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Discovering God in the City:

Prayerwalking with Community Leaders

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by

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To the people of Sharon

Contents

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Chapter 1

Introduction

The thing that surprised me -- and I go to church regularly and I'm on the church's parish council – I didn't realize that I could just openly pray for things. Why don't I do this?

--Emma[1]

On a summer afternoon in 2012, I was having lunch with three local business leaders who were active in community and economic development work in the City of Sharon. We had gone to the "original" Quaker Steak and Lube, which was the brainchild of two Sharonites creating a fun place to hang out that eventually turned into a large regional restaurant chain. One of the businesspeople who also served on Sharon's City Council, Ed Palanski, surprised me by asking if we could begin the meal with prayer. Then he surprised me even more by beginning to pray himself and not asking me, the professional prayer person, to offer a grace. He opened with Jeremiah 29:7, "But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare."[2] Then he prayed earnestly for the city and its blessings, as well as for the work we were doing that day. The other people with us clearly appreciated the prayer, and affirmed both the personal passion and the theological call underlying Ed's words. Yet, although they were at least moderately

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[1] Focus group, Sharon, PA, November 4, 2017.
[2] All scripture citations are from the New Revised Standard Version unless otherwise noted.

active in a local church, none of them would have expressed themselves or their commitment to their work in quite the same way.

This thesis is an exploration of how a church can take steps to form leaders like Ed Palanski – people with a deep commitment to their church congregation and to their broader community with a sense of vocation that feeds and connects both of those calls. One of the causalities of mainline church decline has a been the lack of formation of Christian men and women able to make theological connections between their ministry and their work in the world. Yet, I believe that simple tools exist that can allow a church congregation to offer that theological education and formation to civic, non-profit, and business leaders in ways that benefit the wider community and build up the Kingdom of God while also blessing the local church. My thesis project of taking community leaders on prayerwalks is one of those ways.[3]

This introductory chapter will contain two sections. The first section describes my project thesis and what I hope this paper will show. The second section provides an overview of the rest of this essay.

Section One: Project Thesis

At the beginning the eighth chapter of the Acts of the Apostles, the church appears to be on the decline. Following the stoning of Stephen and fearing its own

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[3] None of the people at this meal were participants in my thesis project. Ed Palanski had rotated off of council and was involved in thinking through some aspects of the project with me, and therefore was not a participant. The others were in different volunteer roles in the community and, in at least one case, had taken a new out-of-town job, that made participation more difficult. Had they participated, I believe their experiences would have paralleled those of the participants.

persecution, the fledgling fellowship is flung out of Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria. God had a plan in this dispersion, however. "Those who were scattered went from place to place, proclaiming the word" (8:4), and when Philip goes to a Samaritan city evangelizing and doing miracles, "there was great joy in that city" (8:8).

My thesis is grounded on the belief that when the church moves out of its own fear- or ego-based siloes to minister in the community, "there will be great joy in that city." Specifically, my thesis is that taking a group of Sharon civic, business, and non-profit leaders with Christian backgrounds on prayerwalks and assembling them for a focus group afterwards will change how they see God at work in their communities, deepen their understanding of their own vocation, and help create a community with a common language where future conversations about faith and community leadership can take place. Secondarily, I expect to see two additional results of this thesis. Deepening Christian leaders' understanding of their work as Christian ministry will allow them more effectively to undertake the work of the church in the wider community between individual congregations and bring greater joy to Sharon. These interactions will also provide insight into the ways that the city's churches can more effectively meet a community's deepest and most pressing spiritual needs.

Without delving into the theological and ministerial assumptions for my project that I will explore in Chapter Three, a number of elements contribute to the practical aspects of my project that will test this thesis. These elements include the Christian background of many of Sharon's leaders and what I hope those Christian leaders can come to understand, the sense of Christian community leaders doing ministry in the gaps

between congregations, and the four basic elements that a project to test this thesis would include.

First, because of the city of Sharon's particular demographic make-up, many of its civic, business, and non-profit leaders have a Christian background and many remain connected to their local congregations. In conversations with leaders during my time in Sharon, I believed that they would be open to, and appreciative of, being able to see their work as God's ministry and having that sense inform their day-to-day activities. Their development of their own sense of vocation in their civic, business, or non-profit ministry would involve at least an implicit understanding of two related theological truths. First and foremost, they would have to believe that God is at work in the city. They would see that the city is one of the primary places where God is at work in people's lives and that cooperating with God's work in the city is fundamentally Christian ministry. Second, and flowing out of the first, is that valid and important Christian activity exists beyond the ministries of local Christian congregations. Doing God's work in these spaces without a formal ministry is actually doing the work of a broader collective church in the community.

Second, to the degree that Christian community leaders understand what they are doing as Christian leaders, in the long run they would have an opportunity to build bridges between the local congregations for common ministry to the city. In some ways, this work is updating the ministry of Christian Associates, which I will describe in Chapter Two. However, one important difference exists between the former era and today. Previously, local churches had the human and other resources to launch such initiatives. Today, those initiatives need primarily to come from people out in the

mission field already who may be less connected to, and certainly less directed by, their local pastors and church boards.

In many ways, this understanding turns a variety of outreach strategies upside down. Instead of taking "spiritually-minded church people" and trying to get them to see the civic role of ministry, I am interested in taking "civically-minded people" and trying to get them to see the spiritual and church aspects of their work.[4]

Third, an effective intervention to address the problems described and test my thesis would include at least four elements. The first element would allow participants to reflect on their own activities in such a way that they could see the spiritual and vocational component inherent in them. This step would involve a series of questions designed to elicit a spiritual way of looking at their work. Questions are an effective way to provoke insight, especially in adults. These questions could ideally come at various points in the process to allow for reflection as steps of the project are experienced.

The second element would be an activity designed to open people's eyes to God being at work in the city. Ideally the design of this step would complement the first introspective and verbal step by being more hands-on and artistic. My project took leaders on a one-on-one prayerwalk through an area of the city that is important to them. Additionally, leaders were given a digital camera and asked to take photos of where they see God at work. Other activities meeting the same goals could have been chosen.

The third element would bring together leaders to discuss what they have already gleaned. Photos taken during prayerwalks would be distributed, and other questions for the group would focus on sharing insights about where leaders see God at work in their

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[4] This point will be explored further in the Chapter Three.

lives and in their city. This step is not designed to create a vision for where God is at work in the city, although if leaders decided they wanted to follow-up this project by engaging that process it would be a very positive outcome. Instead, this step is designed, first, to allow people to gain a broader understanding of how God is at work by hearing the experiences of others. Second, this design would allow leaders to reclaim a common Christian language and to develop a comfort discussing these topics with each other so future conversations could occur on either a formal or an informal basis. This step of creating a common language allows for a longer-term impact of the work begun by this project, including the possibility of passing on this language to other leaders not participating at this time.

The fourth element would be the six-to-twelve civic leaders in the government, non-profit, or business communities of Sharon who have a Christian background and are willing to participate. This number is important to get some diversity of perspective while still being able to come together for a focus group and have a common conversation. While not all participants need to be currently active in a congregation, or even understand themselves as Christian, having a Christian background provides for a common baseline as we discuss theological and spiritual themes. Without this common background, fostering a common conversation becomes a much greater challenge.

My thesis project will incorporate these four elements in an attempt to support my thesis. The project will start from the perspective of the community, and where God is at work there, while building on a Christian understanding to help participants develop their own sense of ministry and vocation in the community. The project will also listen to

those community leaders participating to build an understanding of other effective ways that the church can provide ministry that brings great joy to the city.

Section Two: Thesis Essay Overview

This essay contains nine chapters. This initial chapter offers an overview my project thesis and this essay. Chapter Two will set the stage for my ministry project by looking at my context in the city of Sharon and discussing of the implications of the decline of mainline and other churches for ministry to the community.

Chapter Three will look at the theological and ministerial assumptions informing my project. A theology of the city underlies this entire project, and includes an understanding of the city as the environment where God's people live. The city is meant to be redeemed with certain characteristics, and each city has a particular vocation. My second theological assumption is that ministry and vocation occur not only within the congregation, but also in the community, and maybe even for most lay people primarily in the community. My third theological assumption is an ecclesiological understanding that the congregations of a particular community make up the church in that city. I will then look at the practices that allow churches to see their communities with new eyes by going out to serve the community. I hope to turn some of those practices around to help those already serving the community to see the spiritual foundations of that work. Prayerwalking has been one particularly effective tool for this work with my parishioners, and I hope to transfer that practice effectively to community leaders.

Chapters Four and Five describe aspects of my thesis project. Chapter Four looks first at my project design, including overall decisions to use a phenomenological

qualitative design and how various project components come together. The second

section of Chapter Four provides the background and characteristics of the project

participants. Chapter Five's first section lays out three project results that are directly

applicable to the thesis itself. The first result is participants' understanding of prayer

developed during the project and changes in their prayer practices following the

prayerwalks. The second result is participants' identification of how they and other

participants are living into their vocation to the community. The final thesis-related result

is how participants have formed a cohesive group, including the trust they have

developed and their desire for future interactions. The second section offers insights

from participants that can inform the church's ministry to the community. Areas of

potential engagement discussed include art and beauty, hope, belonging, spiritual

disciplines, memory, how people are seeking the same good life, and the need for the

community to receive permission to move forward.

Chapter Six takes seriously the need of the church to address the broader society

and constructs a theoretical understanding of our current environment that goes beyond

the practical implications described in Chapters Two and Three. Using the work of

Alasdair MacIntyre, Oliver O'Donovan, and Charles Taylor, this chapter shows how our

contemporary secular society has a continuity with more Christian past eras.   I will also

discuss how, in the midst of this situation, the church still has an obligation to witness to

society, without grasping for political power. Building on Taylor's insights, I will

explore aspects of our secular age and the way that we need to be intentional about our

particular Christian "take" as we work with others. At a time when religious belief is

seen as one option among many, we have an obligation to engage society, but also to do so effectively.

Chapter Seven uses Robert Schreiter's tripartite framework to delve deeper into the insights offered by participants about places the church can effectively engage society. The first role Schreiter suggests is the public church, and within this role I address themes of art and beauty and of hope. Second, I will discuss the church's role as an intentionally community to provide a place to belong, to teach spiritual disciplines, and to allow people to explore memory. The church's third role of aligning with secular forces for the betterment of society will include the participants' understanding that "we all want the same things," especially in light of Isaiah 65, and that the community needs to receive permission to move forward.

Chapter Eight begins with an analysis of my project in light of my thesis. Then, I discuss possible follow-up ministry opportunities arising from my project within the city of Sharon, as well as any potential issues of transferability of this project to other contexts. Finally, I explore two other potential research projects building on this thesis. Chapter Nine is the conclusion of this project thesis that points to new directions we can travel with what we have learned.

Chapter 2

My Context

I look at the city of Sharon, and all I can see is potential.

--Maya[5]

My thesis project that I described last chapter is firmly rooted in the context of my community. This chapter will explore the realities of the largely Roman Catholic rustbelt city where I minister. The first section will describe the city of Sharon, Pennsylvania, in more detail. The second section will discuss church decline and how that decline has resulted in a significantly decreased collective ministry by local congregations to the larger community.

Section One: Sharon, Pennsylvania

Sharon, Pennsylvania, is a former steel town in the heart of America's rust belt. Sharon sits on the border of Pennsylvania and Ohio about half-way between Erie and Pittsburgh. Part of the Youngstown-Warren-Boardman, OH-PA Metropolitan Statistical Area[6], Sharon's immediate community of the Shenango Valley includes Hermitage, Sharpsville, West Middlesex, and Farrell in Pennsylvania and Brookfield and Masury in Ohio. Within this community of jurisdictions that would be a single municipality in many other places, Sharon plays the role of downtown while also having some industry, a long commercial strip, and a range of residential neighborhoods.

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[5] Focus Group.

[6] Sharon Community and Economic Development Commission, *Sharon, PA: A Great Place To Live, Work & Grow* (Sharon, PA: City of Sharon, 2012), 3.

In 2010, Sharon's population was 14,038, and was 80.4% White, 14.6% African-American, and 1.8% Hispanic/Latino (no other races were above 1%). The median age of Sharon residents was 39.8, with 16.0% of Sharon residents age 65 or older[7]. This overwhelmingly large proportion of non-Hispanic Whites and African Americans means that Sharon is likely to experience a sharply increasing death rate in the coming years.[8]

Throughout the 19th and early 20th Century, Sharon was a significant manufacturer of steel and boasted other industries, as well. During WWII, Sharon produced munitions for the war effort. Westinghouse Electric Corporation produced transformers and other items at its Sharon plant from 1922-1985. During its peak in the 1940's, Westinghouse employed close to 10,000 people in Sharon.[9] By 1985, however, Westinghouse had closed its local presence, and its facilities became a Department of Environmental Protection Superfund site. Many other local manufacturers followed a similar, if less dramatic, trajectory. Some closed during the upheavals in the manufacture and sale of steel in the 70's and 80's, while others downsized their employees to rely increasingly on automation for labor cost savings. The handful of manufacturers that have moved into Sharon or expanded in the past five years are all doing so with a fraction of the workforce once employed by the mills of a past era.

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[7] "American Fact Finder: Sharon city, Pennsylvania," United States Census Bureau, accessed September 24, 2015, http://factfinder.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?src=CF .

[8] See the predictions of this rising death rate hitting non-Hispanic whites and African-Americans in Weems, Lovett H., Jr., "The Coming Death Tsunami," *Ministry Matters,* October 5, 2011, http://www.ministrymatters.com/all/entry/1868/the-coming-death-tsunami.

[9] "Chronology of the Westinghouse Sharon plant," *The Sharon Herald*, accessed September 24, 2015, http://www2.sharonherald.com/localnews/recentnews/9811/ln110398b.html, para. 1.

These plant closings, along with other larger demographic trends, have led to area population declines and struggles. More specific data on Sharon's downtown show that two census tracks (PA 301 and PA 332) in 1990 had a combined population of 7,051, while in 2012 that number had declined to 5,203[10]. Even since the last census in 2010, the Census bureau estimates that the city's population has declined 4.6% to a citywide total of 13,405.[11] At its heyday, Sharon had almost twice this many residents. A frightening example of the impact of this decline is that in 2010, 15.4% of all housing units in Sharon were vacant[12]. Blight is a huge problem, as are the municipal budget implications of the reduced tax base. More problematic than merely the loss of population is the significant "brain drain" that has also occurred. While Sharon does have a local Penn State campus, most of our young people who aspire to advanced degrees, who have an entrepreneurial spirit, or who are willing to take risks and make changes leave the area. The loss of these potential leaders has made it more difficult to break out of the negative aspects of the legacy of the workplace culture of the mills.

The mills were the area's longtime primary employers, and their workplace culture rewarded workers who showed up and did what they were told to do. In general, collaborative work was not emphasized, nor was creative problem-solving. While these values offered some positive strengths in a particular working environment, they became

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[10] "Census Explorer," United States Census Bureau, accessed September 24, 2015. http://www.census.gov/censusexplorer/censusexplorer.html.

[11] "Quick Facts: Sharon city, Pennsylvania," United States Census Bureau, accessed December 29, 2017, https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/sharoncitypennsylvania/PST045216.

[12] "American Fact Finder: Sharon city, Pennsylvania," United States Census Bureau, accessed September 24, 2015, http://factfinder.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?src=CF.

problematic when manifested in churches and in other organizations. I have heard older members of my parish talk about the people who "gave," and were seen as in charge, and the people who "worked." If you worked, you might contribute quite a bit, and even organize large events for hundreds of people with sophistication and success. But there was no expectation to think big-picture or vision-cast or even look at areas outside of your particular purview. Even though that mill culture is less pronounced today, many of our residents with jobs still work in the mills and those basic attitudes remain part of the local environment.

The loss of jobs, population, and leadership has led to increased poverty and related issues. The current median household income for two downtown census tracts is $30,332 (PA 301) and $17,051 (PA 332)[13]. In the heyday of the community, PA track 301 contained "Millionaires' Row", a series of huge estates that once stood across the street from St. John's Episcopal church, where I am rector. Buhl Mansion, the former home of the president of Sharon Steel and perhaps Sharon and St. John's all-time leading philanthropist, rests in tract PA 332. Drug use is increasingly a problem, and many area employers note an inability to find employees who are able to pass drug tests. As time has passed since many plant closings, Sharon has seen generational effects of poverty, including the erosion of a culture of work and an increasing dependence on social welfare programs.

At the same time, Sharon has a number of strengths to draw upon. Low housing costs mean that those with good jobs have a relatively high standard of living. Given the

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[13] "Census Explorer," United States Census Bureau, accessed September 24, 2015.
http://www.census.gov/censusexplorer/censusexplorer.html.

small influx of people into the area, those who have remained tend to have roots and family connections in the community. The blue-collar, union history of Central and Eastern European immigration gives the community a down-to-earth ethic where people are willing to know and help out their neighbors. The community seems to have a sense that the people around us are "our people" and that we are all in this together.

