in chapter five, one of the teachers acknowledged that she had never thought about where God was active. “This was eye-opening.” Another observed that this made her more aware, and now she finds herself looking to see what God is doing. “I always knew God is there, but now it is different—I am looking for him.” The interventions helped participants learn how to “converse with one another about God.”

One of the central precepts of adaptive leadership is giving the work back to the people. The role of a missional leader is to help people identify the problem or challenge and then explore possible responses collaboratively. An especially rewarding aspect of this process was the interactions with the PAR team members who were enthusiastic, imaginative, and attentive. They were fountains of creativity and embraced the process. Members also willingly participated in discernment and dialogue by coming before the congregation during worship to share where they had discerned what God was up to in Scripture and to witness as to where God had acted in their lives. For most of them, that meant stepping out of their comfort zones. As noted in chapter five, the participants in Focus Group 2 found both the witness talks and the sharing of what God was up to in the Scripture readings during Sunday worship two of the most memorable experiences. People could relate to the stories, and the stories helped people get to know each other better. The whole experience made them more aware of God’s presence.

Mental Models and Reframing

This research sought to shift the participants’ mental model or frame (see Mental Models and Reframing in chapter two), with the goal of influencing their perceptions, missional imagination, identity, and witness. Scott Cormode argued in chapter two that the task of Christian leaders is to “change the way the people of God see the worlds in

which they live. . . . In other words, Christian leaders lead by changing the mental models that the people of God use to make sense of the world.”⁶ My task, along with the PAR team, was to help the members of the congregation see their world in a new way—or, in the words of Ben, to see with “Jesus’ goggles.” Some of the most effective ways of reframing are through the use of story and ritual.

Story and Ritual

Kendall Haven observed in chapter two that we are story animals who like to listen to and tell stories. Bolman and Deal’s contention that story and ritual can be tools to reinforce culture as well as transform culture through mental models and reframing inspired the emphasis on story and ritual throughout the interventions.⁷ Three key concepts by Arthur Frank regarding how stories and rituals affect people shaped these interventions. Stories and rituals reflect the idea of *narrative habitus* as they reinforce the stories that live in us and become the stories within which we live.⁸ Stories and rituals use *interpellation* to call us into living into our identity.⁹ They *emplot* lives by actualizing stories, thus enabling us to reimagine our past, present, and future.¹⁰ (See Story and Ritual in chapter two.)

Consequently, inviting people to share their faith stories during Sunday worship and “Let’s TACO Bout God” was a way to change the culture of BLC by countering the

⁶ Cormode, “The Missional Church and Leadership Formation,” 104.

⁷ Bolman and Deal, 390-92.

⁸ Frank, *Letting Stories Breathe*, Kindle Locations 91-92.

⁹ Frank, Kindle Locations 1128-1130.

¹⁰ Frank, Kindle Locations 231-233.

narrative of maturation in the immanent frame (see Secularity in chapter two). The participants' most memorable events included retelling Bible stories at "Let's TACO Bout God," the witness talks during Sunday worship, people sharing what they heard in the Scripture during Sunday worship, and the Sherlock Psalms videos.

Biblical Lenses

Chapter three included a discussion of five biblical lenses beginning with Jesus' healing of the blind man in Mark. The theme was deepened by exploring Jesus' crucifixion between two criminals, the disciples' encounter with the resurrected Jesus on the road to Emmaus, the experiences of Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz in the book of Ruth, and finally Peter and Cornelius in Acts.

Healing a Blind Man: Mark 8:17-26

The story of Jesus healing the blind man framed the overall research question. Frustrated with the disciples' inability to comprehend his words and actions, Jesus asks, "Do you still not see or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Do you have eyes but fail to see, and ears but fail to hear? And don't you remember?" (17-18)? Jesus' reprimand was a constant reminder of how we turn inward on ourselves and fail to discern the triune God's active presence. Even the disciples struggled to see, hear, understand, and remember.

When the PAR team dwelled on this passage, they suggested that Jesus spoke these words not so we would be uncomfortable or uneasy, but so we would be filled with hope because Jesus would open our eyes. We do not always clearly see the overwhelming abundance that Jesus, the bread of life, has already given us—life, grace, and love.

Observing that the blind man's sight was not restored until the second healing, they contemplated whether they were "living in the first sight or the second?"

This passage also connected to the Christmas song, "Do You Hear What I Hear?"¹¹ As noted in the introduction, Regney's lyrics provided a framework for exploring discernment and dialogue: "Do you see what I see? Do you hear what I hear? Do you know what I know? Listen to what I say." Too often, we fail to hear Jesus' words or see who he is or truly know him or discern his active presence. One of the wonders of this research process was how Jesus gave us eyes to see, ears to hear, and a heart of flesh.

Jesus and Two Criminals: Luke 23:32-49

As reflected in the stories shared by participants, God shows up in the midst of suffering, such as when the criminal hanging on the cross discerns the coming of the Kingdom in Jesus even amid his own suffering and impending death. Though the criminal did not fully understand, he witnessed and proclaimed who Jesus is, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom" (42).

One woman who shared her faith story during worship admitted that she usually does not recognize what God is up to when she is in the midst of a crisis, such as when she lost her job right after her five-year-old son suffered a concussion. Instead, she discerned the hand of God in the midst of suffering when she looked back. God showed up. Suffering is not a sign that God has abandoned us. The cross is the promise that Christ meets us where we are. We cry out, we pray, we trust, and we witness. The Holy Spirit draws us into the Father's preferred and promised future in Jesus Christ.

¹¹ Regney and Shayne Baker, "Do You Hear What I Hear?"

The Road to Emmaus: Luke 24:13-35

Cleopas and another disciple are perplexed and somber as they walk along the dusty road from Jerusalem to the village of Emmaus. Jesus shows up as a stranger and walks beside them, listens to them, talks with them, and opens Scripture to them. When they arrive at Emmaus, they invite Jesus to stay with them. “When he was at the table with them, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him, and he disappeared from their sight” (30-31).

When the PAR team dwelled on this passage, they were struck by the fact that Jesus and the two disciples shared a meal. They immediately brainstormed as to how we could tie in a meal with the interventions. This passage inspired the taco bar for Intervention 4, “Let’s TACO Bout God.” They hoped that gathering around a meal would become an opportunity for Jesus to open Scripture to us, so we would learn to recognize God’s voice, discern God’s active presence, and bear witness to one another.

The members of the PAR team wondered why the disciples did not recognize Jesus—after all, they walked seven miles with him! They inferred that perhaps, like the disciples, we sometimes are not ready to recognize Jesus because we are wrapped up in ourselves. Jesus could be standing in front of us, and we might not see him. The PAR team members were intrigued that Jesus entered into fellowship with the two disciples, where he revealed himself to them in Scripture. Similarly, Jesus does not impose himself on us—he is hidden, but we can find him in Scripture. After breaking bread, Jesus disappeared. Participants pondered what would have happened if Jesus had not disappeared? Would the disciples have tried to contain Jesus and control him? Is that what we try to do? Then the

disciples went and told the other disciples they had encountered Jesus. This event was a reminder of the importance of studying the Bible in community and bearing witness.

The Book of Ruth

Throughout the book of Ruth, God never speaks, no prophet announces the word of the Lord, and there are no dramatic miracles. Nevertheless, Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz do not hesitate to talk about God to each other and their neighbors. The active presence of God is evident in the everyday lives of ordinary people in and through the loving actions (ministry) of others. Sometimes people look for God in significant events, such as miraculous healing or hearing the voice of God. About ten years ago, a confirmation student came to me, wondering why she had never heard God speak to her. When I was confirmed as a teenager, I was disappointed that I did not have a dramatic experience, *à la* Pentecost. This misperception became a teaching moment as members of the PAR team shared during worship the small ways they had discerned where the Holy Spirit was moving in their lives and gave a new perspective to the participants.

Peter and Cornelius: Acts 10:1-11:18

Acts chapter ten recounts the story of God's encounter with Cornelius, a Roman centurion and Gentile, and the Apostle Peter. No doubt, Peter was uncomfortable. After all, he was around Gentiles who were ritually unclean. However, he obeyed God, entered into fellowship with them, listened to them, and witnessed. Peter and Cornelius modeled discernment and dialogue by seeing, hearing, knowing, and saying. Their behavior could become a pattern for sharing our faith. However, the point of witnessing is not to turn people into objects we win or notches on our belts. The hope is that faith can be a natural part of who we are. As Lance, one of the interviewees, observed, the goal is "just

weaving God into all aspects of life.” Witnessing might include conversations with the gas station attendant, a coworker, a fellow student, a neighbor, or a family member. The PAR team summed it up nicely: “We witness by telling a story and pointing to Jesus.”

Theological Lenses

Four theological lenses guided this research in conjunction with the above theoretical and biblical lenses. They were Discernment and Dialogue, the Glory Story and the Cross Story, Missional Imagination, and Liturgy and Witness.

Discernment and Dialogue

In chapter three, discernment was described as perceiving the active presence of the triune God in Scripture, in our lives, in the lives of those close to us, in our community, in the world, and in the church. The phrase *active presence* is vital: God is truly *present* here and now; God is *active* in the everyday lives of ordinary people. Dialogue is two-way communication between people in fellowship, both in the church and with others in the broader web of our relationships. One of the challenges in this research was helping people understand discernment and dialogue. Common responses when discussing discernment and dialogue can be, “I have never seen God,” or “I have never heard God speak to me.” The reality is that very few people in the Bible did either. That is why we have the witness of the Bible as well as the witness of the people around us. The PAR team was essential in forming imaginative ways to help the congregation discern God’s presence.

Andrew Root posits that God comes to us in and through ministry.¹² Witness and ministry, words and deeds, go hand in hand. Discernment is experiencing the presence of

¹² Root, *Christopraxis*, Kindle Location 111-121.

the triune God and taking Jesus' story as our own story. As a congregation, we learned to approach God in a posture of openness, attentiveness, and expectation while being prepared for surprises. Believing is seeing, hearing, knowing, and saying. The faith stories shared by interviewees often involved discerning God's presence as an act of ministry coming in and through people around them, even strangers and non-Christians.

The Glory Story and the Cross Story

In Martin Luther's theology of the cross, the cross is the promise that God is actively present in the suffering, despised, crucified, and risen Son of God. God reveals Godself in lowliness rather than greatness, weakness rather than strength, foolishness rather than wisdom. Interviewees often shared stories where they discerned God's presence in the midst of their own suffering and the suffering of others. For many, faith became real when they faced a crisis. Andrew Root writes:

To be formed in faith is to give yourself to the story of Jesus coming to you, or someone you know, in and through a death experience. To be formed in faith is to be in a community that tells the stories over and over again of how the living Jesus came to us through negation, ministering to us. This breaks the stranglehold of youthfulness by turning us to the stories of those who have encountered the living Christ at the cross. But to be formed in faith means more—it means becoming like Ananias [in Acts 9] and joining the being of Jesus by becoming another's minister, sharing in the other's death experience as participating in the being of God. To be formed in faith is to be in Christ by being ministered to and ministering to others through the cross of their death experience, allowing our own personhood to be the tangible manifestation of resurrection.¹³

“Negation” happens when we lose our story, identity, and meaning through a “death experience” due to suffering, rejection, loss, sickness, sin, fear, loneliness, broken relationships, depression, addiction, or mortality. These are our cross stories. Many of the participants recounted how they experienced God's presence in their own “death

¹³ Root, *Faith Formation in a Secular Age*, 160.

experiences,” such as in a neighbor, a friend, a pastor, or even a stranger. Sometimes, God acted through the participant to minister to others; at other times, God ministered to the participant through another person. They experienced God’s tangible presence, describing God as carrying, guiding, holding, comforting, healing, redeeming, and saving.

Missional Imagination

This research created the opportunity to investigate and cultivate a missional imagination. Alan Hirsh argued in chapter three that a dualistic spirituality paradigm had distorted our experience of God by limiting God to the realm of the church.¹⁴ I proposed the missional imagination model (see figure 7 in chapter three), where there is no sacred-secular or transcendent-immanent divide. The church, centered and sent, is an incarnational community with a permeable boundary. We do not go to church; we are the church.

One of the goals of this research was to encourage participants to look outside of their own lives and see the bigger picture of the Kingdom of God. That was one of the motivations for the video series *Detectives of Divinity*, which featured Sherlock Psalms modeling the spiritual capacities see, hear, know, and say. As the Sunday school teachers observed, it was beneficial for both students and adults to see Sherlock out in the community as a reminder that God is not limited to the confines of the church. Several parents remarked that their children enjoyed watching the videos at home and in the car.