The community is also overwhelmingly Christian or post-Christian. Most residents would have been members of the Roman Catholic or Orthodox churches. Many young people who could be defined as unchurched can still point to "their" church, identified as the place that their grandparents attend or perhaps where they were baptized. The only non-Christian house of worship in Sharon, or in the larger Shenango Valley, was the local synagogue that recently closed when the congregation combined with a synagogue in Youngstown, Ohio, which is a half-hour drive away. Small groupings of people with various neo-pagan beliefs exist in the community, but they have no dedicated public spaces or formal leadership.

My parish, St. John's Episcopal church, sits in the heart of downtown Sharon. St. John's was founded in 1866, and has a tradition of community outreach and clergy who have been engaged in the broader life of the community. I live in Sharon, as well, in a house that I have purchased. I have been rector of St. John's and have lived in Sharon since August of 2009. From 2014-2017, I served a four-year term on Sharon's City Council.

While Sharon's problems are certainly related to international, national, and regional trends, some issues can also be considered spiritual problems. The church must accept some responsibility for the current state of the community, and the efforts of the

collective church will be necessary to address issues like education, addiction, vision, and hope for the future.

Section Two: Church Decline and the Decline of Community Ministry

Recent declines in attendance and membership of the Episcopal Church and other mainline churches have been well documented.[14] While the implications of these numbers often create a panic among denominational planners and prognosticators, all too often the focus remains on the impact these declines will have on our congregations and judicatories. After staring into their own troubling future, church leaders rarely have adequate anxiety remaining to worry about the communities that their churches were called to minister to and share the good news with. Yet, if the church is actually the blessing we claim it to be, the decline of the church is likely to be a huge loss for our communities, as well.

In Sharon, the collective decline of our various Christian churches has hurt the community. During the city's heyday, almost every family would have been affiliated with one of the city's churches or with its (now closed) synagogue. While denominational and other differences certainly were present, the entire town was, in

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[14] See, for example, chapter two in Susan Brown Snook, *God Gave the Growth: Church Planting in the Episcopal Church* (New York: Morehouse Publishing, 2015), for a summary of these statistics drawn from a variety of sources including David T. Olsen, *The American Church in Crisis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008) and C. Kirk Hadaway's research on the Episcopal Church. For ELCA statistics see the summary in Rick Rouse and Craig Van Gelder, *A Field Guide for the Missional Congregation: Embarking on a Journey of Transformation* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2008), 18-20, or Dave Daubert, *Living Lutheran: Renewing Your Congregation* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2007), 10-15, for a narrative description of the decline and its impacts.

effect, covered by the mission and ministry of at least one of the area's churches. If someone was facing a spiritual or temporal crisis, they had at least a tenuous relationship with some pastor in town who might be able to help. Civic leaders usually had prominent roles in their congregational life, and a coterie of "big church" pastors were likely to weigh in effectively on civic issues. The Church of Sharon recognized a mission to the city, and the city's leaders would have had some understanding of their role in relation to their faith communities.

One practical way this ministry manifested itself was in the ecumenical organization Christian Associates. Christian Associates was made up of lay and clergy leaders from Catholic, Orthodox, Mainline, and African-American churches in the Shenango Valley. While much of its ministry involved fostering ecumenical relationships among churches through events such as Prayer Services for Christian Unity and choir concerts, Christian Associates was also able to identify and meet important community needs. They began a New Year's Day meal to offer a place for companionship to those who were lonely on the holidays, as well as those who were hungry. More consequentially, Christian Associates also launched and then spun off the Community Food Warehouse of Mercer County, our local foodbank. When the local hospital was looking for a chaplain, they entered a contract with Christian Associates to hire and supervise the right person to provide those services. For a couple of decades, Christian Associates, made up of representatives of area churches, had the capacity and the energy to take on important issues for the good of the community.

As area churches have declined, however, so has Christian Associates. Few new ministries had started in the 2010's and by 2017 the organization disbanded. While all

ministries have a life cycle, part of Christian Associates decline can be directly tied to the lack of time that clergy and lay leaders in congregations had to focus on work outside of and between their congregations. While full-time pastors would still come to meetings, few churches had new lay leadership that was not already overwhelmed with ministries of or for their own congregation. Few people were being formed and commissioned as Christian lay leaders with a call to work with those of other congregations to serve the wider community.[15]

Christian Associates's death is a symptom of the increased siloing of Christian congregations both generally and in the city of Sharon. As church participation has declined over the past thirty years, the role of the whole church in Sharon working for the city's transformation and well-being has devolved into individual congregations serving their own membership and initiating their own programming. As congregations age and resources dwindle, increasingly pastors and church lay leaders are focused on maintaining existing programs with fewer people and meeting acute pastoral needs. Less time, energy, and money exists for cooperative work with other congregations, for new initiatives focused on meeting the needs of spiritually underserved areas of the city, or for developing spiritual leaders for the non-congregational civic, business, and non-profit sectors.

As congregations focus inward and many community residents no longer actively attend a church, an increasing segment of the city is no longer the focus of any particular

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[15] This information concerning Christian Associates comes through my own experiences working with the organization between 2009-2017, including serving as its Vice-President. I also interviewed Christian Associates's last Executive Secretary, Lois Tamplin, on September 14, 2017.

congregation or of the collective church of the community. Additionally, leaders are not formed to see the spiritual connection of civic work. Leaders, especially Gen-X and Millennial leaders, often have little formation in the connection between what they may experience on Sunday, or may have experienced in their inconsistent church upbringing, and what they do the rest of the week. I believe that these trends must, and can, be reversed if the church is going to effectively carry out our mission in our communities. My next chapter will look at wider theological and ministry perspectives which will point us toward a project that can test how these trends might be able to be reversed and inform future efforts.

Chapter 3

Theological and Ministerial Perspectives

There is a reason that we are all here together.

-- Maya[16]

This chapter will explore some of my own theological assumptions and ministerial experiences that have shaped the formation of this project thesis. The first section will deal with theological assumptions connected to the theological importance of the city. I will begin by looking at the importance of the city in terms of God's plan of redemption. Aspects of this importance include the city itself as a redeemed entity in God's plan of salvation, including its role in shaping and forming God's people, God's vision for a redeemed city as seen especially in third Isaiah, and the vocation that individual cities have within the wider people of God. The importance of the city as a primary locus of God's activity leads to two theological corollaries, which I explore in this chapter's next two sections. Missiologically, Christians' vocation and ministry must focus not only on the Body of Christ assembled in their individual congregation, but also on the wider city around them. Ecclesiologically, a primary understanding of the church must be congregations of a city forming the church in that city. The fourth section of this chapter looks at ministry tools, including prayerwalking, that I have successfully used to helped people in the parish connect with the wider community and see it through new

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[16] Focus group, Sharon, PA, November 4, 2017.

eyes.[17] While these tools began with those in the congregation and connected them to important issues that concern the wider community, I believed that they could also be used to connect those in the community to the important spiritual issues that are the concern of the church.

Section One: The Theological Importance of the City

John Dawson, the former founder/director of Youth With a Mission – Los Angeles, writes that, "Many Christians think cities are by nature evil places…However, that is not God's view. After all, the human story begins in a garden and ends in a city."[18] The end of the human story described in Revelation is not just any city, however, but a fully redeemed city. The new Jerusalem is a holy city that finally embodies God's desire for the human community so fully that it can be described as "the bride, the wife of the lamb" (Rev. 21:9) and the place where "God will live among mortals" (Rev. 21:3).

If our destiny as Christians is to live in the eternal Jerusalem, then that has implications for our life today, as well. As Eric Jacobsen writes, "Taking the model of the New Jerusalem seriously means that we have to also take seriously the idea that in heaven we will be 'citi-zens,' or denizens of the city."[19] I would find it surprising if God is interested in us living a radically different life today than he is preparing us for in

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[17] *Seeing Through New Eyes: Using the PAWN Process in Faith-Based Groups* is the title of the manual by A Renewal Enterprise, Inc. (Chicago: A Renewal Enterprise, Inc., 2010), for their process of helping congregations through this process.

[18] John Dawson, *Taking Our Cities for God: How to Break Spiritual Strongholds* (Lake May, FL: Charisma House, 2001), 19.

[19] Eric O. Jacobsen, *Sidewalks in the Kingdom: New Urbanism and the Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2003), 43. Here Jacobsen is drawing on ideas from Daniel Kemmis, *The Good City and the Good Life* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1995), 9.

eternity. Being city denizens with God in the heavenly city implies an understanding that

we are city denizens with God in our earthly city, as well. If we want to train ourselves

for life in the New Jerusalem, our best preparation may be a continual growth in the

virtues and practices that allow us to be model earthly citizens today. Living out virtuous

lives in the city streets and squares becomes not merely something that makes us good

people, but is also a central part of our eschatological Christian identity.

Historically, we are seeing a movement toward cities. More than half the world's

population now live in cities, and urbanization is increasing to the point that even those

not living in cities are affected by the life of cities to a greater degree than ever before.[20]

Christianity has also spread and thrived in the cities, as Wayne Meeks notes of the

earliest Pauline disciples.[21] Today the gospel continues to be spread by those traveling

from city to city internationally via a mix of trade routes, voluntary associations, family

connections, and people seeking meaning and stability as old ways of life are transformed

that are parallel to what Meeks describes as occurring two thousand years ago.

Becoming denizens of the city is also important because of how a city allows

human beings to flourish and develop. Philip Sheldrake, drawing on the work of Aquinas

and Aristotle, sees cities as essential for allowing human beings to live the good life.

Virtues like "courage, temperance, liberality, greatness of soul, and companionable

modesty… [can only be] achieved in cities because virtue is more effectively learned

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[20] Ray Bakke, *A Theology As Big As a City* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press Academic, 1997), 12. Bakke notes that 20 years ago about 3 billion people out of 6 billion lived in cities, and that number has grown significantly since.
[21] Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983).

with other people in a mixed community."[22] Sheldrake also notes how a good city "enables human aspirations to be productive rather than repressed or limited to self-indulgence."[23] The community found in cities helps human beings thrive and be our best selves.

If good cities promote virtue, the history of human civilization is also littered with examples of cities bringing out the worst in human behavior. Scripture has its own examples, from Sodom to Babylon, of these kinds of cities, which is part of why the ideal of the new Jerusalem is so important. Complete human flourishing and community life requires a fully redeemed city. If the Book of Revelation is the final eschatological description of the redeemed city, the Old Testament contains visions of a redeemed city, as well. Sheldrake looks to the psalms and prophets who describe "the quintessential city – beautiful, rich, and the seat of both political and religious power" where God is enthroned (Psalm 9), where the city speaks to God's power and faithfulness (Psalm 48), where care is given to the poor and needy (Amos 8:4-8), and where the city even can repent of its sins (Jeremiah 26:6).[24] Jacobsen sees Old Testament cities providing redemption in a variety of ways ranging from the tyranny of Pharaoh's Egypt being redeemed with a good king in the city of David to the residents of Babel wishing to make a name for themselves being redeemed in a city where God has chosen to make his name dwell.[25]

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[22] Philip Sheldrake, *The Spiritual City: Theology, Spirituality, and the Urban* (West Sussex, UK: Wiley Blackwell, 2014), 77.
[23] Philip Sheldrake, "Cities and Human Community: Spirituality and the Urban," *The Way* 45, no. 4 (October 2006): 113.
[24] Sheldrake, *The Spiritual City*, 17.
[25] Jacobson, *Sidewalks in the Kingdom*, 44.

Perhaps the fullest expression of the redeemed city in the Old Testament, however, comes in the vision the new Jerusalem described in Isaiah 65:17-25. Elements of the eternal city created for maximum human flourishing include: joy and the absence of crying (v.18-19); long life without infant mortality (v. 20); housing, food, and meaningful employment (v. 21-22); intergenerational families that prosper (v.23); rapid answer to prayer (v.24); and the absence of violence (v.25).[26] These characteristics of the eternal city are, I believe, also characteristics of God's desire for our current cities. These characteristics provide a description of the environment that allows all of God's people to live the fullest possible life in this world.

Another way to look at God's desire for cities is to look at what cities are called to be. I would argue that God does have a purpose for cities to play, analogous to the purpose that he gives to individuals. These particular purposes stem from a combination of the city's existence as a city and the particular personality, character and location of the city itself. Swanson and Williams, for instance, note a number of gifts that all cities should have which matter to both its residents and to the larger human family. These characteristics, such as having "a transforming effect on people," being "a creative center," offering "fertile ground for thinking and receptivity," or helping "people live more efficiently and productively," describe gifts that cities have generally offered in a wide variety of times and places.[27] Bakke adds redeeming nations to this list, since the Biblical account of Revelation describes the nations coming to the New Jerusalem, and

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[26] Similar lists are found in Bakke, *A Theology As Big As A City*, 82-83, and Eric Swanson and Sam Williams, *To Transform A City: Whole Church, Whole Gospel, Whole City* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 56-57.
[27] Swanson and Williams, *To Transform a City*, 30.

we see today how networks of multinational cities connect the world and help the gospel spread.[28] Any city looking to discern its own purpose might start with these attributes.

At the same time, we can see that every city also has distinct charisms that define it. Dawson believes, and I agree, that God created each city with what he calls a redemptive gift.[29] This redemptive gift is what that city can uniquely offer the world. Geographic location, proximity to natural resources, particular cultural history, and the industries and people groups that have called that city home all combine to make New York different than Chicago different than Hong Kong different than Mumbai different from Moscow different from Sharon. When cities know and offer their redemptive gifts, the world is richer and the city prospers in ways that more closely approximate the vision in Isaiah 65. When cities repress their redemptive gifts, the common good suffers as commerce becomes consumerism, administration becomes graft, diversity becomes stratification, and uplifting art becomes empty aesthetic.

The reality that many cities are not fully offering their redemptive gift for the common good, combined with the number of urban areas that bear little resemblance to the vision of Isaiah 65, indicate that the work of God's redemption for our cities remains an on-going activity. If God's work in the city is on-going, then so should be the church's role in cooperating with that work. I will turn to this issue in the next two sections of this chapter.

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[28] Bakke, *A Theology As Big As a City,* 13 and 80.
[29] Dawson, *Taking Our Cities For God*, 19.

Section Two: Vocation in the City

The impact that cities have on human flourishing and life, combined with the distance between the reality of our cities on the ground and the vision of the ideal city described by Isaiah, point to a vocation for the church to minister to the life of the city. Rick Rouse and Craig Van Gelder describe it this way: "God is at work in the world beyond the church. Discerning this work of God is foundational for effective ministry because the church is called and sent to participate in God's mission in the world."[30]

Returning to Acts 8, one important consequence of the church being effective in its ministry is that great joy is brought to our cities, which is also the first characteristic of the redeemed city in Isaiah 65:18. Instead of looking for joy in the city, congregational leaders are often more attuned to gauging the comfort and convenience of their members. To counter this tendency, Reggie McNeal writes that, "On a macro level, this view of church means that every community should be better if the church gets the mission right. The scorecard can no longer be about how well our individual congregations are doing. The condition of our communities is the scorecard on how well the church is doing at being the people of God."[31] Dave Daubert, the former ELCA Director of Congregational Renewal, also sees the purpose of the church as cooperating with God's work in the world. He writes:

> The reason God made the church was to call forth a community of allies…God is looking for allies in mission and each of us and each of our congregations has a role to play as God's dream unfolds. That role is our purpose. Mission is God's

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[30] Rick Rouse and Craig Van Gelder, *A Field Guide for the Missional Congregation: Embarking on a Journey of Transformation* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2008), 49.

[31] Reggie McNeal, foreword to *To Transform a City: Whole Church, Whole Gospel, Whole City* by Eric Swanson and Sam Williams (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 12.

work to bless and save the world. Our purpose is our part in God's work. The mission is always bigger than our purpose."[32]

Daubert's statement that we as individuals, as well as our congregations collectively, have a role to play in God's mission in the world has important implications for my thesis project. If what Daubert says is true, then members of our congregations may be called to work in the community alongside of, or possibly even instead of, spending their time or energy on ministry within the congregation.

Again, this call for some to work in the community may seem self-evident, yet too many of our congregations do not lift up ministry to the city as a Christian calling unless those ministries have some connection to a congregational outreach plan. Even fewer parishes provide the education and formation to help congregants understand their role in the community as stemming from their Christian vocation. This absence is especially felt in community leadership roles that are not mentioned specifically in Matthew 25. While many churches would applaud, and even financially support, someone opening up a homeless shelter or visiting prisons or joining the staff of the local foodbank, fewer connect the work of community development, municipal finance, or downtown zoning as an essential component to living into the vision of Isaiah 65 for a community. Such work can be the work of ministry, however, and as such can provide purpose, fulfillment and, in some cases, even a manifestation the fruits of the Spirit such as peace and joy in a person's life.

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[32] Dave Daubert, *Living Lutheran: Renewing Your Congregation* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2007), 38-39. Part of this quote is also cited in Rouse and Van Gelder, *A Field Guide For the Missional Congregation,* 46.