In the baseline and end line surveys as well as in the interviews and Intervention 4, participants were asked, “Share a story about a time when you perceived what God—Father, Jesus, Holy Spirit—is doing in your life. In the lives of those close to you. In the

¹⁴ Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways*, 74.

community. In the world. In the church.” One of the interviewees, Ben, discussed where he discerned God’s active presence in neighbors and strangers, Christians and non-Christians:

Every act of kindness—it's hard to discern whether it's coming from a Christian foundation or not, but I guess it's irrelevant because if it's a good act, God is the one that's acting. So I see it all the time. I see it at the grocery store when the stranger is carrying the other stranger’s grocery bags, when somebody is helping somebody load a car, might see somebody pull over to help somebody with a flat tire, when somebody at work holds the door for somebody else. Yeah, see it a thousand times a day actually. . . . That’s God in a neighbor and stranger. I think also every act of healing that occurs at the hospital; God's certainly working in and through the doctor. He or she may not be Christian, but God is certainly working through that because God is the ultimate healer. . . . I guess you'd be hard-pressed not to see it when you're looking through your Jesus’ goggles.

We live in partnership with the Holy Spirit and our neighbors. As noted in chapter three, perhaps we can think of this as the concretization of God’s imagination.

The Holy Spirit changes our missional imagination. We do not merely become *like* Jesus; we *are* Jesus for our neighbor. In the same way, Christ meets us in strangers, and they *are* Jesus for us. Faith is not merely an event or experience inside our minds (see Secularity in chapter two), but a concrete lived experience—or in the words of Horton from *Horton Hears a Who!*, “a person’s a person, no matter how small.”¹⁵

Liturgy and Witness

About thirteen years ago, I led a discipleship class during my pastoral internship where we discussed sharing our faith stories. One woman lingered after class. Hesitating, her face forlorn, she said, “Pastor Andrew, I don’t have a faith story. I’ve known Jesus all my life. I grew up in the church, and Jesus has always been with me, no matter where I went and what I’ve experienced.” She proceeded to recount some of the challenges in her

¹⁵ Dr. Seuss, *Horton Hears a Who!*.

life when Jesus had been with her. I smiled. “That’s an amazing faith story. You have led a very blessed life.” She started to cry in relief and joy.¹⁶

Like this woman, many people struggle with telling their faith story. Just as in the Bible, the Holy Spirit sometimes moves in miraculous ways, while other times more subtly. In the book of Ruth, Naomi was bitter after the death of her husband and sons. Yet she and Ruth experienced the steadfast love of God in the ordinary circumstances of life (see Biblical Lenses in chapter three.) In contrast, Michael, one of the interviewees who admitted to being shy about sharing his faith, told a story about an experience from the night before his interview when he had a conversation with a friend whose son was going through a difficult time. This event occurred a week or so after Christmas:

We talked a ton about [faith], and this individual has been somebody that I've actually been able to share my faith with more than probably anybody else for a long time. . . . Well, we talked about [what if] the manger had been empty? The gift of being able to take our burdens to the cross and leaving them there and believing we can leave them there, believing that God's hand is in all this.

The PAR team discussed the idea of a circle of influence and identified four possible boundaries that affect our openness to bearing witness. *Professionalization* is the tendency to see talking about God and the Bible as the domain of professionals, such as pastors and seminary professors. *Competence* reflects the fact that people do not believe they know enough to engage in a theological conversation. We are hesitant to mention God without *permission* from the other person and are reluctant to ask. Finally, we face the issue of our level of *comfort* when sharing our faith.

One of the most memorable events was the number of people who shared their faith stories and talked about the Bible. All twenty-one of the participants in Intervention 4,

¹⁶ Schlecht, *Where Am I?*, 282.

“Let’s TACO Bout God,” spoke about the Bible and shared their witness with two people about how they had discerned the active presence of God. During Sunday morning worship, four people discussed what God was up to in the Scripture readings, and another ten people shared their witness. Nineteen Sunday school teachers engaged in a conversation about what God is up to with over one hundred children who, in turn, created artwork that witnessed to members of the congregation. Twenty confirmation youth were engaged in a conversation about Scripture with one another and approximately thirty adults during Lent. During these interventions, they shared faith stories and talked about the Bible. The challenge in faith formation is how to continue to develop these spiritual capacities in the congregation and make dialogue a regular part of our lives.

One of the Sunday school teachers was also a high school senior. At the community baccalaureate worship service at the end of May 2019, she gave a witness talk where she shared how she answered the question, “What is God up to?”

I have really been noticing [God]. Not in the big ways like the story I just told, but in the little things. I see him in my Sunday school kids when they get excited about the song we are singing and in the friends I have been so blessed to meet throughout my life. I especially saw him the other day. I had just gotten home from school and practice and I was supposed to start doing my homework. But I had a huge urge to text a few of my friends from a couple of hours away. So, I picked up my phone and just sent a quick heartfelt text letting them know how much I love them all and I can’t wait to see them all this summer. Within seconds I had responses. The one that caught my attention was the one that said “I had a really bad day today, one of the worst in a while. But just hearing from you made my entire week.” And that’s when I knew that it was not me who wanted to send that text. It was God, working through me, to make just a couple of people’s lives just a little better. If it wasn’t for the church experiences I have had throughout my life, I would not be the person I am today. I’ve met people I know I can turn to for guidance when life seems dark, and I have been given the opportunity to be the light for others, and for that, I forever will be grateful.

Generalizations and Limitations

The context for this research was a Lutheran church located in a bedroom community in a small town and rural setting in the upper-Midwest of the United States. While some generalizations can be made, the results are specific to this congregation and the surrounding culture. Should one choose to implement similar research, the interventions will need to be adapted by a local PAR team that can also shape new interventions. In addition, results were limited by the short duration of the research. An extended timeframe might reveal additional information regarding the effects of the interventions on missional imagination, discernment, and dialogue.

The results of the baseline survey, end line survey, interviews, and focus groups may reflect bias. Social desirability may have impacted responses since participants knew they were providing input for their pastor's doctoral thesis. People may have self-selected by either declining to participate because the questions made them uncomfortable or choosing to participate because they were comfortable with the attitudes and behaviors described. Since these were subjective questionnaires, errors in self-assessment, external and internal stimuli (e.g., stress, emotional state, illness), and varying attitudinal and behavioral norms may have impacted responses (e.g., their understanding of witnessing). Cognitive dissonance may have occurred as participants sought to align attitudes with behavior. Any of these particularities may have affected the research results.

Evaluation and Questions for Future Research

The PAR team gathered one evening to evaluate the research process. When I entered the fellowship hall, they had already assembled and, to my delight, had spontaneously commenced dwelling in the Word. Afterward, they reflected on our

journey together, “You can see the trail God had laid out for us.” Realizing a cultural change had been initiated by the Holy Spirit, they asked, “How do we keep it a part of our culture and not keep it in the church, but be tendrils out in the community?” Their missional imagination had been transformed as they discerned God’s active presence. Team members were concerned that we would “move back into our comfort zones.” One woman commented, “I realize why I am reluctant to share because I am in secularity three.” We need to help people develop an “awareness of God every day.” The team believed that “Let’s TACO Bout God” equipped people to engage in discernment and dialogue. A member who participated in the event observed:

Sharing a meal is incredibly powerful. When you tell your story, you become vulnerable as you share something about yourself. There was healing in the process—you could see it as they shared a piece of themselves, and connections were made. Interpreting the Bible verses revealed something about ourselves, so witnessing became easier because we had just talked. Our sharing was received in a loving, caring way.

As a result, the PAR team recommended that another “What is God up to?” team be formed to continue the faith formation process, generate new ideas, and evaluate the effectiveness of the interventions at least once a year. They humorously noted that the team should not be called, “What God should be up to.” Their suggestion addressed one of the limitations of the research: the short duration. Continuing the interventions could also create an opportunity to explore the reasons for the negative results for dialogue in the end line survey. Questions to be explored might include: How does secularity three affect people? What other factors affect witnessing? How do we discern together what God is up to and participate with God in the *missio Dei*? The PAR team made several proposals:

- Begin an educational opportunity to help people be more comfortable sharing their faith.

- Create an annual cycle of interventions to help people “weave discernment and dialogue into the fabric of their everyday lives.” During worship, for example, one month have someone share what they discerned God was up to in the Bible reading; the second month, have worshippers share thoughts on Slido; the third month, use the “What is God up to?” meditation cards; the fourth month, talk to the person beside them; and the fifth month, have someone bear witness.
- Initiate more intergenerational opportunities for youth to lead Bible study, such as once a month. Confirmation students could sign-up as they do for assisting with worship.
- Provide more opportunities to gather around a meal, such as one Wednesday a month before worship or potlucks. Incorporate a focus question for conversations: What is God up to in your family? In your health? In your leisure? In the Scripture we heard during worship? Last Tuesday? They suggested making this fun—perhaps tape the question under one person’s chair at each table. Everyone has to look under their chairs, and whoever finds the question at the table then hands it to the second person to their right, who then begins the conversation. Also, each table might have a different question.
- Sherlock Psalms needs to return in new videos. Both the children and adults were impacted. Perhaps once a quarter as part of the annual cycle.
- Continue to involve the children, teachers, and parents. They suggested training for the Sunday school teachers. Perhaps teachers could begin or end class with the questions, “How are you? What is God up to in your life this week?” Parents could be invited to come into the classroom and participate, doing a different grade level each month. The children’s sermon typically involves the children drawing a picture of the Scripture reading. Perhaps blank postcards could be handed out with the question, “What is God up to?” Children’s pictures could relate to that question, and parents could be invited to write an explanation on the back. Pictures could be displayed in the church.

The PAR team reflected on the question, “What was God up to?” One observed, “We grew in witnessing in so many ways.” Another man added, “Matthew 28: go and make disciples. We talked about how many people in the congregation talked about God in church, but I went home and talked to my wife and kids and sister and friends.”

Discernment and dialogue extended beyond the walls of the church building. “The process was God-driven. God was working all the way through. We witnessed it firsthand by being here. God revealed these interventions to us—he just made us feel like they were

our ideas.” A woman added, “God has set us up for the future. He has given us a handbook on how to be disciples. This is something we do together.” Faith formation is communal and guided by the Holy Spirit. “We’ve all grown from it and can’t not talk about it. I think about what God is up to a million times more than I ever did before.”

Conclusion

Do you see what I see?
Do you hear what I hear?
Do you know what I know?
Listen to what I say.¹⁷

These lyrics from the song “Do You Hear What I Hear?” provided a framework for exploring discernment and dialogue in a secular age. The song captured the spirit of this adaptive challenge that sought to cultivate a missional imagination and nurture four spiritual capacities: see, hear, know, and say in the realm of faith formation.

The Holy Spirit reframed the congregation’s world view and equipped people to discern God’s active presence and engage in dialogue around the question, “What is God up to?” Their missional imagination was transformed as they discerned the reality that God is acting. The people of God respond by living in a faith community, engaging in Christian practices, and discerning God’s active presence. The triune God is actively present in, with, and under ministry and witness.

People have faith stories to tell, but we need to create space within the life of the congregation where they can tell those stories. Engaging in Christian practices and intentionally nurturing the spiritual capacities—see, hear, know, and say—positively influence faith formation and cultivate a missional imagination. In this incarnational

¹⁷ Regney and Shayne Baker, “Do You Hear What I Hear?”

transformation, the Holy Spirit transforms us by cultivating new capacities in individuals and the community (*koinonia*). This is not an individualistic event, but is experienced in a *perichoretic* community through the power of the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit transforms our missional imagination by granting us eyes to see and ears to hear as we live in a posture of openness, attentiveness, and expectation toward God, Scripture, and one another. We know Jesus by living in fellowship with him and listening to him. We know our neighbors by entering into fellowship with them and listening to their stories. By sharing stories, we enter into each other's lives and proclaim the active presence of the triune God in Scripture, in our lives, in the lives of those close to us, in our community, in the world, and in the church. We witness by telling the Good News of the arrival of the Kingdom of God in the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus along with the story of the continued ministering presence of the living Christ *to us* through the ministry of our neighbors and *through us* as we minister to them, especially in places we might not expect to find God—our cross stories. Like the disciples on the road to Emmaus, we are witnesses who must not remain silent.

The hope is that the congregation continues to grow in faith as we discern the active presence of the triune God and engage in dialogue. May we respond to the invitational opportunities of the Holy Spirit: see the stranger, hear the neighbor, know their suffering, and say words of comfort, salvation, and hope.

EPILOGUE

The research question underwent a subtle but essential change in November 2018 during research, writing, and fine-tuning of the research instruments. The change involved replacing the phrase “*discern God’s actions in the world*” with the words “*discern the triune God’s active presence*.” The original wording implied a detached, arm’s length relationship between God and creation, whereas the phrase “*triune God’s active presence*” recognized both God’s trinitarian personhood and *perichoretic* presence. God is more than causing things to happen—God is present in, with, and under creation.

The question, “What is God up to?” is not trite or inconsequential, but has helped focus my attention and the attention of the congregation on God and God’s active presence in Scripture, in our lives, in the lives of those close to us, in our community, in the world, and in BLC. Kendall Haven observes, “It may be the information you want to communicate, but it is the story characters that make it relevant, meaningful, and compelling (worth remembering) to readers and listeners. We don’t understand events, actions, narratives, without viewing them from the perspective of a character. . . . Character is central to your understanding of narrative.”¹ The most important element of story is character. God is the primary character in the Bible and history. The Bible is a story—the story about God and creation, God and humanity, God and us. Thus, the question “What is God up to?” shifted our focus to the primary character and encouraged us to wonder who God is, what God is doing, where God is present, and why God acts. Understanding this central fact became essential to discernment, dialogue, and faith formation.

¹ Haven, *Story Proof*, Kindle Locations 699-700, 705.

The way I teach and preach has been affected by this research. I am currently re-evaluating and developing my pedagogical approach to confirmation. The biblical story has always been central to the curriculum. For example, the Ten Commandments, Lord's Prayer, and Apostles' Creed are integrated with the reading of Scripture rather than as isolated events. After exploring the thread of story that has run through this research, I am considering using some of Kendall Haven's tools for teaching story structure and even having students write stories as tools to help youth (and adults) claim Jesus' story as their story.² Christina Wodtke, who has explored the shape of stories based on the work of Kendall Haven, has created a graph based on the image of a wave to help visualize story structure.³ This tool could be a creative way of visualizing the overall story of the Bible as well as the individual biblical stories.

This experience is also shaping the way I see worship as both missional and a liturgical rehearsal of Christian practices, such as prayer, discernment, dialogue, and witness. Worshippers engage with God and discern God's active presence in the world, while the Holy Spirit empowers us with the spiritual capacities: see, hear, know, and say. An unexpected discovery came from Focus Group 2 when the participants commented: "You (pastor) are a storyteller," "You explain the Bible in a story way," and "Your sermons are stories." I had not realized how the lens of story was impacting my preaching until receiving these comments. Most of all, I was profoundly affected by listening to all the witness stories shared by members of BLC. God is up to something!

² Kendall F. Haven, *Get It Write! Creating Lifelong Writers, from Expository to Narrative* (Portsmouth, NH: Teacher Ideas Press, 2004).

³ Christina Wodtke, "The Shape of Story," *ElegantHack*, June 6, 2015, <http://elegantHack.com/the-shape-of-story/>.

APPENDIX A: BASELINE QUESTIONNAIRE

Please answer every question. Provide one answer to all questions except where instructed to "Check all that apply."

- 1) On average, between September 1, 2018, and November 30, 2018, how many times have you attended Sunday and/or Wednesday worship services at Beloved Lutheran Church?
 - Usually every week
 - Three times a month
 - Twice a month
 - Once a month
 - Once or twice total
 - Never
- 2) How long have you been attending Beloved Lutheran Church?
 - Less than 2 years
 - At least 2 years but less than 5 years
 - At least 5 years but less than 10 years
 - At least 10 years but less than 15 years
 - 15 years or more
- 3) God—Father, Jesus, Holy Spirit¹—is actively involved in your life.
 - Always
 - Usually
 - Sometimes
 - Rarely
 - Never
- 4) God—Father, Jesus, Holy Spirit—is actively involved in the lives of those close to you.
 - Always
 - Usually
 - Sometimes
 - Rarely
 - Never
- 5) God—Father, Jesus, Holy Spirit—is actively involved in the community.
 - Always
 - Usually
 - Sometimes
 - Rarely
 - Never

¹ “God—Father, Jesus, Holy Spirit” was intentionally used in the questionnaires so as to focus on the triune nature of God. “Father” was chosen as it is consistent with biblical translations, including the NIV, the ecumenical creeds, and most liturgical language while reflecting the vocabulary commonly used in the research context. While the liturgy uses the word “Son” in the trinitarian formula, people within the research context typically use the name “Jesus” in the course of theological conversations and prayers because using a personal name is more relational. “Holy Spirit” was likewise chosen as it is consistent with biblical translations, the ecumenical creeds, and most liturgical language, as well as to broaden participants’ discernment of God’s active presence while creating space for those participants who are more likely to talk about the movement of the Holy Spirit in their lives.

- 6) God—Father, Jesus, Holy Spirit—is actively involved in the world.
- Always
 - Usually
 - Sometimes
 - Rarely
 - Never
- 7) God—Father, Jesus, Holy Spirit—is actively involved in Beloved Lutheran Church.
- Always
 - Usually
 - Sometimes
 - Rarely
 - Never
- 8) When I pray, I thank God—Father, Jesus, Holy Spirit—for specific ways God acts in my life.
- Every day
 - A few times a week
 - A few times a month
 - Less than once a month
 - Every few years
 - Never
- 9) When I pray, I ask God—Father, Jesus, Holy Spirit—to help me perceive what God is up to.
- Every day
 - A few times a week
 - A few times a month
 - Less than once a month
 - Every few years
 - Never
- 10) How easily can you talk to someone about the Bible?
- Very easy
 - Easy
 - Neither easy nor difficult
 - Difficult
 - Very difficult
- 11) How easily can you retell stories from the Bible?
- Very easy
 - Easy
 - Neither easy nor difficult
 - Difficult
 - Very difficult
- 12) How easily can you connect stories from the Bible with your own life?
- Very easy
 - Easy
 - Neither easy nor difficult
 - Difficult
 - Very difficult
- 13) How easily can you perceive what God—Father, Jesus, Holy Spirit—is doing in the Bible?
- Very easy
 - Easy
 - Neither easy nor difficult
 - Difficult
 - Very difficult

- 14) How easily can you perceive what God—Father, Jesus, Holy Spirit—is doing in your life?
- Very easy
 - Easy
 - Neither easy nor difficult
 - Difficult
 - Very difficult
- 15) How easily can you perceive what God—Father, Jesus, Holy Spirit—is doing in the lives of those close to you?
- Very easy
 - Easy
 - Neither easy nor difficult
 - Difficult
 - Very difficult
- 16) How easily can you perceive what God—Father, Jesus, Holy Spirit—is doing in the community?
- Very easy
 - Easy
 - Neither easy nor difficult
 - Difficult
 - Very difficult
- 17) How easily can you perceive what God—Father, Jesus, Holy Spirit—is doing in the world?
- Very easy
 - Easy
 - Neither easy nor difficult
 - Difficult
 - Very difficult
- 18) How easily can you perceive what God—Father, Jesus, Holy Spirit—is doing in Beloved Lutheran Church?
- Very easy
 - Easy
 - Neither easy nor difficult
 - Difficult
 - Very difficult
- 19) How easily can you talk with someone who attends Beloved Lutheran Church about what you perceive God—Father, Jesus, Holy Spirit—is doing?
- Very easy
 - Easy
 - Neither easy nor difficult
 - Difficult
 - Very difficult
- 20) How easily can you talk with someone who does not attend Beloved Lutheran Church about what you perceive God—Father, Jesus, Holy Spirit—is doing?
- Very easy
 - Easy
 - Neither easy nor difficult
 - Difficult
 - Very difficult

- 21) How easily can you talk with someone who attends Beloved Lutheran Church about your faith in God—Father, Jesus, Holy Spirit—when they initiate the topic?
- Very easy
 - Easy
 - Neither easy nor difficult
 - Difficult
 - Very difficult
- 22) How easily can you talk with someone who does not attend Beloved Lutheran Church about your faith in God—Father, Jesus, Holy Spirit—when they initiate the topic?
- Very easy
 - Easy
 - Neither easy nor difficult
 - Difficult
 - Very difficult
- 23) How easily can you initiate a conversation with someone who attends Beloved Lutheran Church about faith in God—Father, Jesus, Holy Spirit?
- Very easy
 - Easy
 - Neither easy nor difficult
 - Difficult
 - Very difficult
- 24) How easily can you initiate a conversation with someone who does not attend Beloved Lutheran Church about faith in God—Father, Jesus, Holy Spirit?
- Very easy
 - Easy
 - Neither easy nor difficult
 - Difficult
 - Very difficult
- 25) Over the course of your life, what has been your religious background? (Check all that apply.)
- | | |
|---|---|
| <input type="radio"/> Lutheran/Free Lutheran | <input type="radio"/> Evangelical |
| <input type="radio"/> Moravian | <input type="radio"/> Seventh-day Adventists |
| <input type="radio"/> Methodist | <input type="radio"/> Jewish |
| <input type="radio"/> Roman Catholic | <input type="radio"/> Mormon |
| <input type="radio"/> Baptist | <input type="radio"/> Jehovah's Witness |
| <input type="radio"/> Presbyterian | <input type="radio"/> Agnostic (Unsure of the existence of God) |
| <input type="radio"/> Episcopalian | <input type="radio"/> Atheist (Certain there is no God) |
| <input type="radio"/> Greek or Russian Orthodox | <input type="radio"/> Nothing in particular |
| <input type="radio"/> Assembly of God/Pentecostal | <input type="radio"/> Other (please specify) _____ |
- 26) What is your gender?
- Female
 - Male
- 27) What is your birthdate? (Type your answer in the text box including slashes: 2 digits for month / 2 digits for date / 4 digits for year, i.e., 01/05/1962)
- Month/Day/Year

APPENDIX B: END LINE QUESTIONNAIRE

Please answer every question. Provide one answer to all questions except where instructed to "Check all that apply."

- 1) On average, between December 1, 2018, and May 5, 2019, how often did you attend Sunday worship services at Beloved Lutheran Church?
 - Usually every week
 - Three times a month
 - Twice a month
 - Once a month
 - No less than once but no more than five times total
 - Never
- 2) On average, between Ash Wednesday, March 6, 2019, to April 10, 2019, how many times did you attended Lenten Wednesday worship services?
 - Every week for six weeks
 - Five times
 - Four times
 - Three times
 - Two times
 - One time
 - Never
- 3) Did you attend the event Let's TACO Bout God on May 5, 2019?
 - Yes
 - No
- 4) How long have you been attending Beloved Lutheran Church?
 - Less than 2 years
 - At least 2 years but less than 5 years
 - At least 5 years but less than 10 years
 - At least 10 years but less than 15 years
 - 15 years or more
- 5) God—Father, Jesus, Holy Spirit¹—is actively involved in your life.
 - Always
 - Usually
 - Sometimes
 - Rarely
 - Never

¹ “God—Father, Jesus, Holy Spirit” was intentionally used in the questionnaires so as to focus on the triune nature of God. “Father” was chosen as it is consistent with biblical translations, including the NIV, the ecumenical creeds, and most liturgical language while reflecting the vocabulary commonly used in the research context. While the liturgy uses the word “Son” in the trinitarian formula, people within the research context typically use the name “Jesus” in the course of theological conversations and prayers because using a personal name is more relational. “Holy Spirit” was likewise chosen as it is consistent with biblical translations, the ecumenical creeds, and most liturgical language, as well as to broaden participants’ discernment of God’s active presence while creating space for those participants who are more likely to talk about the movement of the Holy Spirit in their lives.

- 6) God—Father, Jesus, Holy Spirit—is actively involved in the lives of those close to you.
- Always
 - Usually
 - Sometimes
 - Rarely
 - Never
- 7) God—Father, Jesus, Holy Spirit—is actively involved in the community.
- Always
 - Usually
 - Sometimes
 - Rarely
 - Never
- 8) God—Father, Jesus, Holy Spirit—is actively involved in the world.
- Always
 - Usually
 - Sometimes
 - Rarely
 - Never
- 9) God—Father, Jesus, Holy Spirit—is actively involved in Beloved Lutheran Church.
- Always
 - Usually
 - Sometimes
 - Rarely
 - Never
- 10) When I pray, I thank God—Father, Jesus, Holy Spirit—for specific ways God acts in my life.
- Every day
 - A few times a week
 - A few times a month
 - Less than once a month
 - Every few years
 - Never
- 11) When I pray, I ask God—Father, Jesus, Holy Spirit—to help me perceive what God is up to.
- Every day
 - A few times a week
 - A few times a month
 - Less than once a month
 - Every few years
 - Never
- 12) How easily can you talk to someone about the Bible?
- Very easy
 - Easy
 - Neither easy nor difficult
 - Difficult
 - Very difficult
- 13) How easily can you retell stories from the Bible?
- Very easy
 - Easy
 - Neither easy nor difficult
 - Difficult
 - Very difficult