When a congregation does not connect ministry to the city as part of the ministry of the church, we risk two negative outcomes. First, people who might be called to work in the community do not go out of the church into the world. This outcome is part of what missional churches have tended to focus on, and have tried to overcome, in the past twenty years. The second outcome, however, is that people doing God's work in the world find their purpose and fulfillment with no connection to the church. These leaders find no need for their local congregation if that congregation is neither supporting nor even understanding the work that God has given them to do. From the congregational perspective, this disconnect means that the church loses some of its most dynamic and gifted leaders. From the civic perspective, this disconnect means that community leaders miss the spiritual community and theological grounding that would assist them personally in their efforts and root their own vision and ministry in God's dream for their community. Obviously, this state of affairs is an utter disaster for our congregations and our communities. The next section of this chapter will look at one way out of this congregational siloing by exploring an ecclesiology that could help the whole church minister to the whole community.

Section Three: A Church for the Whole City

In a three-week span in the fall of 2017, I had the honor of officiating at three funerals. One was for a parishioner from St. John's. The others, however, were members of two other local congregations. In each case, their most recent senior pastor had moved on and the church's Sunday morning services were being performed by one or more clergy driving in from out of town. For at least one of the funerals, no clergy of that

denomination were able to come into town to perform the funeral, and in both cases my connection to the families through various community activities was stronger than that of the clergy now serving their congregations. Yet in neither congregation had any serious attempt been made to cooperate significantly with another local faith community. Instead, networks remained with distant judicatory offices.

Although I was able to perform the funerals, neither church has a formal cooperative agreement with the Episcopal Church, nor are they likely to anytime soon. While convenience certainly played a role in their choice, the loved ones of those who had died also had an important insight that their denominational leaders may have lacked. They saw that I was a member of their local church. I, in turn, recognized ministering to their families, and to their faith communities, as part of my role as the rector of the local Episcopal congregation.

Gratefully, the ecumenical movement has helped break down the barriers between different denominations, at least to the point where few see members of congregations down the street as destined to eternal damnation. Yet often competition, instead of cooperation, remains the norm, and many decisions about financial resources, pastoral and other staffing, disposition of facilities, and other essential mission topics are made by local congregations in conjunction with denominational judicatories in other locations. While I am not necessarily against denominations (except to the degree they hinder the fulfillment of Jesus' prayer in John 17 that we all may be one), too rarely do these decisions get made in consultation with other congregations in the same community with an overall vision for the local city in mind. A lack of common investment and discernment in the important resources of the common church in the community means

that we have congregations without pastors to perform funerals, beautiful buildings with dwindling congregations, vibrant congregations with building constraints, competing youth ministry programs, and no protestant congregation able to gather a critical mass of people to provide an alternative service to meet the needs of people working on Sunday morning. While some of these problems are simply part of the landscape of today's spiritual environment, others are created or exacerbated by the way we generally view our congregations as existing first for themselves, then second for their denomination, and only third, at best, for the wider church in their community.[33]

In New Testament times, however, the church was seen first and foremost as existing in its place. Paul Sparks and his co-authors write, "The church begins *in* place. In fact, the church *in* place is the dominant theme of the New Testament."[34] Saint Paul writes to "God's beloved in Rome" (Romans 1:7), or "To the Church of God that is in Corinth" (1 Corinthians 1:2 and 2 Corinthians 1:1), or "To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi" (Philippians 1:1). When there are multiple churches in one place, Paul writes, as a whole, "To the churches of Galatia" (Galatians 1:1). Similarly, John of Patmos is instructed to write to the angels of the churches in seven specific cities. In fact, Paul gets rather heated when the Corinthians separate their local church by saying "I belong to Paul" or to Apollos or to Cephas, or even to Christ (1 Corinthians 1:12). One

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[33] This understanding of a church congregation as having primary ties beyond the local community does parallel recent cultural trends that increasing allow individuals and groups to choose affiliation networks that minimize geographical location. Increasing ease of travel and electronic communication are just two changes that permit people to shape an identity outside of where they physically reside. Except for the implications of these trends for ministry in the city, the scope of these questions lies beyond this essay.

[34] Paul Sparks, Tim Soerens, and Dwight J. Friesen, *The New Parish: How Neighborhood Churches are Transforming Mission, Discipleship, and Community* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press Books, 2014), 37.

imagines he would be no more accepting of "I belong to Luther" or "I belong to the Pope" or "I belong to the Willow Creek model" or "I belong to Henry VIII."[35]

The problem with these divisions in the local church is not just theological, but is primarily practical. Our divisions hinder the work of ministry in the community. Swanson and Williams provide a helpful understanding of the connection of mission in a community and the various local congregations. They say that "transformation can only occur when 'the whole church takes the whole gospel to the whole city.'"[36] The whole church for them is a key term which refers to "the unity of the church in a given city" since "the church is really only *one* church in a city made up of many different congregations."[37] In fact, they go on to say, that if we are serious about undertaking ministry in our community, we have to recognize that "while all the necessary gifts for ministry and maturity are contained within the church, they may not all reside in a particular local congregation."[38] If we want to undertake God's mission to redeem our cities, then we are going to have to work together much more closely than we do now. Gratefully, Sparks, Soerens, and Friesen do see that desire to work with God to make a difference in our communities as a hopeful motivator for church unity:

> God is up to something in neighborhoods, on the ground in real places. The church, in all its diversity, needs to figure out how to join in. We think God is putting forth a dare that, if practiced, could both revitalize church traditions, and develop a growing unity among members of various denominational expressions in the parish. More than that, it could help the church learn to give itself away in love to the world around it.[39]

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[35] Granted, we would not really state the last one.
[36] Swanson and Williams, *To Transform a City,* 100.
[37] Swanson and Williams, *To Transform a City,* 100.
[38] Swanson and Williams, *To Transform a City,* 100.
[39] Sparks, Soerens, and Friesen, *The New Parish*, 77. For Sparks et. al., the parish refers to "*all the relationships (including the land) where the local church lives out its faith together,*" 23.

A local church of various denominational and other expressions working together to join what God is up to in its neighborhood is also going to be a church that recognizes the vocation of itself and its members to the community. Ideally no ministry in the city falls through the cracks, since there are no cracks to fall through. The collective church works and prays for the collective needs of the entire community.

Section Four: Seeing with New Eyes and Prayerwalking

When I arrived at St. John's in 2009, the congregation was ministering in few ways that were clearly bringing joy to the surrounding community[40]. I had meetings with the city manager and with the Chamber of Commerce director, neither of whom could say anything particularly positive about our congregation.

Then in 2011, St. John's hired Dave Daubert as a consultant to lead our parish through a process designed to help the congregation see through new eyes.[41] A series of exercises helped us discern our purpose and look at the needs and assets of our parish and the surrounding community. Two of the most powerful exercises were pairs of congregants going out into different parts of the city to ask anyone they encountered a few simple questions about themselves and about twenty-five interviews between parishioners and community leaders. The process also involved a variety of visioning exercises and distilling the results into a purpose statement, guiding principles, and

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[40] The congregation had a long history of community engagement, however, and some efforts, such as a food pantry and work by the Episcopal Church Women, were occurring.
[41] Some of the process itself is contained in the book by A Renewal Enterprise, Inc, *Seeing Through New Eyes.* Daubert, *Living Lutheran,* contains descriptions of some of the internal exercises we used. Rouse and Van Gelder offer theological and theoretical background for this process in *A Field Guide for the Missional Congregation.*

strategic directions. As a direct result of the process, the congregation started a

community lunch program which now feeds 150-200 people each week and involves

three other local churches, an agency working with juveniles in the court system, and

other local non-profits. Other results have included the parish opening its doors for

community activities and participating in a variety of local religious, artistic, and civic

events. Today, in 2018, Sharon generally sees St. John's as a resource and we are

regularly sought out as a partner.

The success is relevant here because it demonstrates that with a few simple tools,

combined with the will to follow through in using those tools and take advantage of their

results, a significant connection can be made between a congregation and a community.

Taking people with a spiritual background and connecting them to what God is doing in

the city was not particularly difficult, but the results of that activity were meaningful.

Another tool that I used with the members of the congregation was

prayerwalking. Prayerwalking at its most basic is simply taking a walk and praying for

what is seen along the way. Steve Hawthorne and Graham Kendrick describe

prayerwalking as "*praying on-site with insight.*"[42] Prayerwalking can be a particular

powerful form of intercession for an area, and many evangelists see it as indispensable to

successful church planting and bringing the gospel to new places.[43] By getting out into

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[42] Steve Hawthorne and Graham Kendrick, *Prayerwalking: Praying On-Site With Insight* (Lake Mary, FL: Charisma House, 1993), 12. This volume is also one of the best practical guides for beginning a prayerwalking ministry in a parish or community.
[43] For numerous profound stories of prayerwalking's power, along with practical intercessory tips out of a strong charismatic background, see Mark Geppert, *The Attack Lambs: Prayer the Changes the World* (Singapore: ARMOUR Publishing, 1999).

the community and praying, prayerwalking also helps people connect with the city and begin to see what God might be doing there.

For a couple years, St. John's had a group of people that would gather regularly to prayerwalk. We would choose a location that was important to someone in the group, which was sometimes a neighborhood around their house and sometimes part of a business or commercial area. Beyond the efficacy of the prayers to make a difference in the community, which I believe occurred, I noticed a number of other outcomes. First, we were able to invite members from other churches to join us in this community ministry. The local church was able to join across congregational lines to minister to the city. Second, after every prayerwalk, participants could see ways that God was at work in their community. Whether in people they encountered, buildings they saw, changes from previous prayerwalks that they noticed, or natural phenomena, invariably people saw that God was up to something. Third, people found themselves called to cooperate with God in ministering to the community. That cooperation began with the prayer itself, which they understood as a call from God and a way to bless the area they were walking in. Yet, that cooperation did not stop with prayerwalking. Those who participated have remained active in ministry, including outreach ministries into the community, even after the prayerwalking group ended due to physical limitations for some members and relocations for others.

As I contemplated a ministry project, I thought about the success of the Seeing Through New Eyes process and of prayerwalking in getting members of my congregation to understand and connect with what God was doing in the community. At the same time, I recognized that as we left the church and went out into the community, other

people were already out in the community before we arrived. While local congregations were worried about our own internal issues, others were engaged in reorganizing Sharon's city government, remodeling downtown buildings to bring in new tenants, and designing new school elementary school buildings. People were fighting fires and investigating violent crime and working as EMTs. With no consultation with St. John's, and quite possibly no explicit theological rationale at all, a group of people had managed to establish a grocery store in a food desert less than a block from the church. We were, as always, joining God's work already in progress.

Yet the people doing the work in the community were not necessarily connecting their ministry in the city with the local church. Some were a part of a local congregation, and most had grown up in a church, but the connection between their civic, business, or non-profit work during the week and what happened in church on Sunday mornings was largely disconnected. Even when they were participating in God's work, they did not see it as such. I wanted to help make the connections between the work they were doing and the vocation God was calling them to do. I wanted to see if we could take the successful tools for going out from the church into the community and reverse them to help those in the community see what they were already doing as part of the work of God and the church. The details of how I designed my project around prayerwalking to help people see with new eyes where God was at work in what they were doing already are described in the next chapter.

Chapter 4

Ministry Project Overview

In the capacity of a community leader…we need to say a prayer about this stuff

and bring God into it and get some sense of what role and what intentions we should

bring to the table. I don't think I would have considered that or I don't think anybody

does enough of that.

– David[44]

This chapter will focus on the ministry project I designed to make a positive

difference in the life of Sharon, Pennsylvania, and the church of that community. The

project took community leaders on prayerwalks through Sharon, and then brought them

together for a focus group discussion on what they experienced and how they see God at

work in their community. The two sections of this chapter will deal with the design of

this ministry project and the project participants. The next chapter will look at the

responses of those participating.

Section One: Project Design

This ministry project was designed with three goals in mind. First, I wanted to

create an experience that would allow community leaders with Christian backgrounds an

opportunity to see God at work in their city. Second, I wanted those leaders to

understand that their work was part of a vocation that contained a spiritual element.

Third, I wanted to offer a forum for discussion of these topics that could reinforce these

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[44] David, interview by author, September 27, 2017.

experiences, and help create a community with a common language where similar conversations could occur in the future. I chose to use prayerwalking as an experience because it both offers an opportunity to view the city through God's perspective and actively to undertake spiritual work for the community's benefit. A focus group after prayerwalking would help meet the third goal of building a community.

Accomplishing these goals meant that, in terms of research design, my project had a transformative/postmodern interpretive framework.[45] Characteristics of this framework include participation between the researcher and those being studied as integral parts of both how we understand what reality is (ontology) and how we come to know it (epistemology). Additionally, the values of participants are respected, while also being challenged as part of the process. The research itself is collaborative, encourages participation, and allows participants to highlight issues and concerns.[46] This framework is not merely attempting to measure a static condition, but assumes that changes will occur in the participants as part of the project. The value of the project is not limited, therefore, to the data collected, but is also found in the positive growth in participants, as well as often in the researcher. I see this transformational element as an essential part of any ministry research project, so have chosen this framework.

Respect for the values of the project participants was incorporated into the project in a number of ways. In my initial conversations, as well as in follow-up conversations when participants signed their consent forms, I was clear about what the project was

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[45] See John W. Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches, 3rd Edition (*Los Angeles: Sage, 2013), 36-37, for an analysis of different interpretive frameworks used in qualitative inquiry.
[46] Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design,* 36.

about, what outcomes I hoped to see, and what my own beliefs were. I then invited

people to participate if such a project was of interest to them. One potential participant

said that she was really uninterested in religion at this point in her life, and I did not

pursue her participation. The choice of venues for prayerwalking was determined by the

participants, and their different concerns for different parts of the city helped shape the

project itself. Individual prayerwalks also differed based on participants' interest in and

comfort with praying. On some prayerwalks the participants prayed regularly, on some I

prayed for what people told me to pray for, on some I summarized implicit concerns,

hopes, and dreams out of our conversations while walking, and on some I mostly listened

to participants own experiences with prayer and the community. Finally, during the

focus group, I began the session by articulating clear guidelines concerning

confidentiality, respecting different group engagement styles, participants' ability to

refrain from speaking about any topic, and the value of all perspectives in the

conversation with ways that those perspectives could be honored in a focus group.

 As will be discussed below, my project took seriously the interaction between

myself and the participants as part of the research, with a number of participants noting in

interviews that my presence was an important component of what they experienced. I

also respected the values and experiences of participants, while asking questions that

pushed them to better articulate, understand, and potentially even rethink those values.

Part of what makes this project transformative is that the goal is not only to discover

participant's initial attitudes and experiences, but also to discover how those attitudes

could be changed in ways that affect future behavior.

My project uses a phenomenological approach. Phenomenology focuses on a particular phenomenon experienced by a group of individuals.[47] In this project, that focused phenomenon is prayerwalking. More specifically, my research looks at how the experience of this phenomenon can change a participant's understanding of how God is at work in a community and how they can participate in that work. As part of my research process into that phenomenon, I hope to see how being part of a group that has experienced this phenomenon might create a different sense of community with one another and even engage the phenomenon of prayerwalking more frequently in the future. The primary method of data collection with a phenomenological study is individual interviews and the usual research finding is a description of the "'essence' of the experience."[48] I am not primarily interested here in a deeper understanding of the "essence" of prayerwalking, but rather in looking at the how the shared practical experience of the phenomenon of prayerwalking brings about a transformation in certain attitudes and/or behaviors. The "essence" I am looking at involves primarily the subjective aspects of an experience of prayerwalking including its potential transformational power.[49] To capture this experience, my research design requires an interview mechanism both before and after the prayerwalk. A final focus group is not necessarily a common element in phenomenological design, but gathering participants allowed an opportunity for achieving the project's third goal of community building. The

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[47] Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design,* 78.

[48] Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design,* 79, 105.

[49] I do not have space here to explore more broadly the methodological questions of what exactly phenomenologists mean by "essence". For purposes of this project, I am defining the "essence" I am looking at very narrowly, and looking to go no deeper than participant's subjective reflections on it. If there is a Platonic form of the experience of prayerwalking, I leave that to be discovered by a future researcher.

focus group also offered further interaction between the participants in line with the goals of my transformational perspective that provided for mutual questioning and refinement of attitudes and values. Participants' understandings of their own experience during the prayerwalks deepened through mutual discussion, and capturing that discussion provided me with further important data.

I had considered at least two other project designs, in addition to a phenomenological one. The first type of project I would have hoped to carry out was a quantitative analysis that looked specifically at measurable positive changes in the community as a result of community leaders engaging in prayerwalks for their city. Helping Sharon more closely resemble the redeemed city of Isaiah 65 is, of course, the ultimate goal of this project. A number of practical and ethical issues impeded such a design. First, finding appropriate metrics and obtaining a baseline measurement for the variety of spiritual, emotional, social, and economic activities that can be transformed in a community through focused prayer was well beyond the scope of this project. Second, the project itself would probably have required a longer timeframe to show measurable results if they could have been obtained. Third, the prayerwalks would have needed to be much more regimented and uniform, which would have made a very different, and potentially off-putting, experience for participants. Finally, studies of parallel therapeutic interventions normally require a control group, and I could not ethically designate a section of the city as an area NOT to be prayed for by community leaders, or to send "placebo" non-prayerwalkers through the neighborhood.

I also considered a narrative research approach. Such a design goes more in-depth over time with a much smaller number, or even a single, participant.[50] While such a study could have shown more detail about the potential transformational effects upon an individual engaging in prayerwalking, such an approach had three drawbacks. First and most importantly, such an approach had less focus or opportunity to engage the community aspects of the prayerwalk follow-up. Second, the project would possibly have required a longer time frame in order to see a significant change in a smaller number of people. Third, given the diversity of starting points and responses in my current project, I obtained a wider understanding of the phenomenon of the experience of prayerwalking and its transformational aspects. Narrowing the group would have narrowed the breadth of data, even if allowing for deeper understanding in the experiences of the individuals selected. Narrative data could be a very helpful companion to this phenomenological study, but I believe that the project I have proposed is the first step.

Practically, this ministry project had four elements that facilitated participants' experience of the phenomenon of prayerwalking and collected the necessary data. The first element was an initial on-line survey concerning basic demographic information, faith background and faith participation information, current job information, and participants' current understanding of how their faith relates to their work and the broader community. Second, participants participated in a one-on-one prayerwalk with me in an area of Sharon that the participants chose, followed by a short interview. Third,

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[50] See Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design,* 70-76, for a discussion of narrative qualitative research.

participants went on a second prayerwalk with me, during which time they were given a digital camera and asked to take photos of where they saw God at work. I asked the participants to go on a prayerwalk of at least thirty minutes and the prayerwalks all took between thirty and sixty minutes. I provided short instructions at the beginning of each prayerwalk. Finally, participants were asked to participate in a ninety-minute focus group where the photos they took were shared and they discussed questions concerning faith, vocation, and the wider community.

As a prelude to the research study, I contacted prospective participants, explained the details of the design, discussed confidentiality, provided the date of the final focus group, and asked them to sign an informed consent form. This form can be found in Appendix 3.

The initial survey was designed to capture basic demographic information, as well as some baseline data about prayer practices and participants' attitudes toward faith and the larger community. The initial survey questions can be found in Appendix 1. All participants completed the initial survey before we went on our first prayerwalk.

The prayerwalks were designed to give people an active experience connecting prayer to the community. After I received a response from their initial survey, I contacted that participant to do the first prayerwalk. I requested an hour on people's schedules for a prayerwalk of about thirty minutes, plus a short interview. In my experience, most people are physically able to walk at least that much, busy people are able to schedule an hour time slot during the day, and people are more likely to lose focus on longer prayerwalks. I told them we could meet to walk and pray in any part of Sharon

they wished. Four participants chose residential neighborhoods, with five walking in the

downtown Sharon area.

At the beginning of the prayerwalk I gave them the following instructions orally

and in writing:

> *Imagine you are looking at our city through God's eyes.*
> *As we walk, we want to pray for places for one or more of three reasons:*
> > *1) You want to thank God for what is happening in a place.*
> > *2) You want to ask God to bless what is happening in a place.*
> > *3) You want to ask God to intervene and make a change in a place.*
> *During this walk, you will be deciding when we stop to pray, and either you or*
> *Adam can offer the prayer you want to make.*

I chose these three questions as the basis for the prayerwalk for three reasons. First, the

questions needed to be simple enough both to be remembered and to encompass a variety

of theological understandings. Second, the questions needed to point participants to ways

that God may be at work both in seemingly positive and negative places. Third, the

questions highlight ways that God can be found at work in the city in the past, which

elicits thanksgiving; in the present, which elicits a request for continual blessings; and in

the future, which elicits a prayer for needed intervention. These questions allowed

participants to look widely for God's work while keeping instructions to a minimum.

After we completed the first prayerwalk, I conducted a short interview that lasted

between five and fifteen minutes. My interview questions can be found in Appendix 2.

These interviews immediately following participants' first experience of a prayerwalk

provide significant insight into their experience of this phenomenon.

Sometime after the first prayerwalk, I contacted the participant to schedule a

second prayerwalk of the same length. I offered the same instructions for this

prayerwalk, with one addition. I carried a small digital camera with me, and told

participants that I would like them to take pictures of where they saw God at work. I also told them that those pictures would be shared at the focus group.[51]

I chose to use photographs for a variety of complimentary reasons. First, using visual photos offered a different way for people to engage their experience of prayerwalking. Since different people process experiences differently, offering a photographic way to see where God is at work in the community complimented the opportunity to offer a verbal response. Taking pictures is also more natural for many people today than offering extemporaneous prayer or asking a companion for extemporaneous prayer. Photos offered a different way for me to see how the participants were viewing the community through God's eyes via their own eye looking through a camera lens.

Second, photos offered a tool for use during the focus group discussion. Lynn Butler-Kisber discusses the concept of photovoice in qualitative inquiry. "This process uses photographs, often taken by participants, to elicit responses and local understandings of particular phenomena" that can lead to change on a variety of levels.[52] The images taken allow a group of people to come together and explore deeper meanings through collaborative reflection. Conversation can also be fostered because of the focus on the image instead of on the other participants.[53] The photographs also provide a record of one aspect of the prayerwalk that can be shared and analyzed more quickly and independently by either other participants or myself than an oral description of people's

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[51] Some of those photos can be found in Appendix 4.
[52] Lynn Butler-Kisber, *Qualitative Inquiry: Thematic, Narrative and Arts-Informed Perspectives* (Los Angeles: Sage Publications Inc, 2010), 127.
[53] Butler-Kisber, *Qualitative Inquiry,* 130.

experiences. Additionally, taking photographs allows participants to participate as co-researchers in a particular way.[54]

The final project component was a focus group involving all the participants who had completed both prayerwalks. This focus group took place in a local coffee shop where I had arranged for an open (coffee) bar, took about ninety minutes, and was audio-recorded while two note-takers also captured important aspects of the conversation along with non-verbal and other relevant information. The focus group was designed to provide an opportunity for people to share their experiences of prayerwalking with each other. Ideally this group reflection would help people go deeper in their own understanding of what they experienced, as well as building a loose community of people who had shared this experience and would be more likely in the future to build on that shared experience. The focus group began with a brief introduction where I laid out the agenda, discussed an expectation of loose confidentiality, and set group process norms. After the introduction, the first part of the discussion focused on the photos taken by participants on the second prayerwalk and aspects of the current state of the community that developed out of that discussion. The next part of the discussion involved participants' experience of the prayerwalks and their experience of praying, and what those experiences meant to them. Finally, I asked some closing questions about learnings not already discussed and offered an opportunity to say anything else participants wanted to share.

The project began in August 2017, when I approached prospective participants. The final focus group occurred on November 4, 2017.

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[54] Butler-Kisber, *Qualitative Inquiry,* 130.

Section Two: Project Participants

Participants in this project were community leaders in the City of Sharon that I selected as people who I thought would be willing to participate and fully engage this process. I had worked with all of them on a variety of city or community efforts. Some I have known for almost eight years, while others I had worked with for less than a year at the beginning of the project. I limited participation to people who had grown up with a Christian background for two reasons. First, I wanted to engage people who had some common understanding of prayer and vocation. Even if they had subsequently changed their spiritual understanding or had received little formation, growing up in a Christian church provided a certain foundation for this project and our discussion. Second, most of the leadership in Sharon is still Christian, or was raised in Christian households. Currently, neither Sharon nor the immediate surrounding communities includes a non-Christian house of worship or religious center.[55] While some individuals with no Christian background do live and work in downtown Sharon, they do not yet hold formal community leadership positions.

I chose to work with community leaders for two important and related reasons. The first reason is that one of my goals is to help those already at work in the community connect their work with an understanding of vocation. While I did not narrowly define what that community work needed to be, a certain conscious dedication to bettering the life of the city through employment or volunteer efforts was required. Although selecting

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[55] In 2013, the only local Reformed Synagogue merged with a synagogue in Youngstown, Ohio, thirty minutes away.

a greater range of participants may have provided other interesting data about the experience of prayerwalking or have opened participants' eyes to the need to have a vocation in the community, such participants would not currently be engaged in the work of the city that could be seen through more spiritual lenses. Second, I chose community leaders because I hoped that this project would have a positive effect on the wider city of Sharon. The greatest difference could be made by selecting people in positions of leadership whose experiences through the project would have the greatest impact on the larger community.

I initially asked ten people to participate in the study. Two chose not to participate, one for lack of interest and one due to a scheduling conflict. The eight others agreed to participate, and I later invited two additional participants. These ten all filled out the initial on-line survey. Of those ten, nine people participated in the first prayerwalk and eight people participated in the second prayerwalk and focus group. The two people who could not finish both had significant family crises arise which prohibited their ongoing participation.

To allow for some confidentiality, I will use pseudonyms for participants when quoting their experiences. They have, however, allowed me to note their participation in this project by formal position in the community. Participants held the following paid and volunteer positions:

- Marketing and Media Coordinator for a regional business; Sharon Blight Task Force, Sharon Sanitary Authority, Waterfire Marketing, Sharon PR Initiative;
- Bank Vice-President; Chair of Sharon Community and Economic Development Commission;
- Social Media Small Business Owner; Waterfire River Operations Team Leader, Sharon Neighborhood Revitalization Committee;
- Executive Director, Shenango Valley Chamber of Commerce; Involved in Revitalization Organizations in Sharon and Shenango Valley;

- Planner for a Local Architectural Firm; President of Library Board;
- Executive Director, Community Foundation of Western PA and Eastern OH;
- Sharon City Council Member; Sharon Recreation Commission, Local Church Parish Council, Penn State Shenango Alumni Board;
- Bank Senior Credit Analyst; Sharon Beautification Commission Chair, Sharon Community and Economic Development Commission, Sharon Historical Society;
- Sharon City Manager and Fire Chief; Little League Coach, Peewee Football Coach, Youth Wrestling Coach;
- Former CEO of Local Manufacturer; Community Investor and Property (Re-) Developer.

Of the ten participants 30% are age 31-40. 30% are age 41-50, and 40% are age 51-60. 70% are male and 30% are female (the two people who declined to participate were also female). In terms of faith background, half grew up Roman Catholic, three were Presbyterian, one was Church of God, and one was United Church of Christ. 80% of participants attended church weekly growing up, while the other 20% attended rarely. 80% also attended Sunday School or other church school regularly when they were growing up.

Today, half of the participants consider themselves members of a church, with four belonging to Roman Catholic parishes and one Episcopalian. When asked how often they attend church, the answers were:

- 20%   Weekly
- 30%   2-3 times per month
- 20%   A few times a year
- 20%   Rarely
- 10%   Never

When asked how often they prayed, they responded:

- 20%   Daily
- 40%   A few times a week
- 20%   Weekly
- 10%   When I'm facing a significant crisis

- 10%   Not in the past year

When asked about how they live out their faith in the initial survey, three participants responded by saying they help others. One said, "Creating a culture of kindness and peace." Another spoke of trying to be honest, to speak well of others, and to avoid cutting corners and follow the mission of their organization, and another talked about coworker relationships. One replied, "mostly the connectivity and fanning the flames of hope." One spoke of maintaining faith in humanity and wanting to serve even after seeing all the problems in the world. One spoke of a faith journey of seeing how God has led him to his current role after struggling to find purpose for much of his career, while the final respondent said, "I don't know that I do."

When asked about God's vision or hope for Sharon, one participant summarized most of the responses: "I believe that God would want to see Sharon become vibrant once again, specifically our struggling neighborhoods, I vision him wanting to generally improve the quality of life for residents living in less than ideal situations."

When asked how their own work relates to God's vision for Sharon, participants offered a variety of understandings. Three people had never considered the question before and seemed to struggle to express an answer, with two people noting that they try to consider the "greater good" in their decisions and another hoping that "giving many different opportunities to all different kinds of people" would accomplish it. Three others noted specific contributions they could make including the less glamorous stuff "behind the scenes related to numbers and paperwork", carrying over various best practices to economic development efforts, and developing a program centered around the opioid crisis. Three noted general contributions such as making "our community a better place

to live", "being willing to give time in service to others", and "providing resources and vision others might not have." The final respondent noted that "it's all I do."

This chapter has provided an understanding of the details of the project I have designed to test my thesis. I have also described how I have selected my project participants and furnished background of who they are and how they answered initial questions about their faith and vocation. The next chapter will share their responses to individual interviews and their contributions to our focus group in ways that both touch upon my thesis and provide insight into further ways that the church can engage the broader community.

Chapter 5

Ministry Project Outcomes

What surprised me was how easy it was for me to pray.

--Art[56]

This chapter will explore the statements that project participants made following their first prayerwalk and in the focus group as they discussed what they had experienced. The first section deals with topics of prayer, vocation and deepening community. These responses point to the transformations that occurred as a result of the project itself, and include most of the outcomes I had expected. The second section of this chapter looks at a variety of topics that were important to participants during the focus group or which numerous participants raised in their individual interviews. These discussions point to areas that the community is looking for something which the church has the capacity to provide. While I expected a few such opportunities to be raised, the breadth and scope was unexpected. They offer important learnings for the church.

Section One: Prayer, Vocation, and Deepening Community

During their interviews following their first prayerwalk and during the focus group discussion, the project participants described a number of ways that this experience changed their attitudes, their understandings, and, potentially, their behavior going forward. The three areas, in particular, that I want to explore in this section are changes in participants' understanding of prayer along with accompanying changes in behavior;

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[56] Art, interview by author, September 12, 2017.

deepening understanding of the importance of vocational aspects in participants' own work; and steps toward a deeper community that can discuss and reinforce these themes going forward.

Changes in participants understanding of prayer was probably the most significant change that was expressed throughout this research. The act of casually walking through a neighborhood or downtown with someone and offering simple prayers at various points that resonated with the concerns of participants had a significant impact.

One primary learning expressed was a new understanding of how simply prayer could happen. Emma, an active Roman Catholic, expressed her initial thoughts about the prayerwalk during the focus group. "I didn't even want to do this. I was like, 'What am I going to do? I'm going to walk around town and pray. This is so weird.'…Are people going to know we're praying? Are we going to stop and kneel down in prayer or what? I'm Catholic and that is very ritualistic so I'm not sure what to do."[57] After the prayerwalk, however, she expressed, "When you were like, 'you can pray, too,' I was like, 'ehhh.' But now that I just see how simple it was for you, I can do that…It's simpler than I thought it would be. I have expectations in my head of how things work and I thought it would be more difficult – like you have to be a priest or clergy person to do it."[58]

Another participant, Art, said, "What surprised me was how easy it was for me to pray."[59] In describing the experience, he continued, "I think for the first time…I felt like I was actually kind of on a three-way call with God on this. Even though I probably said

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[57] Focus group, Sharon, PA, November 4, 2017.
[58] Emma, interview by author, October 11, 2017.
[59] Art interview.

all of those things in my mind to myself before, I didn't really say, 'Oh yeah, let's bring the third party in on it.'"[60]

During the focus group, Art and Emma also continued a dialogue about the weirdness of prayerwalking.

> Art: It just seemed so strange to go out and pray.
> Emma: Collectively, we all thought it was going to be weird.
> Art: And it was weird…[Then] you suddenly realize that this isn't weird, in fact I was weird before [for not prayerwalking].[61]

David, who was only able to complete the first prayerwalk, also noted that he "learned a perspective on how to pray…that it can be more conversational and casual."[62] He also realized that "most every twenty feet there was something we could pray about that was really personal that was not just economic development. It represented a person or a family or an opportunity for people to benefit from some of the prayerful intention."[63]

Nick was grateful for the way that the prayerwalk offered a place where he could be honest about what he saw and do something positive with even negative feelings. "I usually don't talk about negative things when I am with someone other than my wife. When I was more deliberate about my feelings, I started to feel the way I did about some of the negative forces that may exist, and it was nice to vocalize them…rather than bottling them up."[64] Since there are a variety of bad things happening in a revitalizing

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[60] Art interview.
[61] Focus group.
[62] David, interview by author, September 27, 2017.
[63] David interview.
[64] Nick, interview by author, September 25, 2017.

steel town, finding a way to deal with those negative experiences and feelings is important for a community leader.

This expanded understanding of prayer elicited expectations of continuing some aspect of what they had experienced while prayerwalking in the future.

The strongest statement came from Zoe, who has no current religious affiliation and in her initial interview said that she hadn't prayed in the past year. Yet, she noted that "any higher power would really kind of look on every place with the same sort of hope for good things."[65] During the focus group, she said that, "[Since] the walk...I can think of at least two times where I had just gotten in my car and seen something that upset me or I wished for better, and I just put some good vibes out." While she was raised Presbyterian and allowed that "you could pray whenever you wanted," the prayerwalking still felt weird. Yet her practice changed after the prayerwalk, where she prayed as she understood prayer, which she described as a "What you put out you get back sort of thing." She wasn't "saying it out loud. But just the energy part of it." [66] Having someone go from not praying in the past year to recognizing multiple occasions where she prayed as she understood it when seeing an issue around her is one of the strongest measurable impacts of this thesis project.