- 14) How easily can you connect stories from the Bible with your own life?
- Very easy
 - Easy
 - Neither easy nor difficult
 - Difficult
 - Very difficult
- 15) How easily can you perceive what God—Father, Jesus, Holy Spirit—is doing in the Bible?
- Very easy
 - Easy
 - Neither easy nor difficult
 - Difficult
 - Very difficult
- 16) How easily can you perceive what God—Father, Jesus, Holy Spirit—is doing in your life?
- Very easy
 - Easy
 - Neither easy nor difficult
 - Difficult
 - Very difficult
- 17) How easily can you perceive what God—Father, Jesus, Holy Spirit—is doing in the lives of those close to you?
- Very easy
 - Easy
 - Neither easy nor difficult
 - Difficult
 - Very difficult
- 18) How easily can you perceive what God—Father, Jesus, Holy Spirit—is doing in the community?
- Very easy
 - Easy
 - Neither easy nor difficult
 - Difficult
 - Very difficult
- 19) How easily can you perceive what God—Father, Jesus, Holy Spirit—is doing in the world?
- Very easy
 - Easy
 - Neither easy nor difficult
 - Difficult
 - Very difficult
- 20) How easily can you perceive what God—Father, Jesus, Holy Spirit—is doing in Beloved Lutheran Church?
- Very easy
 - Easy
 - Neither easy nor difficult
 - Difficult
 - Very difficult

- 21) How easily can you talk with someone who attends Beloved Lutheran Church about what you perceive God—Father, Jesus, Holy Spirit—is doing?
- Very easy
 - Easy
 - Neither easy nor difficult
 - Difficult
 - Very difficult
- 22) How easily can you talk with someone who does not attend Beloved Lutheran Church about what you perceive God—Father, Jesus, Holy Spirit—is doing?
- Very easy
 - Easy
 - Neither easy nor difficult
 - Difficult
 - Very difficult
- 23) How easily can you talk with someone who attends Beloved Lutheran Church about your faith in God—Father, Jesus, Holy Spirit—when they initiate the topic?
- Very easy
 - Easy
 - Neither easy nor difficult
 - Difficult
 - Very difficult
- 24) How easily can you talk with someone who does not attend Beloved Lutheran Church about your faith in God—Father, Jesus, Holy Spirit—when they initiate the topic?
- Very easy
 - Easy
 - Neither easy nor difficult
 - Difficult
 - Very difficult
- 25) How easily can you initiate a conversation with someone who attends Beloved Lutheran Church about faith in God—Father, Jesus, Holy Spirit?
- Very easy
 - Easy
 - Neither easy nor difficult
 - Difficult
 - Very difficult
- 26) How easily can you initiate a conversation with someone who does not attend Beloved Lutheran Church about faith in God—Father, Jesus, Holy Spirit?
- Very easy
 - Easy
 - Neither easy nor difficult
 - Difficult
 - Very difficult

27) Over the course of your life, what has been your religious background? (Check all that apply.)

- | | |
|---|---|
| <input type="radio"/> Lutheran/Free Lutheran | <input type="radio"/> Seventh-day Adventists |
| <input type="radio"/> Moravian | <input type="radio"/> Jewish |
| <input type="radio"/> Methodist | <input type="radio"/> Mormon |
| <input type="radio"/> Roman Catholic | <input type="radio"/> Jehovah's Witness |
| <input type="radio"/> Baptist | <input type="radio"/> Agnostic (Unsure of the existence of God) |
| <input type="radio"/> Presbyterian | <input type="radio"/> Atheist (Certain there is no God) |
| <input type="radio"/> Episcopalian | <input type="radio"/> Nothing in particular |
| <input type="radio"/> Greek or Russian Orthodox | <input type="radio"/> Other (please specify) |
| <input type="radio"/> Assembly of God/Pentecostal | _____ |
| <input type="radio"/> Evangelical | |

28) What is your gender?

- Female
- Male

29) What is your birthdate? (Type your answer in the text box: 2 digits for month, 2 digits for date, and 4 digits for year, i.e. 01/05/1962)

- Month _____
- Date _____
- Year _____

APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Welcome! These interviews are an opportunity to listen attentively to your experiences, stories, and perspectives. Interviews provide depth and texture in surfacing voices and experiences that surveys cannot provide. Review the Informed Letter of Consent with the interviewee, including the following:

- Explain the purpose of the interview
- Address terms of confidentiality
- Explain the format of the interview
- Indicate how long the interview usually takes
- Tell them how to get in touch with you
- Ask them if they have any questions

Conversation Prompts

- 1) Tell me a funny story about you or a family member when you were a child or youth. (This is an ice breaker and hopefully gets them into storytelling mode.)
- 2) When did faith become important to you? Who was important in your faith formation?
- 3) What is your understanding of the Kingdom (or Reign) of God? Where do you see the Kingdom (or Reign) of God during your life?
- 4) Tell me about a time when you perceived what God—Father, Jesus, Holy Spirit¹—was doing in the Bible. One of those Aha! moments.
- 5) Where were you and what were you doing last Tuesday morning at 9 AM? Where was God, and what was God doing then?
- 6) If you think back over your life, share with me one crisis or critical moment in your life. What happened? Where was God in the midst of that experience?
- 7) Share a story about a time when you perceived what God—Father, Jesus, Holy Spirit—is doing in your life. In the lives of those close to you. In the community. In the world. In the church.
- 8) Tell me about a time when you found God—Father, Jesus, Holy Spirit—present and active in and through your neighbor or a stranger.
- 9) Have you ever had an experience of God’s presence? What happened?
- 10) How do you feel about sharing what you believe about God, telling a faith story, with a family member or friend? Tell me about a time when you talked to someone about God.

¹ “God—Father, Jesus, Holy Spirit” was intentionally used in the interviews so as to focus on the triune nature of God. “Father” was chosen as it is consistent with biblical translations, including the NIV, the ecumenical creeds, and most liturgical language while reflecting the vocabulary commonly used in the research context. While the liturgy uses the word “Son” in the trinitarian formula, people within the research context typically use the name “Jesus” in the course of theological conversations and prayers because using a personal name is more relational. “Holy Spirit” was likewise chosen as it is consistent with biblical translations, the ecumenical creeds, and most liturgical language, as well as to broaden participants’ discernment of God’s active presence while creating space for those participants who are more likely to talk about the movement of the Holy Spirit in their lives.

APPENDIX D: FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL

Focus Group 1 Protocol for Teachers

Welcome! This focus group is an opportunity to listen attentively to your experiences, stories, and perspectives. It provides depth and texture to experiences that surveys cannot provide.

Review the Informed Letter of Consent, including the following:

- Explain the purpose
- Address terms of confidentiality
- Explain the format
- Indicate how long the focus group usually takes (60 minutes)
- Tell them how to get in touch with you
- Ask them if they have any questions

Conversation Prompts

- 1) What did the children share? What surprised or delighted you?
- 2) How did the children's responses change over time?
- 3) How has this experience with the children affected your perceptions of God's active presence? (e.g., in Scripture, your life, the lives of friends and family, the community, the world, and/or church?)
- 4) How has this experience with the children effected your ability to talk about God?

Focus Group 2 Protocol for Interventions 1, 2, and 4

Welcome! This focus group is an opportunity to listen attentively to your experiences, stories, and perspectives. It provides depth and texture to experiences that surveys cannot provide.

Review the Informed Letter of Consent, including the following:

- Explain the purpose and which event they are here to discuss (highlight activities as appropriate to refresh their memories)
- Address terms of confidentiality
- Explain the format
- Indicate how long the focus group usually takes (1 hour)
- Tell them how to get in touch with you
- Ask them if they have any questions

Conversation Prompts

- 1) Looking back over this event, what do you remember about it? What did people share? What surprised or delighted you? What confused you?
- 2) What parts of the experience were difficult or challenging? Why? What parts were easy? Why?
- 3) How has this experience affected your perceptions of God's active presence (e.g., in Scripture, your life, the lives of friends and family, the community, the world, and/or church?)
- 4) How has this experience affected your ability to talk about God?

APPENDIX E: IMPLIED CONSENT FORMS

Implied Consent Letter for Baseline Survey

November 19, 2018

Dear BLC Member,

You are invited to be in a research study regarding how we answer the question, “What is God up to?” I hope to learn how people perceive God’s active presence in Scripture, in their lives, in the lives of those close to them, in their community, in the world, or in the church. Furthermore, I am exploring how we talk with one another about God. You were selected as a possible participant in this study because you are actively involved at Beloved Lutheran Church. This survey is limited to people 18 years of age and older.

If you decide to participate, please complete the following survey. Your return of this survey is implied consent. The survey is designed to gather your thoughts and experiences about how you see, hear, know, and talk about what God is up to. This survey will take about 7 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 Beloved Lutheran Church or with me. 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:

Rev. Andrew Schlecht
Pastor, Beloved Lutheran Church
Address
Phone Number
Email Address

Thank you for your time.
Sincerely,
Pastor Andrew Schlecht

Implied Consent Letter for End Line Survey

May 1, 2019

Dear BLC Member,

You are invited to be in a research study for my Doctoral thesis regarding how we answer the question, “What is God up to?” I hope to learn how people perceive God’s active presence in Scripture, in their lives, in the lives of those close to them, in their community, in the world, or in the church. Furthermore, I am exploring how we talk with one another about God. You were selected as a possible participant in this study because you are actively involved at Beloved Lutheran Church. This survey is limited to people 18 years of age and older.

If you decide to participate, please complete the following survey. Your return of this survey is implied consent. The survey is designed to gather your thoughts and experiences about how you see, hear, and know about what God is up to. This survey will take about 7 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 Beloved Lutheran Church or with me. 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:

Rev. Andrew Schlecht
Pastor, Beloved Lutheran Church
Address
Phone Number
Email Address

Thank you for your time.
Sincerely,
Pastor Andrew Schlecht

APPENDIX F: INFORMED CONSENT FORMS

INFORMED CONSENT FORM FOR INTERVIEWS

Do You Hear What I Hear? Discernment and Dialogue in a Secular Age

You are invited to be in a research study regarding how we answer the question, “What is God up to?”

You were selected as a possible participant because you participated in a recent congregational conversation event. 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 doctoral thesis 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 determine how people perceive God’s active presence in Scripture, in their lives, in the lives of those close to them, in their community, in the world, or in the church. Furthermore, I am exploring how we talk with one another about God.

Procedures:

If you agree to be in this study, we would ask you to participate in an interview. The interview will last no longer than 90 minutes.

Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study:

There are no special risks involved by being a part of this study, aside from normal life risks. There are no direct benefits of participating in this research. Indirect benefits to yourself are potentially improved understanding of Scripture and Christian faith formation.

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 study at BLC; only my advisors Daniel Anderson and Alvin Luedke, and I will have access to the data and, if applicable, any tape or video recording. If the research is terminated for any reason, all data and recordings will be destroyed. While I will make every effort to ensure confidentiality, anonymity cannot be guaranteed.

The interview will be digitally recorded, and the files will be stored on my computer. Only I will have access to this raw data. Raw data will be destroyed by June 1, 2023 (Federal guidelines specify a minimum of 3 years for retention of data).

Voluntary Nature of the Study:

Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Luther Seminary and/or with Beloved 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 Andrew Schlecht. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you may contact me, as noted below:

Rev. Andrew Schlecht
Pastor, Beloved Lutheran Church
Address
Phone Number

Email Address

You may also contact my advisors with any questions or concerns:

Dr. Daniel Anderson

Dr. Alvin Luedke

Email Address

Email Address

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 (or videotaped):

Signature _____ Date _____

I consent to allow the use of my direct quotations in the published thesis document.

Signature _____ Date _____

INFORMED CONSENT FORM FOR FOCUS GROUPS
Do You Hear What I Hear? Discernment and Dialogue in a Secular Age

You are invited to be in a research study regarding how we answer the question, “What is God up to?”

You were selected as a possible participant because you participated in a recent congregational conversation event. 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 doctoral thesis 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 determine how people perceive God’s active presence in Scripture, in their lives, in the lives of those close to them, in their community, in the world, or in the church. Furthermore, I am exploring how we talk with one another about God.

Procedures:

If you agree to be in this study, we would ask you to participate in a focus group discussion about your experience of the congregational event, and the impact that event has had on your faith. The discussion will last no longer than 90 minutes.

Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study:

There are no special risks involved by being a part of this study, aside from normal life risks. There are no direct benefits of participating in this research. Indirect benefits to yourself are potentially improved understanding of Scripture and Christian faith formation.

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 study at BLC; only my advisors Daniel Anderson and Alvin Luedke, and I will have access to the data and, if applicable, any tape or video recording. If the research is terminated for any reason, all data and recordings will be destroyed. While I will make every effort to ensure confidentiality, anonymity cannot be guaranteed.

The focus group discussion will be digitally recorded, and the files will be stored on my computer. Only I will have access to this raw data. Raw data will be destroyed by June 1, 2023 (Federal guidelines specify a minimum of 3 years for retention of data).

Voluntary Nature of the Study:

Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Luther Seminary and/or with Beloved 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 Andrew Schlecht. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you may contact me, as noted below:

Rev. Andrew Schlecht
Pastor, Beloved Lutheran Church
Address
Phone Number
Email Address

You may also contact my advisors with any questions or concerns:

Dr. Daniel Anderson	Dr. Alvin Luedke
Email Address	Email Address

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 (or videotaped):

Signature _____ Date _____

I consent to allow the use of my direct quotations in the published thesis document.

Signature _____ Date _____

APPENDIX G: INTERVENTION 1 SUNDAY WORSHIP

The following is a summary of the components of Intervention 1: Worship for Sunday mornings.

SEASON	DATE	THEME & SEASON	SCRIPTURE & MESSAGE	INTERVENTIONS
ADVENT	12/2/18	The Birth of John the Baptist Foretold: Advent 1: Do you see what I see?	Luke 1:1-25 ; Angel appears to Zechariah; his wife Elizabeth will give birth; What vision does the angel give him? What do they see when they look at themselves? At their future? What do people see when they look at Zachariah and Elizabeth? What does God see when he looks at them and the world?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gospel acclamation verse 1 from “Do you see what I see?” • Scripture was shown as a video clip from “The Gospel of Luke” • “Anticipatory Set: “What do you SEE God doing in this passage?”
	12/9/18	Mary Visits Elizabeth: Advent 2: Do you hear what I hear?	Luke 1:26-56 ; Mary’s song; Jewish understanding of <i>shema</i> as hear and obey; Word comes to us as law and Gospel; What do you hear in Mary’s song?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gospel acclamation verse 2 from “Do you hear what I hear?” • Scripture was shown as a video clip from “The Gospel of Luke” • Anticipatory Set: “What do you HEAR God saying in this reading?”
	12/16/18	The Birth of John the Baptist: Advent 3: Do you know what I know?	Luke 1:57-80 ; John is born, Zachariah’s song; what does he know through the Holy Spirit? The Jewish understanding of <i>yadah</i> : knowing as remembering and relationship; link to Holy Communion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gospel acclamation verse 3 from “Do you know what I know?” • Scripture was shown as a video clip from “The Gospel of Luke” • Anticipatory Set: “What does God want us to KNOW in this reading?”
	12/23/18	Announcement of Jesus’ birth to Joseph: Advent 4: Listen to what I say.	Matthew 1:18-25 ; Jesus will be Immanuel/Emmanuel; What is Matthew saying to us? What does the angel say? What does Joseph say? What do we say? What kind of God is with us (Emmanuel)?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gospel acclamation verse 4 from “Listen to what I say.” • Scripture was shown as a video clip from “The Gospel of Luke” • Anticipatory Set: “What does God want us to SAY in this reading?”

SEASON	DATE	THEME & SEASON	SCRIPTURE & MESSAGE	INTERVENTIONS
CHRISTMAS	12/24/18	Birth of Jesus: Christmas Eve: Jesus, seeing, hearing, knowing, saying.	Luke 2:1-14 (15-20) ; Birth of Jesus; What if the manger were empty? What if Jesus had never been born? What is God up to? What does God want us to see? Hear? Know? Say?	
	12/30/18	Birth of Jesus: Christmas 1	Matthew 1:1-17 ; The genealogy of Jesus the Messiah	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anticipatory Set: “What is God up to in this reading?”
	1/6/19	Kingdom of God: Day of Epiphany	Matthew 2:1-23 ; The Magi visit the infant Jesus; flight into Egypt, massacre of the innocents, the return to Nazareth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anticipatory Set: “What is God/Jesus/Holy Spirit up to in this reading?” • PAR team member models response • NOTE: a substitute pastor preached and led worship as I was on vacation.
EPIPHANY	1/13/19	Baptism of Jesus; the beginning of Jesus Ministry Epiphany 1	Matthew 3:1-17 ; John the Baptist, Jesus is baptized to fulfill all righteousness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anticipatory Set: “What is God up to in this reading?” • PAR team member models response • NOTE: a substitute pastor preached and led worship as I was on vacation.
	1/20/19	Jesus in the Wilderness; the Kingdom of God Is Near Epiphany 2	Matthew 4:1-17 ; Jesus tempted in the wilderness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anticipatory Set: “What is God up to in this reading?” • PAR team member models response
	1/27/19	The Kingdom of God Is Near: Epiphany 3	Matthew 5:1-20 ; Beatitudes, we are blessed with divine favor/grace to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anticipatory Set: “What is God up to in this reading?” • PAR team member models response
	2/3/19	The Kingdom of God Is Near: Epiphany 4	Matthew 6:7-21 ; Lord's prayer, treasure in heaven	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sli.do: Where have you seen God's active presence in your prayer life?

SEASON	DATE	THEME & SEASON	SCRIPTURE & MESSAGE	INTERVENTIONS
	2/10/19	The Kingdom of God Is Near: Epiphany 5	Matthew 7:1-14, 24-29 ; Speck in the eye, narrow gate, wise man builds a house on rock	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sli.do: Where have you seen the Kingdom of God?
	2/17/19	The Kingdom of God Is Near: Epiphany 6	Matt 13:24-45 ; Parable of wheat and weeds	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sli.do: What words or phrases pop out at you? Where do you see the Kingdom of God?
	2/24/19	The Kingdom of God Is Near: Epiphany 7	Matt 14:13-33 ; Feeding the 5,000; walking on the sea	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Worshippers were invited to turn to a neighbor to share their responses to the question "What is God up to?" during the sharing of the peace.
TRANSFIGURATION	3/3/19	The Kingdom of God Is Near: Transfiguration	Matthew 16:24 - 17:8 ; Passion prediction, what it means to bear our crosses as disciples, repentance, Jesus' presence in suffering and persecution, God's instructions to LISTEN to Jesus.	
LENT	3/10/19 Cancelled	The Kingdom of God Is Near: Lent 1	Matt 18:15-38 ; Church discipline, forgiving 70x7, the parable of the unforgiving servant	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sherlock Psalms video from Sunday school intervention used as children's message • NOTE: Due to Blizzard worship was canceled, and above video was shown on May 5.
	3/17/19	The Kingdom of God Is Near: Lent 2	Matthew 20:1-16 ; Parable of laborers in the vineyard	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Witness talk by a member of PAR team (due to illness this was delayed until April 7.) • Sherlock Psalms video from Sunday school intervention used as children's message
	3/24/19	The Kingdom of God Is Near: Lent 3	Matthew 22:1-14 ; Parable of the wedding banquet	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Witness talk by a member of PAR team (due to illness this was delayed until April 7.) • Sherlock Psalms video from Sunday school intervention used as children's message

SEASON	DATE	THEME & SEASON	SCRIPTURE & MESSAGE	INTERVENTIONS
	3/31/19	The Kingdom of God Is Near: Lent 4	Matthew 25:1-13 ; Parable of the bridesmaids	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Witness talk by a member of PAR team (due to illness this was delayed until April 7.) • Sherlock Psalms video from Sunday school intervention used as children's message.
	4/7/19	The Kingdom of God Is Near: Lent 5	Matt 25:31-46 ; Parable of the Last judgment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Witness talk by a member of the PAR team • Sherlock Psalms video from Sunday school intervention used as children's message
HOLY WEEK	4/14/19	Jesus the Messiah: Palm Sunday	Matthew 21:1-17 ; Triumphal entry, cleansing temple	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Witness Talk by a member of the PAR team. • Sherlock Psalms video from Sunday school intervention used as children's message
	4/18/19	Gifts for the Journey / Jesus the Messiah: Maundy Thursday	Matt 26:17-30 ; Preparing for the Last Supper, mention of betrayal, Words of Institution; focus on Remembrance and use of senses; Jesus presence in the present	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • None
	4/19/19	Jesus the Messiah: Good Friday		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • NOTE: the congregation participates annually in an ecumenical community Good Friday worship service. The preacher was from another non-Lutheran congregation, and this service was held at a Catholic church. Thus, this was not part of this intervention.
EASTER	4/21/19	Jesus the Messiah: Easter Resurrection Sunday	Matthew 28:1-10 ; Resurrection, empty tomb, women encounter the risen Jesus	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Witness Talk by a member of the congregation • Sherlock Psalms video from Sunday school intervention used as children's message • Invite others to share on May 5
	4/28/19	Jesus the Messiah: Easter 2	Matt 28:16-20 ; Great commission; being and making disciples; baptismal identity; teaching to obey Jesus.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Witness talk by a member of the congregation. • Sherlock Psalms video from Sunday school intervention used as children's message • Invite others to share on May 5

SEASON	DATE	THEME & SEASON	SCRIPTURE & MESSAGE	INTERVENTIONS
	5/5/19	New Covenant Community: Easter 3	Acts 10:1-17, 34-48 ; Peter's witness to the Gentiles; Cornelius and Peter seeing, hearing, knowing, and saying.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sherlock Psalms video from Sunday school intervention used as children's message • Worshippers were invited to come forward to witness.
	5/12/19	New Covenant Community: Easter 4	Acts 4:1-22 ; Peter and John Before the Sanhedrin; Salvation is found in no one else but Jesus.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Begin end line survey.
	5/19/19	New Covenant Community: Easter 5	Acts 4:1-22 ; Peter and John Before the Sanhedrin; Salvation is found in no one else but Jesus.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continue end line survey. • Sunday School Program: children witness to the congregation • Witness Talk by a member of the congregation • Remembrance of Baptism

APPENDIX H: INTERVENTION 2 LENT

For the Wednesday Lent, soup and sandwich fellow time before worship from March 6 to April 10, the confirmation students led an intergenerational Bible study with those attending, including adults. Note that not everyone attending the meal participated in the Bible study. This has been an ongoing practice for the past four years. However, several changes were made. First, a conversation prompt was placed on a tent in the center of the table. This conversation prompt was used at the beginning of the Bible study as an anticipatory set (question). After the Bible study, this became a reflection question as the participants were invited to consider how their answers might have changed as a result of their conversation. Second, to keep the conversation open and allow for more time, the closing intercessory prayer was omitted. The format for the Bible study follows:

Lenten Bible Study

Date: *List Date*

Opening Prayer: Dear Father, open our hearts and minds to your Word. Send your Holy Spirit to help us grow in wisdom, and in stature and in favor with you and others. Amen!

Discuss: *“Include Conversation Prompt Here”*

Scripture: *Include Scripture Reference Here: groups discussed the preaching text, as noted below for each week.*

Read the passage, highlight or underline important words or phrases below:

Include the text of the Scripture passage here.

Why did you highlight or underline these words or phrases?

Observations:

Who wrote this book?

When and Where written:

Why written?

To whom was it written?

Who are the people in this passage?

What happens?

What delights or comforts me?

What confuses or challenges me?

What do I learn about God and myself?

Application(s):

Did this passage contain an example to follow, a warning to heed, a promise to claim?

What was it, and how does it apply to my life at home, work, school, or church?

What does God require of me?

What am I going to do?

Reflect: “Include Conversation Prompt Here”

Sermon Themes

The sermons during worship immediately following the fellowship time focused on the same Scripture and related to the conversation prompts on the cards. The themes for each of the six Wednesdays in Lent were as follows. Note that members of the PAR team generated the descriptions. In addition, a meditation was incorporated into the service.

Week One (Ash Wednesday): The first week was an "easy, introductory" conversation prompt that most people would recognize and hopefully be "comfortable" with: "God so loved the world. What does that mean to you?" The sermon focused on John 3:16, with an emphasis on the incarnation, mortality, Jesus' 40-day withdrawal into the desert (like our 40-day journey through Lent) in preparation for his life and ministry, culminating in Christ's crucifixion and resurrection. Everything hangs on "God so loved the world... that He gave His only Son." "What that means will be our week-by-week journey over these next 40 days."

Week Two: For the middle four weeks, we used the Scripture readings from the Biblical Lenses (see chapter three). For the second week of Lent, we used Mark 8:17-26. The conversation prompt was, "Where did God show up this week?" The sermon focused on seeing God at work in our lives but then moved on to seeing God's active presence more clearly. Like the blind man who first saw partly and then saw clearly, as we get better at seeing through this new lens, we get better at seeing what God is up to- in the big stuff (death and dying) and the small stuff (peanut

butter). "Over these 40 days we'll continue to move towards Easter, and week by week, we'll find it easier to see what God *was* up to, and what God *is* up to."

Week Three: The preaching text was from the Book of Ruth, "Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried" (1:16b-17a). The conversation prompt was, "Who are six people in your life that you could share the story of how you came to know Jesus?" The sermon focused on carrying on Jesus' ministry. He sent the twelve disciples, then he sent the seventy-two, all to proclaim God's grace and love through the arrival of the Kingdom of God. "We have a responsibility, a calling, a mission to live out the Great Commission, to share our memories, our Jesus stories, with others—especially the six that first came into our hearts downstairs!"

Week Four: Luke 24:13-35 The Road to Emmaus. The conversation prompt was, "If Jesus was sitting at the table with you right now, what would you ask Him?" The sermon highlighted how the entire Old Testament shouts, "Jesus is coming! Our Saviour is coming!" Even though the apostles that had spent three years under Jesus' direct tutelage, they were absolutely clueless. From the proto-evangelism of Gen 3:15 to the Jew's deliverance from Egypt, to Isaiah 53, to ... it all screams, "Jesus is coming!" but they didn't get it. Oftentimes neither do we. And THAT'S OK! The followers of Jesus still went out and told His story: the story of grace, the story of redemption, the story of forgiveness. Even though we have questions and can always learn more, right now, we are called to go and make disciples by telling our stories.