Emma spoke of two ways that this might change her future practice. First, she talked about wanting to prayerwalk with her children. "This is something I could do with my kids. We just usually walk around and talk about stuff. [Prayerwalking] might be fun and neat to do with [them]. [They may] see things that I don't see."[67] She also saw

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[65] Zoe, interview by author, September 28, 2017.
[66] Focus group.
[67] Emma interview.

prayerwalking as a way to combat times she feels unhappy. "This might be selfish, but if I am feeling dumpy, I just might do it on my own so I will feel better because I had such a good feeling after I did it…So now when I am feeling sorry for myself… [I will] pray for other people and things that need prayer."[68]

David talked about the need to incorporate prayer into economic development efforts going forward.

> [We've] brought a spiritual element and God into a conversation about economic development, and…it's appropriate to do so – to bring God into this equation that many times you probably wouldn't think of doing…[W]e need to say a prayer about this stuff and bring God into it and get some sense of what role and what intentions we should bring to the table. I don't think I would have considered that and I don't think anyone does enough of that.[69]

Hopefully his learnings about the ease of praying and his desire to pray will allow him to live into intentionally praying about the work he is doing.

Nick said that actually praying was "absolutely" the most important thing we did on our prayerwalk. The prayer made him aware that we "can't do it alone" and the importance of praying "for individuals and…strength to continue to work…[To help them through] at least a difficult circumstance, maybe in their day, maybe in their life." He said he learned that "I don't often walk around and pause to pray," and seemed interested in changing that omission.[70]

Sam often walks and bikes around the community and, he said, "I'm constantly thinking…[but] I've never thought of that as a prayer. [After this time] I gave them power. From my time with the Rev. [on the prayerwalk] I [realized] I needed permission

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[68] Focus group.
[69] David interview.
[70] Nick interview.

to allow my wandering to be more than wandering, if that makes sense."[71] For Sam, being able to experience what he was already doing as a form of prayer helped him connect his current practices with prayer going forward.

At the end of the focus group, as we were going over closing details, Maya asked if I could end with prayer. This minor request points to a recognition by the group of the importance of prayer, especially coming out of their experiences of prayerwalking.

During their interviews and the focus group, participants also described a number of ways that they experienced their own work as cooperating with God's purposes and work for the community. The focus group discussion did allow a number of participants to connect the dots or to articulate for the first time what they might have believed. While not necessarily clear in the quotes below, some of what participants are expressing may have come after an extended discussion of a topic or a person trying to say something in a couple of different ways over the course of a portion of the conversation before being able to express what they seemed to want to express. While only Maya would clearly express her overall work as something like a spiritual vocation, many participants were willing to see part of their actions or part of other participants' actions as places where God was at work.

Maya most clearly sees her work as vocation. When asked during the preliminary survey, "How does your work help bring about God's vision/hope/desire/longing?", she replied, "it's all I do." In the preliminary survey, she also expressed that she lives out her faith through "connectivity and fanning the flames of hope." During the focus group, she said, "I almost feel like my whole life is a prayer, though. I'm not religious or very

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[71] Focus group.

spiritual. But how we live our life is a prayer, good or bad. How we live our life is our

testimony to whatever god we serve, good or bad. I feel like that is something that is my

own life."[72]

Her professional work is a clear part of this vocation. She notes that

professionally she is going to "tout the good, but I'm also going to talk about the bad so

that we can make a change…[The poor] are not always going to come to the table, so

sometimes we need to go to their table. That's how we can help change and help heal

and help things grow."[73]

Maya also described two practices in the realm of prayer that she sees as part of

her vocation. One, which she describes as doing "almost every single day," involves

going to blighted areas and pushing out positive thoughts.

> I look at places [that are a bit of an eyesore or are run down and] I push out
> thoughts of change. Change and feeling and moving forward. Not moving
> backward, not staying the same, but moving forward…I have very strong beliefs.
> Don't get me wrong. It's not magic…I do believe thought is reality…We know
> that a lot of times change doesn't happen until people believe in change. Believe
> that hope can happen, that change can happen. Self-image, perception, thought,
> brain-power – it does hold things back. It can also move things forward. I'm not
> saying just believe and it magically happens, but belief is half the battle.[74]

What Maya describes may not line up precisely as traditional Christian prayer, but

it certainly falls under the heading of prayer, and Maya has at least one powerful story

where she has seen direct results of this prayer work.

In the focus group Maya discussed how she deals with negative things she sees

happening to people. "I never say to someone, 'Oh, I'll pray for you,'…but I'm going to

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[72] Focus group.

[73] Maya, interview by author, September 26, 2017.

[74] Maya interview.

sit for a moment and feel the pain and let that pain help me think of what I can do to actually make a change…Maybe I'm the catalyzer. That's how I approach it."[75]

Matt sees his own goal in his volunteer efforts in the community as just wanting "to see things better." "In a poor community that has gone through the dying mill age," Matt has worked to improve neighborhoods and to make his town better for those "having a tough go of it and that…don't have the resources to get themselves out of it." While making it clear that he wouldn't claim to speak for God, he did say that "I'm sure it's God's vision, too, that people are taken care of…A few blocks away people are truly suffering and I don't think God would want to see it that way. I think he would want us to do something about it."[76]

Matt saw his efforts as cooperating with God's work in the community, even if he didn't claim them for himself. The photos he took of where he saw God at work focused on a park that had been rehabilitated and improved over the past few years by a group that Matt is a part of. While he identified the efforts of others as making it happen, he, too, has been key in the park's transformation.

Other participants also noted the way that Matt is engaged in God's work. During the focus group, in the context of a discussion of personal mission, Sam told Matt, "You are on to something and you are maniacal about it."[77]

Sam was also seen by at least one other participant in cooperating with God's work. Art took a photo of a structure that Sam was in the midst of rehabilitating. On our first prayerwalk, about a dozen people were replacing the roof of a large downtown

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[75] Focus group.
[76] Matt, interview by author, September 12, 2017.
[77] Focus group.

building Sam recently acquired. On our second prayerwalk, the building had a new,

completed roof, and Art saw it as a place where God was at work.

Sam does feel a vocation in his rehabilitation work. When I asked if it felt like

the buildings needing attention were calling him, he replied,

> Yeah, I wish it didn't. It's almost like a haunting for me. I look and I see the beauty. I just look at this thing and think, 'There is so much opportunity…' It lures me in…I absolutely feel and I connect with the spirits of the past, as bizarre as that may sound, or as not bizarre…[In the midst of a fall and other dangerous situations in buildings] I feel like God's watching out for me…And I never once felt fearful. Something has to be offering me that peace…I've never felt in these buildings that I shouldn't be here. So I guess it is a calling.[78]

Sam also described where he feels closest to God. "My mother is a deep down,

over the top, [church person]. I'm not. I feel like I'm one with God with a jackhammer

in my hand because I'm touching the dirt. That is where I feel most grounded as an

individual."[79]

Nate also noted how different people have different ways of cooperating with

God's purpose for the betterment of the community, and of the need to continue the work

of prayer. "Everyone has their role. The doers, the leaders, the marketers, the

contributors, the consumers…While that purpose is being worked out, our charge is

always to be praying, to be always called to that work. To channel your energy or your

thoughts or however you want to think about that word."[80]

Art stated that "art is a reflection of God." Most of the participants took at least

one photo of a work of public art as a place they saw God at work in the community.

Matt said, "The arts are a God given talent" and Emma added that, "art…is God working

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[78] Sam, interview by author, October 11, 2017.
[79] Focus group.
[80] Focus group.

through people, because that is what he does." Nate added that the Psalms constantly mention God as "the one that should be credited for the natural beauty he creates," and that art tries to "either imitate or enhance that" natural beauty. Art, including public buildings and civic monuments, according to Nate, can "help inspire people, supposedly calm people, supposedly make them feel more involved in the community and want to participate in the community."[81] While I will explore later how the church can engage society around the arts, the focus group clearly understood cultivating of the arts, which many participants do, as cooperating with God's work in the city.

Two participants also described the importance of making connections. Nick talked about the way prayerwalking helped notice connections. "[D]uring the prayerwalk…you were able to walk along and associate different stories of success with different people and through different organizations and businesses."[82] These connections played a role that Emma felt as a more direct element of her vocation. "I'm a religious person, so I know that there have been times that God has put me somewhere to make a connection…That happens to me a lot…Just seeing this group of people here…something's going to come out of this."[83]

Emma's sense of something coming out of this group of people gathered for a focus group points to the creation of a deeper level of community among the participants. One of my goals is that by allowing people to talk together about their prayerwalking experiences, they would be able to continue those conversations together going forward. During the focus group a number of comments revealed a desire for such a continuing

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[81] Focus group.
[82] Focus group.
[83] Focus group.

community, while also noting that a community had been forming among participants and other Sharon leaders in ways that this project may have fostered and strengthened.

Most telling, perhaps, was Art's comment at the end of the focus group. "We should do this again. I mean the point where you ask questions – it's just a great vibe." He is hoping that this group will reassemble to discuss what they are doing and what they see in the community with me asking theological reflection and spiritual questions to get them to go deeper. He reiterated the comment a few minutes later, saying, "I'm not kidding, do it again."[84] As I will discuss in Chapter Eight, continuing these focus groups could be a fruitful on-going ministry.

Sam also saw the formation of this community of leaders as both important and happening within the city, and that this formation process was aided by this project. He said, "I feel like what we have going on here is the connective piece…I'm grateful – I've felt [like I am standing by myself] – but I today I don't. I don't know everybody in this room, but I know I could call you, Nate, and I've only known you for maybe an hour. But I could call you and say, 'I need you to help with something or I need you to talk about something.'"[85]

Maya also expressed a sense that this particular group was here for a reason. She said, "I don't know how long all of us will be here, but there is a reason we are all here together so we have to make hay while the sun shines…We are all here at the same time, and that is not random, that is not an accident. I just hear everyone's passion for this area. I'm really blessed, but I don't know five years from now where we're all going to

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[84] Focus group.
[85] Focus group.

be. Now is the time." [86] Emma responded to Maya that, "Maybe this is a divine opportunity."[87]

Art reflected on the particular call of people in the community at this particular moment, in his interview, as well. "Most all of these people are selfless, and at someplace inside of them they are spiritual and attached, not just to one another but also to God somehow." He also mentioned how when multiple people are there in God's name it "brings God to the table."[88]

We can see in a number of areas how participants in this project have grown in their understanding and even practice of prayer, in their sense of God at work in the community and their own vocation to cooperate with that work, and the formation of a community of leaders who are able to discuss and support each other in their vocations within the community. From these participant responses directly relating to the project's goals, I will turn in the next section to other topics raised in the focus group that inform our work as the church in the current age in relation to our engagement with society.

Section Two: Insights Informing Broader Issues

In addition to the project information described in the previous section that relates directly to the ministry thesis undertaken, project participants offered a variety of insights into theoretical and ministry topics relating to the intersection of the church and society. This section will lay out some of those responses. Chapter Seven will discuss how the church might respond to these areas.

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[86] Focus group.
[87] Focus group.
[88] Art interview.

The discussion of these implications will be framed using three elements of church that Robert Schreiter proposes as important for our increasingly secular society. I will discuss this framework more in Chapter Seven. These three areas are the public church that acts as a center "for art, cultural activities, social outreach, and religious activities;" a place for intentional community that offers "a place to belong, a place to be part of something larger than themselves, a place of spiritual quest;" and a religious source of "conscious alignment with secularity…that works together for the betterment of human society."[89] Project participants talked in the focus group about the centrality of art and beauty and about hope, which I believe the public church could address. Themes of spiritual disciplines, a need for belonging, and memory arose during the project and can inform the church's work as an intentional community. Finally, this project provided insight into the church's alignment with others for the betterment of human society in both the common vision of what people want for their lives and in the need to have someone give them permission to work to accomplish important goals.

As we explore themes that fit in the church's role as a public church, one of the consistent themes discussed was art and beauty as a mark of where God was. Five of the seven participants who took photos of places where they saw God at work included natural beauty and human works of art. In the focus group, Art described why they took these particular pictures, saying that, "Art is a reflection of God…[M]usicians will often claim out of the blue that music is actually the language of God…We took pictures of art

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[89] Robert Schreiter, "Mission From the Ground Up: Emergent Themes in Contemporary Mission," in *Mission After Christendom: Emergent Themes in Contemporary Mission*, ed. Obgu U. Kalu, Peter Vethanayagamony, and Edmund Kee-Fook Chia (Lousiville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 18-19.

because I do believe there are some ways that art reflects that."[90] Zoe added that the very colors seemed to say something about God. "I'm not religious, but God is in charge of rainbows, I assume…[N]ow we've got all these colors everywhere and I think it just makes things feel more vibrant.[91]

Nate noted how beauty indicated God's presence even in places that people might have given up on. "I think there is beauty everywhere, his handiwork is everywhere, even in a neighborhood that people give up for lost or abandon. There is still a lot of natural beauty and beauty that people bring. He certainly hasn't abandoned it. He is still there."[92]

Emma also saw God at work in art in the ways that it draws people together. She noted especially the new art installations downtown, which were documented in the group's photos, as places that people, in at least one case, previously avoided and were now places they gathered.[93] Nick followed up on that theme, noting how important art is for a city's survival. Looking at examples of other places, including Pittsburgh's recent past, he said that, "when the arts die in a community, the community usually dies."[94]

Another issue raised by participants that informs the role of the public church is hope. In the midst of a longer conversation about where they can see God working in the city contrasted with areas that seem unable to overcome their difficulties, Matt summarized the group's sentiments, saying, "Hope is the magic word here. If people in

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[90] Focus group.
[91] Focus group.
[92] Nate, interview by author, September 16, 2017.
[93] Focus group.
[94] Focus group.

the community have hope, then things will move forward."[95] Maya added, "[O]nce

people start believing, that's when it's going to change. All the marketing, all the new

business – the foundation, the basement, is hope. When we can all start believing, that's

when the magic happens. Then everything's possible."[96]

Sam noted that, "At the end of the day, everyone wants a sense of hope."[97] To

find that hope, however, participants saw a need for someone or something to offer it.

Emma noted that our prayerwalk and the act of praying made her more hopeful.[98]

Talking about a depressed area of the city, Nate said, "They don't have hope. Sometimes

it takes someone not of that street or of that area to see potential in it…The positive thing

is the outside energy because oftentimes it is not the people from that particular situation

that turn it around. They need to see a catalyst."[99] When thinking about another area that

did turn around, Maya asked, "What was the reason? Why did hope start to happen? It's

almost like people have been given permission to have hope."[100]

The group also brought up a number of ways that indicated doors for the church

and its ministry in its role as an intentional community. The first opportunity was a

desire for, and even current practice of, spiritual disciplines. Sam noted after the first

prayerwalk how important the calm was for him and the ability to "stay away from the

noise and just disengage for a little bit. Because that's what you need."[101]

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[95] Focus group.

[96] Focus group.

[97] Focus group.

[98] Emma interview.

[99] Focus group.

[100] Focus group.

[101] Sam, interview by author, October 11, 2017.

In the previous section, I looked at various ways that people expressed their longing for and engagement with prayer, and the transformation of some of those practices following our prayerwalks. I would only highlight here that the two people who do not identify themselves as Christians currently were both particularly engaged with prayer and spiritual practices. Maya described a daily habit of praying for places that needed positive energy, as well as an intentional spiritual practice of sympathizing and being transformed by the pain of other people. In addition to finding herself putting out "good vibes" on at least two occasions following the prayerwalks, Zoe also described being helped by going to the Emerald Tablet, which is a recently-opened downtown store selling an eclectic mix of non-Christian spiritual items.

A Christian intentional community also offers a sense of belonging. Sam described this need to belong, saying, "to walk alone is one thing, but to walk hand-in-hand with a group of people who all have the same common desires, visions, hopes, dreams, prayers – everybody…wants to be on a team."[102] Beyond creating a community of shared mission, many participants talked about memories following their prayerwalks, and how those memories played a role in their vision and their hope.

Maya talked about how memory actually provided a grounding for hope and vision for the future.[103] Nick and Nate both described how their own memories interacted with what they were seeing on the prayerwalks to give them a sense of hope.[104] For Emma, going to pray at places that were important to her past brought peace in the

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[102] Sam interview.
[103] Maya interview.
[104] Nick interview; Nate interview.

present.[105] For Sam, memory *per se* was not a driver, but the "spirits of the past" in buildings and what those buildings had once been become a very real presence for him as he does his work.[106]

This project also highlighted ways that church could have a role working alongside of others for common goals along two broad themes. The first topics could fall under the rubric of "we all want the same things" or be seen as an implicit longing for the city described by Isaiah 65. In the focus group, Sam said, "I think everybody's looking for the same quality of life."[107] Much of Matt's post-prayerwalk interview discussed ways that God desired "that people are taken care of" in all neighborhoods.[108] Zoe commented how the prayerwalk made her think about "what I want for this neighborhood and for my neighborhood and my kid and all kids."[109] Maya noted how important it was that Jesus hung out with and welcomed everyone, and how important that was in our current work in the city.[110]

Participants also highlighted the importance of people receiving permission before engaging positively in the community. This issue provides another opportunity for the church to work alongside others for the betterment of society. During the focus group discussion, different people noted the need for permission to do something good for the community and to produce public art. Permission was also identified as needed before people could have hope or have a mission. Sam noted that he even needed the

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[105] Emma interview.
[106] Sam interview.
[107] Focus group.
[108] Matt interview.
[109] Zoe interview.
[110] Maya interview.

permission given on our prayerwalk to "allow my wandering to be more than wandering."[111] Initially, the importance participants afforded to the need for permission surprised me, but this theme points to the need for greater church engagement in the broader community. While permission fills the basic human needs for security and affirmation before beginning something, the ways in which permission for hope, art, prayer, or community service has been lacking points to the vacuum left by the decline of the church and its siloing from the life of the city.

The next two chapters will take these potential openings and offer ways they can be used by the church to connect with the community. Chapter Six will offer a theoretical perspective on the current state of our secular society and how it can be considered open to engagement in these ways. Chapter Seven will look at these areas from the perspective of the church's potential fruitful ministry in that engagement.

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[111] Focus group.

Chapter 6

Theoretical Perspectives

[O]nce people start believing, that's when it's going to change.

--Maya[112]

Oliver O'Donovan writes that "If the Christian community has as its *eternal* goal, the goal of its pilgrimage, the disclosure of the church as city, it has as its *intermediate* goal, the goal of its mission, the discovery of the city's secret destiny through the prism of the church."[113] O'Donovan's understanding of the particular interplay between church and society will be unpacked below, but I want to start by reiterating two points that O'Donovan highlights here. The first point is that the city has a destiny as part of God's plan of redemption. The second is that the church has a vocation to the city that helps it also fulfill its own destiny.

My next chapter will look at ways, highlighted by community leaders in my project, that the church could engage with the city to help it fulfill its destiny, which is also part of the evangelical mission and ministry of the church. Doing so effectively requires an understanding of the times we live in and the characteristics of the society around us, however. This chapter will explore that understanding based on the work of Alasdair MacIntyre, O'Donovan, James Davison Hunter, James K.A. Smith, and Charles Taylor. My goal here is not to present a systematic theology or a comprehensive social theory of the church's engagement with secular society or post-modernity, but rather to

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[112] Focus group.

[113] Oliver O'Donovan, *The Desire of Nations: Rediscovering the Roots of Political Theology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 286.

suggest working guidelines that could help the church fruitfully engage society around

the themes emerging from my thesis. Section one of this chapter will dig into how our

society has moved from Christendom to post-Christendom. Section two will look at the

church's on-going vocation to society. Section three looks at the distinctive

characteristics of our secular society which offer insights for how the church might

engage it.

Section One: Post-Christendom Society

The first question to address is what exactly are we dealing with in this society

that goes by such monikers as modernity, post-modernity, a secular society, post-

Christendom, and a variety of other often less flattering designations. Is twenty-first

century America shaping up as basically better, worse, or pretty much the same as

previous times and places, and what scale should we be measuring with anyway? I will

argue that we live in a secular society that sees religious belief and transcendence as one

option among many, but that most of our intellectual and social institutions are still

undergirded by Christian theology, ethics, and values, and that our society still enjoys the

fruit of those longstanding Christian institutions. We are, if you will, still in the midst of

an enormous Christian hangover that affects all we do. The question is whether we will

decide to return and drink deeply again of the wine at Cana or merely down a shot of a

distilled pseudo-Christian moral-therapeutic deism to dull our pain while we try to move

on to the next thing. In terms of my project, the fundamental issues at stake are whether

enough institutions and moral intuitions remain to engage community leaders in helping

the city fulfill its vocation, or whether society has moved on and the church must retrench and start over.

Alasdair MacIntyre in *After Virtue* lays out a robust argument of how Northern European/American moral thought has eroded since the Enlightenment. Much of his argument demonstrates how stages of social thought, such as utilitarianism or Weberian-based social science, were in fact founded on Christian assumptions. However, these theoretical moves did not acknowledge the underlying Christian bases for their work. As future steps were taken further and further afield from classical Christian virtue ethics, we were left, in MacIntyre's eyes, with either Nietzsche or a return to the classical models that the Enlightenment project rejected. He writes, "For it was Nietzsche's historic achievement to understand more clearly than any other philosopher…not only that what purported to be appeals to objectivity were in fact expressions of subjective will, but also the nature of the problems that this posed for moral philosophy."[114] For MacIntyre, Nietzsche was honest about where we were headed.

A way forward remains for MacIntyre, however, because Nietzsche's critique only goes as deep as his Enlightenment roots. Nietzsche's arguments bring down "modern moralities of rules, whether of a utilitarian or Kantian kind" but do not "extend to the earlier Aristotelian tradition."[115] MacIntyre is not particularly hopeful that society will reclaim such classical virtues. Yet he believes that it could, and he famously looks "for another – doubtlessly very different – St. Benedict."[116] For MacIntyre, some neo-

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[114] Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory: Third Edition* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 113.
[115] MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 257.
[116] MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 261.

monastic group grounding themselves in a renewed classical ethic seems the only solution to our current predicament.

While some of MacIntyre's hope of a reconstructed virtue ethic led by the next Saint Benedict falls in the category of the church's role as intentional community we will describe later, MacIntyre's analysis opens up another question to us. Specifically, how do we as the church deal with the millions of people who have been taught some form of John Stuart Mill's utilitarianism as anachronistically filtered through the lens of the Declaration of Independence, who maintain a belief in human rights divorced from natural law theology or even the passages from the Hebrew prophets that grace the walls of the United Nations, or who undertake their work with Weberian efficiency to serve what they understand to be the greater good? While a rigorous intellectual honesty would clearly show the whole project to be ripe for collapse, most people lack MacIntyre's rigor, intellect, or honesty, and therefore hold on to their paradigms propped up by the phantoms of virtue they understand as neutral ethics. In fact, we might wonder if any period in history has managed a cohesive unity of theological understandings and practical actions such as MacIntyre espouses.

MacIntyre's framework would suggest that the fruits of this thesis project would be of little value. If our modern moral intuitions and sentiments are inevitably failing outside of Christendom, then there is little hope for Matt as he works to revive a sense of community that he can describe as "Mayberry," much less any point in the "good-vibe" prayers of non-religious Zoe.[117] Yet, my thesis participants do continue to see value and

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[117] Matt interview. Focus group.

find meaning in much of what MacIntyre would give up for lost, and their engagement does seem to bear fruit in the city.

Maybe a further alternative exists for the church. We could take seriously the impulses which led to these particular expressions of Enlightenment and modern thought, and see whether a Christian moral framework can be reignited within them. Such a project would be all the more worthwhile if society's current intellectual environment is chaotic; if the virtue ethics touted by MacIntyre led in some way to the intellectual tradition he now writes against; and if such a reigniting can be done through practical witness that bears fruit for the Kingdom of God, at least in the short-to-medium-term.

I believe that all of these conditions are present in our current society. Describing our current intellectual climate as a smorgasbord would be generous. Calling it a food fight might be more accurate. Cable television, talk radio, and internet chat rooms have led to a variety of echo chambers with little dialogue, much less intellectual coherence. Even if someone, as MacIntyre would hope, is off forming a small group of people in Christian-based Aristotelean virtue ethics with high-tech evangelism strategies and apostolic-era missionary zeal, there is still much work to be done in the meantime.

Second, Charles Taylor describes a number of movements that were already underway by the late medieval period. He calls the sum of many of these "Reform" because they were designed precisely to bring a coherence among various people and societies, and the entire process of Reform had a profound effect on people's worldviews.[118] Neither the details nor the question of whether they were inevitable given

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[118] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 61-62.

the social and ethical worldview up until that time concern us now. What matters is that both Taylor and MacIntyre can describe how our current philosophical landscape emerged almost seamlessly from a pre-modern one. Such a chain implies that even if Aristotle were revived and taught throughout the land by a new Benedict, we might also end up with a new Luther, a new Erasmus, and a new Marx. A return to an Aristotelian-based ethic is *an* answer, yet we may need to take seriously the fact that it may not be again *the* answer, and we will need to bring a robust Christianity to bear on all moral and societal understandings, not just the ones we believe will be most receptive.

Finally, engagement in this post-Christendom era would be most valuable if people's intellectual and theoretical constructs can be engaged practically. This requirement is necessary partially because MacIntyre and others have already challenged the intellectual bases of Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment constructs, but also because people do not necessarily look on their own constructs with intellectual rigor. Instead, as philosophies like Christian humanism, Christian Marxism, and Christian existentialism, as well as the real thriving of Christian churches and missions under liberal democracies indicates, people are able to live under a variety of worldviews while accepting Jesus as their Lord and Savior and doing their duty to "follow Christ; to come together…for corporate worship; and to work, pray, and give for the spread of the kingdom of God."[119]

I believe my thesis project shows that this practical engagement is of value. Oliver O'Donovan also suggests a parallel type of strategy for social engagement in the post-Christendom political sphere. While the arenas are clearly different, in many ways the

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[119] *The Book of Common Prayer* (New York: Church Publishing, Inc, 1979), 856.

trends and the circumstances are very similar between O'Donovan's political engagement

and other societal engagement.

In *The Desire of Nations*, O'Donovan sees our current liberal state as emerging

out of Christendom. He sets the dates of Christendom as 313-1791 AD, with the Edict of

Milan and the First Amendment of the US Constitution as the boundaries.[120]

Christendom was not, for O'Donovan, a goal of the church's mission, but a response to it

by the "alien power" of government submitting itself, not to the church, but to the throne

of Christ.[121] By the end of the eighteenth century, Christendom was being replaced in the

West by liberal democratic nation states.[122] Yet, those governments still contained a

Christian legacy, even if largely unrecognized. Part of this legacy was the legal-

constitutional conception,[123] but there are also other elements. O'Donovan has no more

esteem for liberalism and modernity than MacIntyre, however. While he notes that,

"modernity is the child of Christianity", he says that it "has left its father's house and

followed the way of the prodigal." While seeing our current situation as flowing out of

our past, O'Donovan, like MacIntyre, would adopt a defensive posture with a longing

backwards glance. Nevertheless, he does see value in the Christian legacy remaining,

and would encourage its further use and development in the service of Christian mission.

Looking through the lens of this thesis project, O'Donovan's stance parallels the

prevailing sense of Sharon that many of my participants have been working to overcome.

We could summarize it as, "Times were better, and the good old days have left us some

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[120] O'Donovan, *Desire of Nations,* 195.

[121] O'Donovan, *Desire of Nations,* 195-196. After the patristic period, this understanding of the relationship between church and state and Jesus goes through a variety of phases.

[122] O'Donovan, *Desire of Nations,* 226-284 describes this transformation.

[123] O'Donovan, *Desire of Nations, 240.*

great stuff, but we are a lot worse off." O'Donovan does see a vocation and a hope for the community, which we will look at in the next section. Yet we still need another account of post-Christendom that allows us to value our contemporary society on its own terms, while still recognizing where it came from.

This more hopeful and less defensive understanding comes from Charles Taylor. He views Christendom, the post-Christendom modern era, and our current, post-1960's age as flowing into each other, but with their own valuable manifestations of religious, spiritual, and moral life. Drawing on religious sociologist Émile Durkheim's work, Taylor refers to the pre-modern age of Christendom as a "paleo-Durkheimian mode" which is an "enchanted world" where "there is an obvious way in which God can be present in society: in the loci of the sacred."[124] In this mode of traditional religious understanding with its holy people and holy places, God was a given and there was a clear order to the universe, including the church and the state. Next, in modernity, came a "neo-Durkheimian mode" where human fulfillment was seen as tied to religious belief and where spirituality, discipline, political identity, and an image of the civilized order were all interwoven.[125] This mode is the backbone of traditional American denominational religious life. If MacIntyre and O'Donovan seek a return to a paleo-Durkheimian age, the American Christian right would reinstitute a neo-Durkheimian one. Today, urban Americans live in a largely post-Durkheimian mode, where authenticity is the rule and where "each of us has his/her own way of realizing our humanity, and that it is important to find and live out one's own."[126] This authenticity need not lead away

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[124] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 446, 455.
[125] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 471-472.
[126] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 475.

from religion and spirituality. In fact, such individual seeking can, in some cases, lead to a deeper and richer spiritual life than would be found in some previous eras. While these various modes predominated certain ages, they can all be found in different pockets of contemporary America, as well.

What Taylor provides for us is an opportunity to see that we can practically engage in addressing our post-Christendom society without starting over. The learnings described by people like Maya and Zoe during my thesis project lend credence to the understanding that we do not need to reconstruct Christendom to help people deepen their own spiritual lives.[127] The third section of this chapter will look in more detail at the characteristics of our current secular age, but first I will turn to the particular vocation of the church to the city within our current context.

Section Two: The Church's Vocation

O'Donovan sees a specific role for the Christian church to play in addressing our current situation. This role stems first and foremost from O'Donovan's eschatological role for the city. For O'Donovan, there is only one city in a continuity that moves from Rome/Babylon to the New Jerusalem.

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[127] The use of prayerwalking for my project is one specific way of taking a spiritual discipline that is generally written about from a neo-Durkheimian perspective and adapting it for a post-Durkheimian project. Writers who describe prayerwalking, including Hawthorne and Kendrick and Geppert, often discuss its effectiveness especially in situations where the development of a Christian spiritual life, ethical employment, family and self-disciplines, and identification with a larger group are all key. My own use of it with individuals who might describe prayer as "good juju" would be, perhaps, surprising to them. Yet, theologically we would share a sense of what God is ultimately up to in the city, and that prayerwalking would further the understanding and the fulfillment of that work among participants.

> The curious thing about the two cities in the Apocalypse, Babylon and Jerusalem, is the continuity between them…Three political communities, ancient Israel, the pagan empire and the eschatological church, are being drawn together in startling identification. In fact there is only one city, which is at once the Holy City trampled by the Gentiles and the Great City where Christ was crucified. The community in which God and the Lamb have set their throne is one and the same with the community where Satan and the beast have set their throne.[128]

The city that is ruled by the Beast with all of the evils attending to it is meant to become the city with the Lamb as the light which manifests the characteristics of God's redeemed city as described in Isaiah 65 and the end of Revelation. Rather than God taking Babylon by eminent domain to drop New Jerusalem from the sky on a barren field we might find a better parallel in the way Paul speaks of our own resurrections. Paul's assertion that "this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality" (1 Corinthians 15:53) is also a good way to think about how the perishable city becomes imperishable and how broken, flawed human structures and systems put on immortality. Such work, of course, is ultimately God's work, and O'Donovan would agree with that. He states that "the name and aspect [of this city] changes as the God who claims it wrests its government away from the pretender."[129]

The church does have a twofold role for O'Donovan as our current imperfect cities move toward the final, glorious one, however. He describes the mission of the church as having two frontiers as it has gone out in mission: "the church addressed *society*, and it addressed *rulers*."[130] These two avenues required separate activities because the final destiny of the two addressees is different. For O'Donovan, society "is to be transformed, shaped in conformity to God's purpose," while the kings, governors,

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[128] O'Donovan, *Desire of Nations,* 155-156.
[129] O'Donovan, *Desire of Nations,* 157.
[130] O'Donovan, *Desire of Nations,* 193.

and ruling political systems "are to disappear, renouncing their sovereignty in the face of [Christ's]."[131] These destinies conform to O'Donovan's understanding of the heavenly city where the society that inhabits the city becomes the eschatological, perfected church and where every prince and principality throws their crowns at the feet of the throne of Christ. The role of the church, then, is to work toward the transformation of society while witnessing to the rulers.

O'Donovan allows us to dismiss a strategy for Christian growth that aims primarily at taking over political authority. For him, the church and state have a complimentary function in this age. The church demonstrates "the working of the coming Kingdom within this one…it squares up to civil authority and confronts it. This may lead to martyrdom, or to mutual service."[132] This witness should not, however, lead to one body holding political rule while also claiming to be the church. For O'Donovan, such a unity defines the role of the Antichrist. He writes that, "there is a single theme which connects the varied warnings of Antichrist in different ages: the convergence in one subject of claims to earthly political rule and heavenly soteriological mediation…The rejection of Antichrist is the rejection of a unified political and theological authority other than that which is vested in Christ's own person."[133] Instead of seeking to lay claim to political power, the church in its witness to Christ looks to either force the political authority to allow it free reign to pursue the "growth of the church, its enablement to reconstruct civilizational practices and institutions, [and] its effectiveness in

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131 O'Donovan, *Desire of Nations,* 193.
132 O'Donovan, *Desire of Nations,* 217.
133 O'Donovan, *Desire of Nations,* 214-215.

communicating the Gospel" or to suffer martyrdom.[134] The church is not looking to take over city hall.