Week Five: Luke 23:32-49 Jesus and the Two Criminals. The conversation prompt was, "Where have you seen the triune God's sacrifice in your life?" The sermon focused on the crucifixion with an eye to the resurrection. The sermon was about the Passover Lamb, the once-and-for-all sacrifice of Jesus, that brought about perfect grace and perfect justice. It was about the end of Psalm 22. It was about Jesus looking ahead and saying, "You'll be with me in paradise!" It was about why we continually point to the cross. Maybe tie in with the Matthias Grünwald

painting of Jesus (Isenheim Altarpiece), and the simultaneous presence at the cross of such hatred and evil (hell on earth), and the conquering love and redemption.

Week Six: Luke 24:2-3 The stone is rolled away. The conversation prompt was, “What is your favorite memory of Christmas or Easter?” The sermon is about, duh, Easter! The sermon includes walking back through Lent and witnessed God’s active presence—the story of how we have all walked down this path together, and how we now take God’s story and make it our own to go out and witness to Easter! Praise God!

Meditations/Visualizations

Meditations were included at the worship service during Lent to help worshipers reimagine the triune God’s active presence. Each week, worshipers were given a business card when they entered the sanctuary. One side of the card was blank while the other side displayed the question, “What is GOD up to?” These cards were used to record their thoughts during the meditations each week so they could take them with them to continue this activity. These meditations were typically conducted at the end of the sermon.

Week One March 6: This meditation was a centering activity that engaged their missional imagination. Worshipers were invited to “sit comfortably, both feet on the floor, close your eyes and take a slow deep breath. Inhale slowly, now exhale slowly. Allow the tensions of the day to melt away. Now think of a place you love to be. Look around you. What wonderful things you see! Notice the smells. Notice the sounds. See God there, making it and saying, ‘Good. Very good!’ Notice God, our loving parent, tenderly caring for the smallest detail. See God smiling, finishing a fine point. See God concentrating, working out a troubled spot. See God thinking, inventing, producing, balancing, tipping, pouring, gathering, scattering, painting, breathing, laughing, [mourning,] turning, loving. Now take a slow deep breath, and exhale slowly. When

you are ready, open your eyes.”¹ Now pull out the business card you were given when you entered the sanctuary, write down the name of the place you imagined. Now record what you envisioned God was doing. This week continue to think about and remember your favorite place and all that God was doing. Thank God for his active presence in your life. Say these things out loud—not just in your head— whether by yourself or with someone else. When we say it out loud, it becomes more real.

Week Two March 20: Due to a blizzard, the March 13 service was canceled, and meditations were shifted one week. Worshipers were invited to “sit comfortably, both feet on the floor, close your eyes and take a slow deep breath. Inhale slowly, now exhale slowly. Allow the tensions of the day to melt away. Now, *remember* all the places you have been this past week and picture them in your mind . . . *remember* the things you have done . . . and *remember* the faces of the people you met . . . *remember* what you heard.

Give thanks to God for each of them, those who blessed you, those who challenged you. Now take a slow deep breath, and exhale slowly. When you are ready, open your eyes.” On the business card you were given when you entered the sanctuary, write down what you remembered: the places, the things you have done, and the names of the people. G. K. Chesterton, a famous Christian writer, once noted, “You say grace before meals. All right, but I say grace before the concert and the opera, and grace before the play and the pantomime, and grace before I open a book, and grace before sketching, painting, swimming, fencing, boxing, walking, playing, dancing and grace before I dip the pen in ink.”² So this week, I invite you to take this card with you as a reminder to say grace throughout the day and not just at a meal, to thank God for all the places you go, the things you do, and the people you meet. Thank God for his active presence in

¹ Pat Taylor Ellison and Patrick R. Keifert, *Talking About Our Faith* (St. Paul, MN: Church Innovations Publishing, 1997), 58.

² Martin Wroe, ed., *God: What the Critics Say—Not Forgetting Heaven, Hell, Death, Religion, Sex, Money, Faith, Hope, Love, and Quite a Bit Else* (London: Spire, 1992), 58.

your life. Remember to say it out loud by yourself—not just in your head—or with someone who is with you. When we say it out loud, it becomes more real.

Week Three March 27: This meditation particularized this missional imagination to the participants' lives. Worshipers were invited to “sit comfortably, both feet on the floor, close your eyes and take a slow deep breath. Inhale slowly, now exhale slowly. Allow the tensions of the day to melt away. Now think about this morning at 9 AM. Where were you? What were you doing? Look around you. What wonderful things you see! Notice the smells. Notice the sounds. Notice the people. Where was God? What was God doing then? Now take a slow deep breath, and exhale slowly. When you are ready, open your eyes.”³ Now pull out the business card you were given when you entered the sanctuary, write down the name of the place. Now record what you envisioned God was doing. This week continue to think about all that God was doing. As you go through the week, add to the list. Thank God for his active presence in your life. Say these things out loud—not just in your head— whether by yourself or with someone else. When we say it out loud, it becomes more real. So this week, I invite you to take this card with you as a reminder to look for God's active presence throughout the week. When you notice his presence, write it down on the card and give thanks to God. Say it out loud by yourself—not just in your head—or with someone who is with you. When we say it out loud, it becomes more real.

Week Four April 3: There are days, moments, and events that define our lives. Sometimes they are good events, like birth, confirmation, graduation, marriage. Other times they are difficult, like a broken relationship, death of a loved one, divorce, loss of a job. In the Jewish Talmud, these events are often described using the phrase, “If not for that day . . .”⁴ Worshipers were invited to “sit comfortably, both feet on the floor, close your eyes and take a slow deep breath. Inhale slowly, now exhale slowly. Allow the tensions of the day to melt away. Now visualize

³ Ellison and Keifert, *Talking About Our Faith*, 58.

⁴ Michael Frost, *Seeing God in the Ordinary: A Theology of the Everyday* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2000), 119.

your life passing before you, from the moment of your birth . . . through to the present day. Imagine each second, each minute, each hour, each day, each year. Give thanks to God for each of them, those that blessed you, those that challenged you. Now choose one of them. Zoom into that moment in time. Notice the place . . . the people . . . the events of that day. Answer the question, “If not for that day . . .” How did that day affect you? Where was God at that moment in time? What was God doing? How did God reveal his presence? His love? His sorrow? Now take a slow deep breath, and exhale slowly. When you are ready, open your eyes.” On the business card you were given when you entered the sanctuary, write down the name of that moment. This week, meditate on the question, “If not for that day . . .” Thank God for that moment in time and for his active presence. Now turn to a neighbor and share your memory.

Week Five April 10 and Six April 18: This meditation particularized their missional imagination by connected it to witnessing and helping them imagine themselves as witnesses. Worshipers were given a business card when they entered the sanctuary. They were invited, “Write down the name of a person who has loved you. It can be someone who loved you recently or a long time ago. After the person’s name, write what the person has done to show you that love. For example, one of my pastors, Ron Lavin, would write down, ‘Walter loved me by telling me he believed in me.’ He explained that ‘Walter was the foreman at Waltz Brothers’ Tool and Die Company on the northwest side of Chicago. I worked there as a teenager. I was an athlete. I acted like someone who had his act together. I walked with a swagger. I looked like I had confidence. The truth of the matter is that I was a scared rabbit who didn’t believe in myself because, at the time, I knew nothing about God. When I became a Christian several years later, I realized that Walter was someone who had pointed me toward God because he told me he believed in me.’ Did you write down the name of a pastor? Most people don’t. That doesn’t mean the pastors don’t influence people by their love. It’s just that most folks feel love from family members, friends, or people like Walter who say the right thing at the right time in the right way.”

“Next, replace the name of the person who loved you with God’s name. [My friend] Ron Lavin’s sentence now reads, ‘God loved me by believing in me.’ After all, God uses people to get his love across to people. Consider the story of Paul’s conversion. ‘Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?’ Jesus asked. Saul might have replied, ‘It isn’t you that I persecute. It’s Christians.’ To that, Jesus would have replied, ‘I am in my people, my people in me. As you do it to the least of them, you do it to me.’ In other words, Walter was God’s witness to me, long before I even knew there was a God. “Now, do the practical part of putting this spiritual exercise into action. This week do for someone else what someone did for you that made you feel loved. In my case, I’ll be looking for someone to tell, ‘I believe in you.’⁵ Worshipers were encouraged to put the business card in their pockets as a reminder to thank God and to pray for a way to love another.

⁵ Ronald J. Lavin, *Witness: The Reign of God and Missional Churches Today* (Lima, Ohio: CSS Pub. Co, 2007), 55-57.

APPENDIX I: INTERVENTION 3 SUNDAY SCHOOL

For the Sunday school intervention from March 17 to May 5, the teachers encouraged students to share observations, examples, and stories that answered the questions: “What is God up to? Where have you seen God active during the past week?” The following is the information given to the teachers by members of the PAR team.

Dear Teachers,

We are inviting you to become Detectives of Divinity with your students during Lent from March 10 to April 14, 2019. God isn't out there somewhere in a galaxy far, far away. God hasn't retired, and he isn't sleeping on the job. God is busy and active in the world and in our lives. We are asking you to help the children become detectives and find places that God is active in their everyday lives. This will help the children gain a God-centered view of life as they learn to recognize where they can see God's active presence in Scripture, in their lives, in the lives of those close to them, in our community, in the world, and in the church.



At the bottom of the page are conversation prompts for each week during Lent from March 10 to April 14, 2019. We will be making a short video for each Sunday featuring our very own Sherlock Psalms! (You may recognize him from some videos we did a few years back: “Sherlock Psalms and the Search for the Essential Jesus.”) We will post the videos on YouTube, Facebook, and the BLC website. The video will be shown during music in the sanctuary. After returning to class, we ask you to please do the following:

- 1) Engage the students in answering these questions every Sunday, either at the beginning or the end of class. Please be sure to leave enough time at the end.
- 2) Record their answers with colorful gel pens on the graffiti wall—the large black sheet of paper in the classroom. Children can write their answers themselves on the graffiti wall, or you may write responses for younger children. Children can also draw pictures if they prefer. Please be sure to FILL the PAPER! Write large and draw big pictures.
- 3) We will put a new graffiti wall each week in your classroom as the completed ones will be displayed in the Fellowship Hall.
- 4) As part of the closing prayer, we ask you as their teachers to thank God for the specific examples shared by the children.

Thanks and Blessings,

The names of the members of the PAR team were listed.

The above letter also included rough preliminary scripts of the videos so the teachers would have an idea of what to expect. However, these scripts changed substantially once the videos were produced. The song “Detectives of Divinity” was discovered during the editing of the videos and was incorporated into the final videos. Words and music were written by Bryan Moyer Suderman, who graciously gave permission to use the recording of his music in the videos.¹ A portion of the lyrics was also incorporated into the script as an introduction to each video, which created a common thread and reinforced the overall theme. For the credits at the beginning of the video, the cast is listed as “Starring: God, Sherlock Psalms, You.” Credits are listed at the end for costume design, script, cast, music, location, and the dedication: “To the glory of God.”

There was a blizzard on March 10, so videos were delayed by one week, and, as a result, episode 5 was not shown until May 5. Sherlock Psalms wore a traditional Sherlock Holmes outfit complete with an Inverness coat (an outer-coat with sleeves covered by a long cape), deerstalker hat, and magnifying glass. Each week props and additional costumes were added as appropriate.

The following are the final versions of the scripts:

Week One March 17 (This first episode was delayed due to blizzard on March 10; this pushed back all the subsequent videos except Palm Sunday and Easter Sunday): Episode 1 Breakfast

[Setting: At a table eating breakfast with a plate of food along with boxes of cereal and a carton of milk. Optionally you can put a pajama top over his coat, but be sure the traditional Inverness coat is visible.]

Sherlock Psalms here, I’m a detective of divinity
 I’m looking all around for signs of God’s activity wherever they are found
 God is up to something of that you can be sure
 So let’s start the investigation
 The clues are everywhere . . .

I saw God at work while I was having breakfast today. Sometimes I don't stop and think about how amazing it is that we have such good food here. I just go to the fridge and am able to have a good, big breakfast, all because God made the plants and the soil and the water and the sun and

¹ Bryan Moyer Suderman, *Detectives of Divinity*, Copyright © SmallTall Music, <https://www.allmusic.com/album/detectives-of-divinity-mw0002299779>.

the farmers and everything else we need to have breakfast. Thank you, God, for breakfast! I saw God at work in my breakfast. Where did you see God at work today?

OK Kids, start the investigation, the clues are everywhere . . . What is God up to?

Week Two March 24: Episode 2 Church

[Setting: At the altar with a Bible, a baptismal bowl filled with water, baptismal candle, a paten with bread/large wafer, and a chalice. Optionally you can put a stole over his coat, but be sure the traditional Inverness coat is visible.]