O'Donovan's theoretical work supports James Davison Hunter's analysis of the church in the United States over the past fifty years. Hunter describes how the Christian right, Christian left, and Anabaptist movements have all turned their focus increasingly to politics, and especially to a politicization that interprets "all of public life through the filter of partisan beliefs, values, ideals, and attachments."[135] Where O'Donovan warns that church against preaching doctrine instead of Christ,[136] Hunter sees American Christians as largely seeking political victories to have the power not only to preach, but to enforce their particular worldview. This power, "the exercise of coercion or threat of its use,"[137] is an ineffective and immoral tool for spreading the gospel and resembles the Antichrist's rule more than a vibrant Christendom. Whether various church factions are seeking a "defense against" modernity, a "relevance to" it, or a "purity from" it, their focus on politic victory as their scorecard overshadows their insights into the dangers facing us today.[138]

This analysis does not forbid rulers from being Christians. In fact, some Christians may have a vocation to be a secular ruler. However, for O'Donovan, "the ruler may belong within the church…but not *qua* ruler."[139] Instead, the secular ruler's job is to carry out the role of the secular state effectively and to prepare itself as best it

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[134] O'Donovan, *Desire of Nations,* 215.
[135] James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 103.
[136] O'Donovan, *Desire of Nations,* 219.
[137] Hunter, *To Change the World,* 101.
[138] Hunter, *To Change the World,* 275.
[139] O'Donovan, *Desire of Nations,* 218.

can for the "dawning age of Christ's own rule."[140] The government need not in any way, however, "defend" the church or "reinforce church discipline,"[141] a situation that would involve elements of the Antichrist's rule. This understanding flies in the face of much of the rhetoric of the American Christian right.

Instead of winning control of the earthly powers through political or other victories, O'Donovan describes the very simple and effective strategy for overcoming them. He notes that instead turning to the government, Christians should focus on society. This order is the same one that Christ has used, who "conquered the rulers from below, by drawing their subjects out from under their authority."[142] Once society is transformed by Christ and his teachings, the rulers are much more likely also to recognize Christ's ultimate authority and do their job well. Hunter comes to the same understanding through religious sociology that O'Donovan reaches through political theology. For him, the "vision of a new city commons" becomes "rooted in a theology of faithful presence," and that faithful presence gains traction by "affirming the centrality of the church itself and the parish or local congregation in particular."[143] If the church hopes to offer a compelling witness to society, it must focus on strengthening itself so that it has a solid foundation for its faithful presence.

This direct engagement with society in fulfillment of the church's vocation to the city is at the heart of my project. While I have served a term on Sharon City Council, my project aspiration of transforming the city was sought through civic leadership and not

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[140] O'Donovan, *Desire of Nations,* 219.
[141] O'Donovan, *Desire of Nations,* 218.
[142] O'Donovan, *Desire of Nations,* 193.
[143] Hunter, *To Change the World,* 281.

municipal government. Additionally, project participants spent very little time discussing

government as something that was needed in the community, and when they did it was

mostly about a particular change in tax structure instituted about ten years ago.[144]

Instead, they talked passionately about a variety of ways that, as will be described in the

Chapter Seven, the church could help engage society to move toward a redeemed city.

Before addressing those opportunities, I will explore more of the characteristics of our

secular society which will influence how we do that work.

Section Three: Secular Society

If the role of the church is to engage society to help our earthly cities live into

their vocation of resembling the heavenly one, then some further understanding of what

we are facing in society is important. We can, with Hunter, accept some of the concerns

of the various Christian outlooks while rejecting their political agenda. Society does

seem to have lost the respect it once had for God, the church, and church institutions,

modern capitalism is exploiting both people and our environment, and the modern state

and international markets are both resorting to violence and other "deformities of

power."[145] We can also agree with MacIntyre that contemporary moral utterance is an

unending cacophony of disputes with "no rational way of securing moral agreement in

our culture"[146] and that there may no longer be found "any there there" at the foundation

of much of our current ethics, political philosophy, and social science.

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[144] Focus group.

[145] Hunter, *To Change the World,* 275.

[146] MacIntyre, *After Virtue,* 6.

The discussion of my thesis project participants, however, did not indicate a

desire to see the church quietly retreat into its own internal life or to start over. Instead

they expressed a number of longings that the church, in fact, is quite capable of offering

to the larger society in ways that dovetail with the Great Commission and the Great

Commandment. We can turn to Charles Taylor's analysis of the peculiarities of our

secular age to point us in a direction that is helpful as we discern how the church can

engage the society around us. I will supplement Charles Taylor's own work with a

helpful overview of his thought by James K. A. Smith.

Taylor's understanding of our secular age is different from other prevailing stories

about secularization. Taylor objects to "subtraction stories" which try to demonstrate the

inevitability of the loss of faith and religion as "human beings having lost, or sloughed

off, or liberated themselves from certain earlier, confining horizons, or illusions, or

limitations of knowledge."[147] As Smith notes, according to such a theory, secularism

would be the almost inevitable outcome, for, "as cultures experience modernization and

technological advancement, the (divisive) forces of religious belief and participation

whither in the face of modernity's disenchantment of the world...People who self-identify

as 'secular' are usually identifying as areligious."[148] This understanding of secularization

cannot accurately describe what is going on, however. Taylor himself says, "I cannot see

the 'demand for religion' just disappearing like that."[149] We have also seen above in the

work of MacIntyre and O'Donovan, for example, that human rights, the rule of law,

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[147] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 22.
[148]James K. A. Smith, *How (Not) To Be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014), 21.
[149] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 435.

liberal political philosophy, social science, and a variety of other achievements so often touted as secular victories have really ridden into the West on the coattails of the Christian worldview.

Instead, Taylor sees our society according to a different model. The secularism of our society is characterized by a number of factors including that "religious belief or belief in God is understood to be one option among others, and thus contestable."[150] Also, "for the first time in history, a purely self-sufficient humanism came to be a widely available option...[T]his is a humanism accepting no final goals beyond human flourishing…Of no previous society was this true."[151] In our new state of affairs, we have a choice to believe in God or not, in ways that would have been unthinkable in previous ages, and whichever choice we make, we are aware that there are still other "plausible visions of meaning and significance on offer."[152] The playing field for humanist and Christian and other theistic accounts has been leveled. When we are honest, all worldviews face dilemmas and all offer something to us. The task for Christian witness to society is to make the case that what we have to offer is the most compelling and nuanced account of our experience.[153]

For Taylor, an important component of effective engagement in our current secular age is an honesty about what we are offering. He recognizes that most of our stances are not, and maybe cannot, be hyper-rational, intellectually-conclusive, independently compelling epistemological positions on what we believe. Instead, we

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[150] Smith, *How (Not) to be Secular*, 21.
[151] Taylor, *A Secular Age, 18.*
[152] Smith, *How (Not) to be Secular*, 23.
[153] See Smith, *How (Not) to be Secular*, 120, and Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 675.

have a "take" on things that "seeps into our social imaginary…[and] becomes part of the background that governs our being-in-the-world."[154] Recognizing that we are operating from a "take" means that we also "recognize the contestability of our *take* on things, and even fell the pull and tug and cross-pressure of the alternative."[155] If we are not intellectually honest, however, we substitute our "take" with a "spin". "Spin" is "a way of convincing oneself that one's reading is obvious, compelling, allowing of no cavil or demurral."[156] Those holding a "spin" can include both those among religious fundamentalists who are unable to see beyond their own transcendent theistic worldview, as well as those in the academy who cling unreflectively to an imminent, rationalist paradigm.[157]

Given the contestability of different worldviews, at least among those who are not wedded to a particular spin, many in our current age find themselves to be spiritual seekers on individual quests for religion and meaning.[158] Taylor regards ours as a "culture informed by an ethic of authenticity."[159] Even if the quests end in traditional religious communities focused on transcendent encounters, we still cannot escape "the quest-like shape of our searches in the present age."[160] At the heart of this quest is a "focus on the individual, and on his/her experience," searching for "wholeness and spiritual depth."[161] Yet, this search need not be a shallow one. While some

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[154] Smith, *How (Not) to be Secular*, 94.
[155] Smith, *How (Not) to be Secular*, 94.
[156] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 551.
[157] Smith, *How (Not) to be Secular*, 95 and Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 546-551.
[158] Smith, *How (Not) to be Secular*, 89-90.
[159] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 507.
[160] Smith, *How (Not) to be Secular*, 90.
[161] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 507.

contemporary spirituality can be superficial, much of this search also resonates with earlier strains of Christian tradition, such as that espoused by Ignatius of Loyola.[162] Instead of railing against our current secular age, the church would benefit by understanding our age of authenticity and sculpting our evangelism accordingly.

These characteristics that shape our modern, secular age do offer the church effective entry points in its witness to society. The problem of the decline of Christian churches may be occurring, in part, because we have focused on the avenues of witness that we were comfortable with in the last, neo-Durkheimian age while ignoring today's opportunities. Christianity can be confident that we have a "take" that, when lived with integrity and described adequately, is both compelling and fruitful for seekers looking for authentic answers for themselves. Instead of wasting time with those cemented in their own spin, we can reach the multitudes of open individuals in ways that can truly bring transformation to individual lives, our society, and the city.

My thesis project has been one way to attempt this kind of engagement. In addition to the ways that participants responded to my authentic sharing of the experience of prayerwalking, they also provided insight into ways that the church could fruitfully engage society. While many of these areas would likely have been engaged by the church in the past, our current environment calls for both a recommitment to engage and often a reevaluation of how that engagement should happen. I will investigate these opportunities in the next chapter.

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[162] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 511.

Chapter 7

How the Church Can Engage Society

Maybe this is a divine opportunity.

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As I explore ways the church can witness to the city, I will be examining opportunities for the church to present its "take" in a compelling way to those open to reexamining their own "takes." While an important role remains for a variety of evangelism strategies which can bear fruit in different circumstances, this section will explore openings that Sharon leaders have identified as important and as somehow related to their experiences of prayerwalking and where God can be seen operating within the community. These avenues were discussed by people with different degrees of current engagement with a Christian faith community, even if they all did have some Christian background and upbringing. Obviously, not all these topics present the same opportunities at all times and places, but all are worth discussing as potentially fruitful areas where the Church can actually offer answers and resources that society needs. By meeting society's needs, we increase our credibility and our ultimate ability to spread the Gospel and transform our communities.

The first part of this chapter will lay out a framework proposed by Robert Schreiter for the church's engagement with society. His tripartite approach includes church as the public church, as an intentional community, and as a partner with secular society for the common good. The second part of this chapter will look at ways that the

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[163] Focus group.

public church can engage society around art and beauty and around hope. The third section explores the church as an intentional community offering solutions to society searching for spiritual disciplines, a need for belonging, and engaging memory. Finally, by working with secular society for the betterment of humanity, the church can hone society's understanding of their vision of the good life and offer it needed permission to accomplish its goals.

Section One: Schreiter's Framework

In his essay, "Mission From the Ground Up: Emergent Themes in Contemporary Mission," Robert Schreiter draws on the work of Charles Taylor and others to propose three broad avenues for the church in its engagement with society. These three approaches are being a public church, being an intentional community, and consciously aligning with secular groups for the betterment of society.[164] While Schreiter himself does not flesh out these areas much beyond his initial descriptions, I find his categories to be helpful framework for looking at how the church can respond to issues raised by my project participants.

For Schreiter, being a public church recognizes that the church can be a center "for art, cultural activities, social outreach, and religious activities…that reaches father than the tightly disciplined community."[165] Rather than focusing on doctrine, being a public church focuses on a religious way of life that invites others along as they are able to come. Being an intentional community allows the church to be a "place to belong, a

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[164] Schreiter, "Mission from the Ground Up," 18-19.
[165] Schreiter, "Mission from the Ground Up," 18-19.

place to be part of something larger than themselves, a place of spiritual quest." Such locations are increasingly important in our quest-driven, authenticity-valuing culture. An intentional community is also a place where spiritual disciplines and significant relationships can be developed, which are essential to a both vibrant Christian life and an embodied worldview. Finally, engaging with secular groups to work for society's betterment recognizes the dangers that modernity and consumer capitalism present to all elements of society and seeks to address those challenges together. This witness also allows religion and secularity "to stand together against the darker sides of both: religious fanaticism and cults of power and exclusivism."[166] Christian and secular groups can work together to further common goals. I will use these three areas in the following sections of this chapter to discuss insights identified by project participants.

Section Two: Public Church

In looking at how the church engages society as the public church, I will be looking primarily at the church's larger events and institutional presence. Aspects of public church engagement include the main Sunday morning worship service, as well as other worship events at a scale beyond the small group; the church facilities and property; events outside the church that can be engaged or sponsored by the church; and relationships that the church leadership may undertake in a public role. While personal interactions may be part of what occurs, this section's focus is on group activities or multiple people being able to experience, read, hear, or encounter something together.

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[166] Schreiter, "Mission from the Ground Up," 19.

Art and beauty is the first avenue for the church's encounter with society as the public church. We saw in the last chapter how a number of people took photos of natural beauty and human art as places where they saw God at work, as well as describing beautiful places as where they could experience God. That understanding of God's presence in the midst of beauty was brought to consciousness by the project's theological focus. Zoe's response was perhaps most noteworthy. In the context of the discussion, she could state that "God is in charge of rainbows, I assume" and see God's presence in the vibrancy of artistic color amid drab downtown buildings.[167] Whether she would have seen the same theological implications of that beauty in another setting is an open question. While others were more prepared to jump from art to God, the way Nate saw beauty on the prayerwalk in a depressed neighborhood and recognized God's presence because of that beauty[168] is step beyond what may have been understood in another situation.

Art is, in fact, a good place to begin this discussion of the church engaging a secular society because Charles Taylor sees the shifting role of art as a consequence of our current secularism. In prior eras, art primarily played a liturgical function, or perhaps a political-liturgical one. Art was meant to speak to some greater reality. Now, however, art is often designed to foster a response, without a clear understanding of what that response relates to. We see "a shift whereby the aesthetic aspect is distilled and disclosed for its own sake and as an object of interest."[169] We might find that "music moves us

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[167] Focus group.
[168] Focus group.
[169] Smith, *How (Not) to be Secular*, 74.

very strongly…But what as? What is the object? Is there an object?"[170] Even art or music

that had an object is increasingly put into contexts where that object is hidden or

removed. For example, we are now more likely to hear Bach's *Mass in B Minor* in a

concert hall than during liturgical worship.[171] This shift means that although, when asked,

people can see God's hand at work in the beauty of the Shenango River or an alley art

installation, at another time they might just feel a calm when gazing at the river without

making any connection to God. A beautiful sunset can become soothing therapy after a

hard day and a public art installation can be a utilitarian means of economic development.

Too many people view both daily without any deepened awareness of God at work.

Yet beauty, including beauty produced by humans through art, offers a particular

invitation to respond to God. Alejandro García-Rivera, in his theological aesthetics,

develops an understanding of how beauty has a particular capacity to move the human

heart that the good and the true do not. In *The Community of the Beautiful*, García-Rivera

states that "God's beauty has the human heart as its aim in all its freedom and

response."[172] Like all of God's initiatives toward humanity, we do not always receive

them appropriately. Nevertheless, God's beauty has a particular *telos*. When humanity

receives it, it "moves the human heart not simply in pointless agitation but towards that

vision upon which the heart may rest."[173]   When the beauty of God's glory is received by

humanity, it is meant to result in praise back to God.

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[170] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 355.
[171] Smith, *How (Not) to be Secular*, 75.
[172] Alejandro García-Rivera, *The Community of the Beautiful: A Theological Aesthetics* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1999), 20.
[173] García-Rivera, *The Community of the Beautiful*, 20.

Since the church has an understanding of beauty as an expression of God's glory meant to evoke praise and thanksgiving, we can offer that understanding to society as a public church. One way we can use art and beauty to help lead people to a deeper encounter with and response to God is through an undertaking like my thesis project. By gathering leaders and asking them to look at public space for places where God is at work, we can raise their awareness about the ways God is present in the midst of beauty. We can also use church resources to commission art and music for our worship or for other public events or spaces. One of the most powerful liturgies we have held at St. John's was when we invited a local guitarist and a dance company to participate. The guitarist, who is not a believer, wrote a beautiful setting of a passage in James. The dance company, made up of about twenty people with various relationships with the church, was able to choreograph and dance to a setting of *O Come, O Come Emmanuel.* This work was moving to our congregants, but was also an evangelical opportunity for outside artists to express their work as an act of praise. We offer similar invitations regularly to a variety of musicians for Christmas and Easter services, many of whom are grateful for the opportunity to participate. While I cannot quantify the results of these efforts, such initiatives constitute important ways to present our Christian "take" on art and beauty to those who may have a different "take." Beautiful sanctuaries and beautiful liturgies are other methods that the public church easily offers for people to experience beauty that points them toward praise.