Sherlock Psalms here, I'm a detective of divinity
I'm looking all around for signs of God's activity wherever they are found
God is up to something of that you can be sure
So let's start the investigation
The clues are everywhere . . .

I expect to see God at church today. I think I'll see God in the smiles on everyone's faces. I think I'll hear God in the joy of everyone singing hymns. I think I'll hear God's voice when we read the Bible. I know I'll see God when I see the smile on Pastor Andrew's face when he is sharing Communion with us. Jesus will even show up in the bread and the wine. The Holy Spirit will be hovering over the waters of Baptism. God will show up at church. Thank you, God, for church! Where will you see God at church today?

OK Kids, start the investigation, the clues are everywhere . . . What is God up to?

Week Three March 31: Episode 3 School

[Setting: Sitting at a desk in a classroom at the local school. The desk included various paraphernalia typical of a school such as a notebook, pencil, textbooks, glass beaker, and a knickknack from the teacher's desk featuring an apple. Optionally you can put a t-shirt with the school logo or mascot over his coat, but be sure the traditional Inverness coat is visible.]

Sherlock Psalms here, I'm a detective of divinity
I'm looking all around for signs of God's activity wherever they are found
God is up to something of that you can be sure
So let's start the investigation
The clues are everywhere . . .

I saw God at work this week when I was at school. I looked around and saw kids sitting at tables and doing work, like reading, writing, arithmetic, making music, and creating art. God wants us to learn and grow in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man so that we can do good things for him. So he gave us teachers, principals, secretaries, custodians, cooks, and bus drivers. It is amazing that God gave us minds to think, to imagine, and to remember. Thank you, God, for school! I saw God at work in my school. Where did you see God at work?

OK Kids, start the investigation, the clues are everywhere . . . What is God up to?

Week Four April 7: Episode 4 Hospital

[Setting: The local hospital would not allow filming, so this was filmed inside an ambulance. Sherlock had a sling on his nonfunctional arm, gauze wrapped around his other hand, band-aids

on his face, and small red sticky dots all over his face. Be sure the traditional Inverness coat is visible.]

Sherlock Psalms here, I'm a detective of divinity
I'm looking all around for signs of God's activity wherever they are found
God is up to something of that you can be sure
So let's start the investigation
The clues are everywhere . . .

God was at work this week when I went to the hospital. God worked through the nurses doing more than is expected. I saw God working through the ambulance crew, the doctors, and the pharmacists taking care of me. God was there in a man praying with someone who was sad and afraid. I saw God in the smile of an elderly woman when her husband touched her hand. I knew God was healing, comforting, holding, and encouraging ME. Thank you, God, for hospitals! I saw God at work in the hospital. Where did you see God at work today?

OK Kids, start the investigation, the clues are everywhere . . . What is God up to?

Week Five April 28 (Since the first episode was delayed due to blizzard on March 10 it was shown on May 5): Episode 5 Prayer

[Setting: Sitting at the baseball or softball field with the field clearly in view behind him along with a baseball bat, gloves, and baseball. Optionally he can wear a baseball cap and baseball jacket over his coat and cap, but be sure the traditional Inverness coat and deerstalker cap are visible.]

Sherlock Psalms here, I'm a detective of divinity
I'm looking all around for signs of God's activity wherever they are found
God is up to something of that you can be sure
So let's start the investigation
The clues are everywhere . . .

I saw God at work this week when I prayed to God for sunny weather. I went outside to play baseball and what a bummer! The baseball field was covered in snow. I was sad and even mad with God. Why did God make it snow? Sometimes things don't go the way we want. Sometimes God says no; sometimes God says later; sometimes, God says he has something even better! I know God listens when I pray, and he is always with me no matter what. Thank you, God, for answering our prayers! I saw God at work in my prayers. Where did you see God at work?

OK Kids, start the investigation, the clues are everywhere . . . What is God up to?

Week Six April 14 (Palm Sunday): Episode 6 Waving Palms

[Setting: At the altar with a background filled with palm branches. In front of him was a Bible sitting on coats/jackets. He held a palm in his active hand and waved it at appropriate times.]

Sherlock Psalms here, I'm a detective of divinity
I'm looking all around for signs of God's activity wherever they are found
God is up to something of that you can be sure
So let's start the investigation
The clues are everywhere . . .

God was at work this week when I read my Bible. Guess what: Jesus is God! Jesus healed the sick, fed the hungry, forgave them for the terrible, horrible, no good, very bad things they did, and even raised people from the dead! Jesus is also our king. He rode on a donkey into Jerusalem. The people were so excited when Jesus came to save them that they threw a great big parade. They waved palm branches and threw their coats on the road. They shouted, Hosanna! God save us! God showed up! Thank you, God, for Jesus! I saw God at work in Jesus. Where did you see God at work?

OK Kids, start the investigation, the clues are everywhere . . . What is God up to?

Week Seven April 21 (Easter Sunday): Episode 7 Resurrection

[Setting: The background was the graffiti wall created by hanging the drawings of the Sunday school children each of the previous weeks.]

Sherlock Psalms here, I'm a detective of divinity
I'm looking all around for signs of God's activity wherever they are found
God is up to something of that you can be sure
So let's start the investigation
The clues are everywhere . . .

Have you heard the news? God was at work this week. Bad guys arrested Jesus, and they nailed him to a cross on Friday. Jesus died. They put Jesus' body in a tomb, like a small cave, and rolled a great big stone in front of it. Soldiers stood guard. Three days later, some women went to the tomb early Sunday morning. The stone had been rolled away, and Jesus' body was gone! An angel told them that Jesus was alive. The women told the disciples, so Peter and John ran to the tomb. Sure enough, the tomb was empty. Jesus appeared to the women and then to the other disciples. He hung out with them and ate with them and even went fishing with them. Fascinating! What was God up to? Once you eliminate the impossible, whatever remains, no matter how improbable, must be the truth. Hmmm. (*Act puzzled and then shocked!*) Christ is risen! (*Pause.*) (*Whisper.*) You're supposed to say, "He is Risen Indeed!" Let's try again... (*Exclaim.*) "Christ is Risen!" (*Pause for a response.*) Thank you, God, for raising Jesus from the dead! I saw God at work in the resurrection of Jesus. Where did you see God at work?

OK Kids, start the investigation, the clues are everywhere . . . What is God up to?

Week Eight April 28: Episode 8 Make Disciples

[Setting: The local playground with play equipment in the background and an open Bible in front of Sherlock.]

Sherlock Psalms here, I'm a detective of divinity
I'm looking all around for signs of God's activity wherever they are found
God is up to something of that you can be sure
So let's start the investigation
The clues are everywhere . . .

God was at work this week when I read in the Bible that Jesus said he's the commander of everyone and everything, so he commands us to go and be his disciples and make disciples. Hmm . . . what's a disciple? Let's look in the Bible. [*He looks down and reads his Bible, following along with his hand.*] A disciple is someone who's been baptized and learning to do what Jesus tells us to do. Wow! I've been baptized. Have you been baptized? God made me his child, and he

lives inside me. How awesome is that! God is working in the teachers and parents and pastor when I learn to do what Jesus tells us to do. [*Acts startled.*] Do you know what that means? I'm a disciple! Are you a disciple of Jesus? We get to be disciples and make disciples at home, at school, at church, at work . . . why, even here on the playground! Best of all, Jesus promises to be with us forever, no matter what!

Thank you, God, for making us disciples! I saw God at work making us into disciples of Jesus. Where did you see God at work?

OK Kids, start the investigation, the clues are everywhere . . . What is God up to?

APPENDIX J: INTERVENTION 4 STORY AND DIALOGUE

“Let’s TACO Bout God”	
<p>Items Needed</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lunch/Drinks • Name tags • Large Easel Pad • Markers for Easel • Pencils/pens for participants 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Copies of agenda or alternately have the agenda posted on a large easel • Copies of Scripture for storytelling; hang on wall • Copies of Interview Questions (One sheet with three boxes, each box contains a cluster of questions)
<p>Assignments</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facilitator: One person should take the primary responsibility for leading the conversation. • Recorder: One person is the recorder and writes down a record of the group conversation. • Note that Participants will be taking notes for the interviews, which will need to be turned in before everyone leaves. 	
<p>Gather</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • make the rounds and greet people as they arrive • nametags • allow people to get food/drink and relax • Begin meal 	15 minutes
<p>Introductions of Participants</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage people to introduce themselves: • Have participants share a funny story about themselves with the people at their table 	Continue while eating
<p>Introductions of Leaders</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduce PAR team 	Keep it brief!
<p>Share the Purpose</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Thank everyone for participating • Your input is valuable. • Comments will be reported, but names will not be attached to the comments. • Goal: Equip people to develop and use spiritual capacities: see, hear, know, and say, especially to be comfortable talking to others about God. 	1 minute
<p>Centering Prayer</p> <p>This meditation was a centering activity that engaged their missional imagination</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participants were invited to “sit comfortably, both feet on the floor, close your eyes and take a slow deep breath. Inhale slowly, now exhale slowly. Allow the tensions of the day to melt away. • Now think of a place you love to be. Look around you. What wonderful things you see! Notice the smells. Notice the sounds. See God there, making it and saying, ‘Good. Very good!’ Notice God, our loving parent, tenderly 	3 minutes

<p>caring for the smallest detail. See God smiling, finishing a fine point. See God concentrating, working out a troubled spot. See God thinking, inventing, producing, balancing, tipping, pouring, gathering, scattering, painting, breathing, laughing, [mourning,] turning, loving.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Say a Prayer for the group • Now take a slow deep breath, exhale slowly. When you're ready, open your eyes.¹ 	
<p>Story Telling</p> <p>One member of each team is invited to select one of the Scripture stories hanging on the wall (each one can be used only once). Instruct them to work together to retell the story in their own words (not read it). To spark their creativity, encourage them to imagine they are telling the story to a child as a bedtime story. After retelling the story, discuss:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What character is most like you? Why? • What is God doing in this story? • How might this story relate to you or your life? To our community? To the life of the church? • What do you learn about yourself & God? • When time is up, invite people to share observations. • NOTE: Due to time constraints, the groups did not tell their stories to the group. One possibility would be to have groups pair up and tell their stories to each other. • [This helps participants learn Bible stories, and how to make connections to life, develops spiritual discernment skills, and critical theological reflection skills, not to mention listening to the word of God in community.] 	<p>Allow no more than 20 minutes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Joseph Genesis 37:12-36; 45:1-7; 50:18-21 • Parting of the Red Sea Exodus 12:29-32; 13:17-18; 14:5-31 • Fall of Jericho Joshua 5:13-15; 6:1-21 • Ruth & Naomi Ruth 1:1-22; 4:9-17 • David & Goliath 1 Samuel 17:1-51 • Shadrach, Meshach, & Abednego Daniel 3:1-30 • Daniel in the Lion's Den Daniel 6:1-28 • Jesus Feeds the 5,000 & Walks on Water Matthew 14:13-36 • Peter Declares Jesus the Messiah Matthew 16:13-28 • Transfiguration & Healing Matthew 17:1-20 • Crucifixion & Resurrection Matthew 27:32-66; 28:1-10 • Baptism & Testing of Jesus Matthew 3:13-4:11; 4:18-22 • Good Samaritan Luke 10:25-37 • Lost Son Luke 15:11-32
<p>Conversation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Distribute copies of questions. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ When did faith become important to you? Who was important in your faith formation? Why? ○ If you think back over your life, share with me one crisis or critical moment in your 	<p><u>Keep close track of the time.</u> Allow 45 minutes for this section. Give them updates every 5 minutes. At 12 minutes, tell them that they have 3 minutes remaining before they will switch. At 15 minutes, ask them to switch roles and begin the next interview. Repeat the process.</p>

¹ Ellison and Keifert, *Talking About Our Faith*, 58.

<p>life. What happened? Where was God in the midst of that experience?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Have you ever had an experience of God's presence? What happened? • Instruct participants that they will interview each other. • Three participants per team, one person asks questions, one person answers, and one person takes notes. Be prepared to present highlights from the interview to the group. • Ask them to please write legibly. • Listen and encourage the conversations. • Tell them we are allotting 45 Minutes for the interviews—15 minutes for each person. • [This helps develop the skills of listening, spiritual discernment, and critical theological reflection.] 	<p>End at 45 minutes. They may need a minute to wrap up.</p>
<p>Share</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Invite participants to write on the easel pad one place their conversation partner had seen, heard, or experienced God's active presence. • [Alternatively, you can have them write them on post-it notes and have them place them on the easel pad.] 	<p>10 minutes.</p>
<p>Collect everyone's notes.</p>	<p>This is critical!</p>
<p>Thank everyone again!</p>	
<p>Closing Prayer</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Invite everyone to join together and say the Lord's Prayer. 	
<p>Sending</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SAY: Go in peace and serve the Lord! • Hopefully, they will respond: Thanks be to God! 	

APPENDIX K: CONGREGATIONAL COMMUNICATION

Newsletter December 2018



Dear Beloved Saints,

As we begin Advent and prepare to celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ at Christmas, I invite you to reflect on the lyrics to the Christmas song *Do You Hear What I Hear?*

Said the night wind to the little lamb,
Do you see what I see
Way up in the sky, little lamb,
Do you see what I see...?

Said the little lamb to the shepherd boy,
Do you hear what I hear
Ringing through the sky, shepherd boy,
Do you hear what I hear...?

Said the shepherd boy to the mighty king,
Do you know what I know
In your palace warm, mighty king,
Do you know what I know...?

Said the king to the people everywhere,
Listen to what I say
Pray for peace, people everywhere!
Listen to what I say....

This popular song captures, in an imaginative way, the substance of our theme for the next six months as we focus on four spiritual capacities: *seeing, hearing, knowing, and saying*.

Our goal is to learn how to perceive divine action and answer the question, "What is God up to?" We will explore how to recognize God's active presence in Scripture, in our lives, in the lives of those close to us, in our community, in the world, and in the church. What better way to begin than with the birth of God's only Son!

We will learn how to talk about God with one another while we imagine how God's story interconnects with our story, both individually and as a church. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, we will see how God is acting and moving, so we can share the compelling story of God's grace and be more fully engaged in God's mission to usher in the Kingdom of God.

Finally, I'll highlight a few of the awesome happenings in December: [A description of congregational events].

Vallorie and I wish you a most blessed and astounding Christmas! May you discover the hope, peace, love, and joy that come through Jesus, the Messiah, the King of Kings, the Son of God!

Merry Christmas,
Pastor Andrew Schlecht

Congregational Annual Report February 2019



Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Last December, as we began Advent and prepared to celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ at Christmas, I invited you to reflect on the lyrics to the Christmas song *Do You Hear What I Hear?*

Said the night wind to the little lamb,
Do you see what I see
 Way up in the sky, little lamb,
Do you see what I see...?

Said the little lamb to the shepherd boy,
Do you hear what I hear
 Ringing through the sky, shepherd boy,
Do you hear what I hear...?

Said the shepherd boy to the mighty king,
Do you know what I know
 In your palace warm, mighty king,
Do you know what I know...?

Said the king to the people everywhere,
Listen to what I say
 Pray for peace, people everywhere!
Listen to what I say....

This popular Christmas song captures, in an imaginative way, the substance of our theme for 2019: *seeing, hearing, knowing, and saying*. In a word, our goal is to learn discernment, so we become *detectives of divinity!*

What is discernment? I'm glad you asked! Discernment is perceiving the *active presence* of the triune God—Father, Son, Holy Spirit—in Scripture, in our lives, in the lives of those close to us, in our community, in the world, and in the church, as we answer the question, “What is God up to?” The phrase *active presence* is vital: God is truly *present* here and now, not out there somewhere “watching us from a distance.” Not only is God truly present, but God is *actively* engaged in history in the lives of real people like you and me.

To help us with discernment, the Holy Spirit has gathered together six fellow saints: [Names were listed]. They have faithfully agreed to walk with us, explore with us, pray with us, witness with us, and encourage us on this great adventure!

Throughout the year, we will learn together how to perceive divine action and answer the question, “What is God up to?” We will also explore how to talk about God with one another. We will imagine how God's story interconnects with our story, both individually and as a church. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, we will see how God is acting and moving, so we can share the compelling story of God's grace and be more fully engaged in God's mission to usher in the Kingdom of God.

As we reflect on God's active presence, our imagination will continue to be challenged as we envision God's preferred and promised future. . . .

Together we are on a grand journey as we seek to **be disciples and make disciples who are bold, daring, adventurous followers of Jesus Christ!**

These are very exciting times! The Holy Spirit is up to something amazing! I can't wait to see what happens next . . .

Grace and peace,
 Pastor Andrew Schlecht

Congregational Annual Report and Newsletter February 2020



Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

First off, God has blessed me with serving side-by-side with the best congregation in the world. You are supportive, curious, and courageous while being willing to experiment. Most of all, you are faithful disciples of Jesus Christ. I thank God for each of you and our partnership in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

We have an incredible staff—[list of staff members]. We have a dedicated church council whose wisdom, passion, and faithfulness are truly inspiring. A special thank you to all our volunteers for their faithfulness, dedication, and generosity. All of you serve and glorify the Lord in all that you do and say—not only here at church, but in your everyday calling to live as disciples at work, in your families, and at play. Thanks to all of you for blessing me, encouraging me, and challenging me. I am blessed beyond all measure!

Our theme for 2019 was: *see, hear, know, and say*. Our goal was to learn how to discern God’s active presence and talk to one another about God. We became *detectives of divinity!* As our curious Sherlock Psalms from last year’s videos would tell us:

I’m looking all around
for signs of God’s activity
wherever they are found
God is up to something
of that you can be sure
So let’s start the investigation
The clues are everywhere . . .

We learned together how to be detectives of divinity and discern God’s active presence. The phrase *active presence* is vital: God is truly *present* here and now, not out there somewhere “watching us from a distance.”

Not only is God truly present, but God is *actively* engaged in history in the lives of real people like you and me.

The Holy Spirit changed us by equipping us to discern God’s active presence and engage in dialogue around the question, “What is God up to?” Our missional imagination was transformed as we discerned the reality that God is acting. We responded by living in a faith community, engaging in Christian practices, and discerning God’s active presence. The triune God is truly present in, with, and under ministry and witness.

The Holy Spirit transformed our missional imagination by granting us eyes to *see* and ears to *hear* as we live in a posture of openness, attentiveness, and expectation toward God, Scripture, and one another.

We *know* Jesus by living in fellowship with him and listening to him. We *know* our neighbors by entering into fellowship with them and listening to their stories.

We witness by *saying* the Good News of the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus. By sharing stories, we enter into each other’s lives and proclaim the active presence of the triune God in Scripture, in our lives, in the lives of those close to us, in our community, in the world, and in the church. Like the disciples on the road to Emmaus after their encounter with the risen Christ, we are witnesses who must not remain silent.

We experience the ministering presence of the living Christ *to us* through the ministry of our neighbors and *through us* as we minister to them, especially in places we might not expect to find God—times of suffering, pain, and heartbreak.

The hope is that we will not only continue to grow in faith as we discern the active presence of the triune God and engage in dialogue, but will respond to the invitational opportunities of the Holy Spirit: *see* the stranger, *hear* the neighbor, *know* their suffering, and *say* words of comfort, salvation, and hope.

To God be the glory,
Pastor Andrew Schlecht

APPENDIX L: EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

DO YOU HEAR WHAT I HEAR? DISCERNMENT AND DIALOGUE IN A SECULAR AGE



Executive Summary

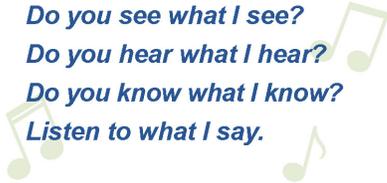
Andrew J. Schlecht

Do you see what I see?

Do you hear what I hear?

Do you know what I know?

Listen to what I say.



INTRODUCTION

These lyrics from “Do You Hear What I Hear?” provide a framework for exploring discernment and dialogue. The song captures the spirit of this adaptive challenge that sought to **cultivate a missional imagination and nurture four spiritual capacities: see, hear, know, and say in the realm of faith formation.** This involved the Holy Spirit reframing the congregation’s world view and equipping people to discern God’s active presence and engage in dialogue around the question, “What is God up to?”



QUESTION

How might Participatory Action Research (PAR) interventions increase our capacity to discern the triune God’s active presence and engage in dialogue with others?



CONTEXT

A Lutheran church in a bedroom community in a small town and rural setting in the Midwest.



METHODOLOGY

This PAR methodology utilized a mixed-methods approach that included four interventions by the PAR team: Sunday Worship, Lent, Sunday School, and a special event focusing on Story and Dialogue.



LENSES

Theoretical lenses:

- Secularity
- Adaptive Change
- Mental Models and Reframing
- Story and Ritual

Theological lenses:

- Discernment and Dialogue
- Glory Story and Cross Story
- Missional Imagination
- Liturgy and Witness

Biblical lenses: Jesus’ healing of the blind man in Mark serves as a way of framing the overall research question. The theme is deepened by exploring Jesus’ crucifixion between two criminals, the disciples’ encounter with Jesus after his resurrection along the road to Emmaus, the experiences of Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz in the book of Ruth, and finally Peter and Cornelius in Acts.



RESULTS

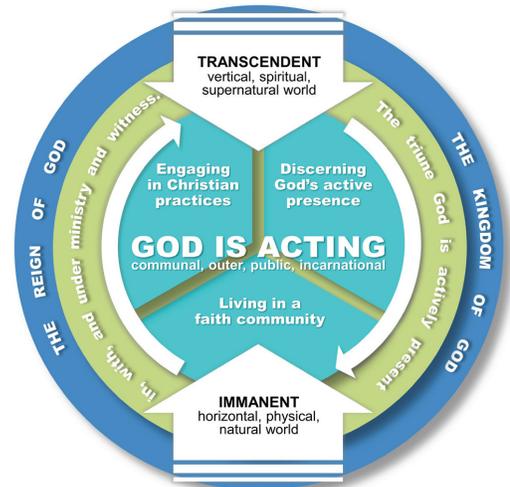
Analysis of the data generated five axial codes delineated below. The figure to the right clarifies the theoretical relationships among these axial codes. We live in the “immanent frame,” but as Christians, we are open to the “vertical” or “transcendent” (see the arrows at the top and bottom of the figure). The phrases “Kingdom of God” and “Reign of God” encircling the figure remind us that all things are under the reign of the triune God.

The center circle is trisected into three pie-shaped segments that evoke the triune nature of God who desires to be in a personal relationship with us, individually and communally. God’s invitation is grounded in *koinonia* as we are drawn into the divine life. The curving arrows represent the whirling, spiral process of our communal engagement with the triune God described as *perichoresis* or mutual indwelling.

God Is Acting: Missional imagination involves seeing God as actively present. Our faithful response is communal, outer, public, and incarnational.

Living In A Faith Community: We are gathered, centered, and sent by the Holy Spirit. Being in relationships with God and others is the primary setting for faith formation.

Engaging In Christian Practices: These communal experiences reframe our view of the transcendent and immanent while equipping us to live as disciples.



Discerning God’s Active Presence: The Holy Spirit gives us eyes to see and ears to hear, so we know Jesus and are faithful witnesses.

The Triune God Is Actively Present In, With, And Under Ministry And Witness: The continued ministering presence of Jesus *to* us through our neighbors and *through* us as we minister to them.

Executive Summary



SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

The answer to the research question is that the results suggest that the Holy Spirit worked through the PAR interventions to increase the capacity of participants to discern the triune God's active presence and engage in dialogue with others.

Cultural Adaptation

The PAR team initiated a process of cultural adaptation as participants became more open to the "vertical" or transcendent dimension of life and began to experience a reframing of their world view.

Missional Imagination

The church was exposed to the missional imagination church model, which affirms God's active presence in all of creation.

Discernment

Participants were able to more easily discern the triune God's active presence in Scripture, in their lives, in the lives of those close to them, in their community, in the world, and in the church.

Dialogue

They could talk more easily to someone about the Bible, retell stories from the Bible, and connect those stories to their own lives.



KEY INSIGHTS

Four key insights that arose from the research include:

People Have Faith Stories To Tell: One of the primary challenges to discernment and dialogue is helping people realize that they have a faith story to tell.

Create Space For Discernment And Dialogue:

People have faith stories to tell, but we need to create space within the life of the congregation where they can tell those stories.

Nurture Spiritual Competencies: Engaging in Christian practices and intentionally nurturing the spiritual capacities—see, hear, know, and say—positively influence faith formation and cultivate a missional imagination.

Incarnational Transformation: In this incarnational transformation, the Holy Spirit transforms us by cultivating new capacities in individuals and the community (*koinonia*). This is not an individualistic event but is experienced in a *perichoretic* community through the power of the Holy Spirit.



In the figure above, the Kingdom (Reign) of God includes all of creation. God makes Godself known even in places we would not expect to find God. The church is created by the Holy Spirit to participate in God's mission by witnessing in word and deed to the Father's redeeming and reconciling work through God's son, Jesus Christ. Thus the center circle represents the church as an incarnational community with a permeable boundary (represented by the dashed outline of the circle). Circumscribed around this circle are the spiritual capacities see, hear, know, and say. These capacities are incarnated as we think, write, speak, and act.



CONCLUSION

The hope is that the congregation continues to grow in faith as we discern the active presence of the triune God and engage in dialogue, and will respond to the invitational opportunities of the Holy Spirit: see the stranger, hear the neighbor, know their suffering, and say words of comfort, salvation, and hope.

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