At least two methods of engaging society around beauty would not be in keeping with the role of the public church, however. The first problematic engagement is indiscriminate sponsorship of artistic events that appeal to the social class of our

parishioners. While sponsorship can be useful, such sponsorship should be characterized by an opportunity to help people come to experience a sense of God's presence through art and beauty. Without an opportunity for either prayer or dialogue about the art between members of the church and those outside, such an event may serve as advertising or as a fellowship opportunity for the church, but it does not offer an opportunity for witness with our secular age. The second problematic avenue of engagement is an open condemnation of artwork that is not deemed to have praise of God as its goal. While instruction to avoid unhelpful situations may be appropriate pastorally to church members, engaging such issues publicly is likely to be seen as "spin" and shut down debate.

Many of the other avenues for engagement that arose in my project will have parallel opportunities and cautions. Specifically, all of them involve ways that the church has an important, and potentially salvific, understanding of these areas that secular society may not be aware of. Finding ways to share that understanding as a "take" that others can come to appreciate and accept in a potentially transformative way is the goal of this section of analysis.

The second discussion topic Sharon leaders brought up that the public church could address is hope. Hope has significant theological meaning that surpasses that of art and beauty. Charles Mathewes sees cultivating hope as "the central political task of today," and he views hope as a political virtue because it is "best cultivated not in

individuals but in communities."[174] The focus group pointed to the need for Sharon's

community to undertake this task of cultivating hope, and the public church can help.

Mathewes defines hope in ways that cohere well with the issues facing Sharon.

While he notes that hope is an empowering "capacity for recognizing the difference

between *what is* and *what should be*", he continues that "[h]ope definitely implies that the

way things are is not yet the way they will ultimately be."[175] This clarion call to a

different future is a great gift to a community that has a recent history of wallowing in its

rustbelt decline. Mathewes is also honest that hope involves seeing what is really

present, and that seeing often requires letting go of prevalent attitudes and prejudices. He

writes, "Hope is what we have when we recognize the blinders for what they are and take

them off."[176] Cultivating hope in Sharon, Pennsylvania, involves an honest and

courageous assessment of where we really are and where God is leading us, both in the

short-term and toward the ultimate redemption of our city.

As we respond to society's need for hope, the public church has two tasks. The

first is quite simply to help cultivate hope into existence. In the midst of a city, even one

that looks like it has been taken over by a particularly nasty Beast, hope remains that it

might come to more closely resemble the one described in Isaiah 65. The second aspect

of hope concerns a witness to Jesus Christ who is the ground of our hope.

Scripture instructs us, "Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who

demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you" (1 Peter 3:15). A public

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[174] Charles Mathewes, *The Republic of Grace: Augustinian Thoughts For Dark Times*
(Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010), 2, 26.
[175] Mathewes, *The Republic of Grace,* 15.
[176] Mathewes, *The Republic of Grace,* 225.

church in a community should also be able to give an account of what hope means for that community. Public preaching and teaching should lift up a vision for the city that sees the city fulfilling its own vocation and living into its redeemed potential. At the same time, Ephesians 1:12 points to the other important aspect of hope that the public church has to share with society when it says, "we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ." Obviously, the hope of the church, and of anyone who has real hope, is Jesus Christ and not the next redevelopment plan, the resurgence of the automobile industry, increased fracking, millennials who want to live in downtowns again, or becoming a regional artistic and cultural hub. Some of those dreams (although perhaps not all of them) have the potential to benefit the community in positive ways and to bring it closer to resembling the city God created it to be, and may even be cause for optimism, but none are foundation of hope. Part of the way that the public church can witness to society is by sharing our hope for the city and sharing our hope for the city in Jesus Christ.

An important part of sharing hope with a community, especially one that has trouble claiming hope, is simply to show up. A church that takes a stand to remain in a community is a witness to hope. When a church does not leave because the neighborhood changes, or when the new pastor buys a house in town instead of in the next town, or when the church sends the city a check as a voluntary payment in lieu of taxes to recognize the service the church receives from the local police, fire, and streets departments, the public church makes a public statement of hope akin to Jeremiah going to buy land right before the Babylonian exile (Jeremiah 32). Maintaining the church's public facilities and buildings and grounds is another display of hope within a community that lacks it.

The companion to such demonstrations of hope are finding opportunities to describe what we are hoping for. To be able to say, with an integrity born out of a public church's community investment, that "I believe that God has a purpose for this city" casts a horizon of hope beyond the next economic cycle. Representatives participating in the life of the city beyond self-interest or an optimism about the next great idea provides opportunities to share our "take" on hope in Jesus Christ. A public church committed to engaging society around hope will also preach and find other avenues to ensure that its own congregation and any visitors understand that there is hope for the city and that hope is found in Jesus.

Section Three: Intentional Community

The second way a church can engage society is in its role as an intentional community. As an intentional community, the church offers a place to belong and to reap benefits that come from belonging. In many ways, the spiritual questing and longing for wholeness that pervades modern secularity can find at least a restful peace, and maybe a permanent home, when the church offers itself in this way.

Defining intentional community too narrowly would be a mistake, however. For some, such language might call up churchwide small group programs or off-the-grid semi-monastics hoping to emerge as MacIntyre's next Saint Benedict. Yet, Joseph Myers, in his book *The Search to Belong*, reminds us that there are many ways that people choose to belong, and all are important. Even relationships that are not close or

committed can be significant and a source of belonging.[177] Myers believes that people

are looking for belonging on at least four levels, public, social, personal, and intimate,

and that when it is healthiest the church can foster all types of relationships in an

appropriate balance.[178] Belonging is not necessarily up to the church, however.

Although people can be excluded, how and when they decide that they belong is an

individual experience that may even be happening in ways that others in the church are

not aware of.[179]

The point of looking at Myers's work here is to note that there is not a one-size-

fits-all intentional community that is "the" answer for effective societal engagement.

Instead, the church has the opportunity to offer itself as a place that people can decide to

opt into on a variety of levels. When functioning as a public church, we are sharing our

"take" outside of our doors in an evangelical way. When functioning as an intentional

community, we invite people to step inside, as they are comfortable, to experience a

belonging that begins the work of discipleship.

On the most straightforward level, Sam discussed a need for belonging,[180] and this

value was echoed by others during the focus group. The discussion indicated that this

need was being fulfilled in various ways both by the community of leaders who were

involved in city revitalization, as well as in the work of the project and interaction with

other focus group participants. My project acted as an intentional community in this way,

even if a short-term one.

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[177] Joseph R. Myers, *The Search to Belong: Rethinking Intimacy, Community, and Small Groups* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 12.
[178] Myers, *The Search to Belong*, 41.
[179] Myers, *The Search to Belong*, 25.
[180] Sam interview.

Given the focus of my project, the topic of prayer and other spiritual practices was brought up. The church as an intentional community can engage these practices. Under this broad rubric, participants discussed intercessory prayer (even if they did not use that term), a longing to slow down and disengage, a way to connect with other people, and a way to connect with the spiritual world in different ways. They also found ways to deepen their experiences of prayer, as I discussed in Chapter Five.

Nancy Tatom Ammerman completed an extensive sociological study of spiritual practices, and some of her results were right in line with what we would expect of a secular society such as Taylor and others describe. People are much more religious than adding up church membership rolls would indicate, and they undertake spiritual practices in a variety of ways. At the same time, their sense of religious and spiritual identity is permeable with a variety of strands and connections, and they are often in the midst of a variety of conversations making them both sacred and secular.[181] Another of her findings might be surprising in the midst of much of the current "spiritual but not religious" literature. She writes that, "There is a strong relationship between participation in religious communities and engaging in spiritual practices in everyday life; spiritual community and spiritual practice are in a dynamic relationship with each other."[182] In our questing society, even many people who seem "secular" are searching for spiritual practices that can sustain them in various ways. Those practices are created and sustained in various locations where conversations and relationships can occur.

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[181] Nancy Tatom Ammerman, *Sacred Stories, Spiritual Tribes: Finding Religion in Everyday Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).
[182] Ammerman, *Sacred Stories, Spiritual Tribes*, 290.

Ammerman has found that, "Among the most important of those sites are the official religious institutions."[183]

Ammerman's work does not mean that people are wanting to break down our red doors to sign a pledge card. However, her research does indicate that people are seeking what the church can offer. We can give them a place that they can choose to belong where they can nurture the spiritual practices that are important to them. For some, this might mean the contemplative Rite I service at 8:00am on Sunday, and most Episcopal Church rectors have congregants who are faithful at that service but want no other significant involvement with the church.[184] For others, this could mean coming to evensong, centering prayer, Lenten services, or Stations of the Cross, joining a read-the-Bible-in-a-year Facebook group, or possibly just sending money for altar flowers for those in the family that have died. The church, with either its current membership or with future seekers it might encounter, can offer a place for people to opt into spiritual practices at the depth they desire. We can also continue to invite people who chose to belong at one level to join us in other ways, but trying to force such deepening is usually ineffective and often harmful.

We should also note that religious institutions are not the only destinations for people seeking to develop spiritual practices. Zoe's statements during the focus group were highly instructive. First, she said she wasn't religious. Second, she noted that being part of the intentional community of this project helped her develop spiritual practices of

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[183] Ammerman, *Sacred Stories, Spiritual Tribes*, 301.
[184] Gratefully, most of them are of an older, dues-paying generation, so they also make a pledge, even if they are not interested in running for vestry or coming to other church events.

sending out "good vibes" that she was grateful to find herself doing. Yet, third, she noted that she also saw a local store that sells a variety of non-Christian spiritual books and objects as worthwhile.[185] The church is capable, and even well-poised, to allow people to belong in ways that foster their spiritual practices, but if we ignore that call, people will look elsewhere. If we do not reach out to them, they may not even know what we have to offer.

Memory was another significant area that the church as an intentional community can address. This topic arose in many of the post-interview prayerwalks, in part because I asked a question of people to allow them to connect their memories with what they were experiencing. My hope for this question was to get deeper reflections on what they saw and how that tied into their own experiences.

Belonging to an intentional community, especially a religious community, offers opportunities to engage people and their memories on a number of levels. One of the most important openings for this engagement is to allow people to delve into their memories to find hope. Rowan Williams notes that, "Memory…can be the ground of hope, and there is no authentic hope without memory."[186] Memory allows us to see our current reality in a different light that opens up new possibilities. Maya expressed her practical use of this reality during her post-prayerwalk interview when she described working with people in a depressed area of Pittsburgh and getting them to remember what had been in the past. "It isn't how it's always been and we have to have some faith and some hope that it can change again and there is really a great future coming. That's

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[185] Focus group.

[186] Rowan Williams, *Resurrection: Interpreting the Easter Gospel*: *Second Edition* (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 2002), 25.

what I do. I think about the past and I forward that beautiful past into the future that this can happen here and now."[187] In this way, providing intentional communities where people feel comfortable sharing positive memories can lead them to hope in a way that is complementary to the way the public church can engage society around hope.

Another level of memory, however, are the many troubling memories that people have which make them feel ashamed or isolated from others. By offering a place to belong where people are accepted even with those memories, the church as intentional community offers important opportunities for forgiveness and transformation of those memories into a positive identity and hope. Williams writes that, "If forgiveness is liberation, it is also a recovery of the past in hope, a return of memory, in which what is potentially threatening, destructive, despair-inducing in the past is transfigured into the ground of hope."[188] We affirm that forgiveness when we accept people for who they are as part of our community. Who those people are includes identities that have been forged by their past experiences that they experience now through memory. As Williams writes, "My identity as lover in the community is uniquely coloured by the loves in which I have already struggled, failed, learned, repented."[189] For the church as intentional community to assist people with processing their memories toward forgiveness and hope, we need primarily not to exclude them so that they know they are valued as someone with the past and the memories they have. While such action is Christianity 101, not all churches are currently successful at it.

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[187] Maya interview.
[188] Williams, *Resurrection*, 26.
[189] Williams, *Resurrection*, 38.

I would also note that engaging members of secular society around memory does not require countless opportunities for deep sharing. Preaching and teaching around issues of memory, forgiveness, and integration, as well as simply that "Jesus loves you," are helpful, as are various prayer opportunities that allow people to process memories themselves. At times a pastor or spiritual companion to talk to is helpful, but a small group dedicated to sharing memories is not required.

Section Four: Partner With Society

Schreiter's third area for the church to engage with the society is by consciously partnering with secular groups and individuals to better humankind. This area is one of the strengths of mainline churches generally and the Episcopal Church in particular. When we take Matthew's parable of the sheep and the goats (Matthew 25:31-46) and Jesus' commandment to love our neighbors (Mark 12:31) seriously, we find ourselves as a church feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, caring for the sick, and visiting prisoners. As we engage that work, we often find ourselves alongside of others doing the same things.

The community leaders who participated in my thesis project raised two areas around which the church could engage society in this capacity. The first was for a vision of the community shared by participants and the church. People want good lives for themselves and their children, safety and security, good jobs, and to be surrounded by their families. These desires look a lot like the vision of Isaiah 65. The church can engage society around these issues on a number of fronts, including many of the outreach ministries we already have in place. To move from church programming to engagement,

however, two other steps must be taken. Either the church must actively invite, and make room for, those outside the church to participate in its outreach activities or it must go out and join in activities beyond its own walls. This step is essential to ensure that we are able to interact with those not already in the church. We also have to honest about why we are engaged in what we are doing. We have to share our "take" with those who have other "takes" so that conversations can develop. Ideally, a combination of respectful conversation, effective ministry, and winsome presence opens hearts to receive what the church has to offer.

The second area where thesis project participants identified a need was in receiving permission to make positive changes in the community, or even to foster positive virtues. This sentiment was expressed both in terms of people's personal experiences of needing to have permission to engage in spiritual activities or community service, as well as seeing a need in the community for people to have permission before they embark on an activity.

This need for permission was one of the conversations that most surprised me in the focus group. Yet, perhaps it should not have. As we discover in the work of people like Taylor, Smith, and Ammerman, many in society today have an eclectic worldview of various spiritual and secular strands that they weave together to create meaning. One consequence of such a patchwork of purpose could be a hesitancy in assimilating new loci of meaning, especially without any trusted anchors pointing toward it. A 1950's Catholic school graduate might know exactly what the Baltimore Catechism expected of them, and what they were and were not allowed to do.[190] For someone who has been in

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[190] Whether they followed those instructions or not does not currently concern us.

church a handful of times and been raised to be a secularly good person, however, basic questions of what is worthwhile can be fraught with greater difficulty. Additionally, my own context of Sharon is still influenced by the legacy of the workplace culture of the mills described in my second chapter, where creativity and initiative were not usually rewarded. Receiving official permission for any new activity acquires greater importance in this context.

This need for permission is another opportunity for the church to come alongside society and help it achieve its own ends. Especially when discussing opportunities to better humanity, the church maintains a high level of credibility. While society seems less interested in the church's views on sexuality or politics, when dealing with the poor and the general community the church remains a valued leader. By saying through word or deed that something is worth doing, we can provide the necessary permission for people to follow. Sometimes giving permission occurs by blessing a fledgling initiative, sometimes by taking the first step to address something that needs to be done, and sometimes by pointing to a need and asking someone to address it. The church can engage society in ways that allow society to step out of its own mental, emotional, and spiritual constraints into working for the redemption of the city. As Swanson and Williams write, "The church in the city…is in the best position to be the catalyst for change. We are the ones who call the party together!"[191]

All of the above discussion of avenues that the church can use to engage secular society and witness to it in transformational ways assumes that the church is doing its own work. We cannot share a "take" that we do not understand or do not live into.

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[191] Swanson and Williams, *To Transform a City*, 189.

Obviously, a church can only act effectively as a public church, as an intentional community, and as a partner with secular society to the degree that embodies its own identity as the Body of Christ. Additionally, I would argue that if the church hopes to be effective in this evangelical engagement with society, it must also be engaged with the kind of prayer necessary for such a significant enterprise. While my project and thesis has focused mostly on practical and theoretical aspects of how the church can effective engage with community to transform a city, the spiritual work that contributes to that transformation is also important. The prayer, fasting, prayerwalking and other spiritual disciplines that undergird this work are as important as anything I have discussed, even if they are not the focus of this essay.

This chapter has focused on a variety of topics brought up by project participants that offer avenues for the church to engage society. Separated into the Schreiter's public church, intentional community, and partner with secular society for the betterment of humanity, I have looked at ways that the church could fruitfully engage these areas. My next chapter will look at the data from my thesis project described in Chapter Five and focus more specifically on how that data supports my thesis, while also exploring areas of further ministry and research.

Chapter 8

Thesis Analysis and Potential Next Steps

I think everybody's looking for the same quality of life…At the end of the day, everybody wants a sense of hope.

--Sam[192]

Sharon's leadership provided substantial data during my project, which I have shared primarily in Chapter Five. This data has pointed to ways in which participants were changed by this process and ways in which their reflections have pointed to potential avenues for the church to engage society in our current secular environment. This chapter will evaluate my project thesis in light of my project data, as well as propose opportunities for future ministry and research.

The first section of this chapter will look specifically at my thesis and evaluate whether the project supported my thesis concerning the effects of taking community leaders with Christian backgrounds on prayerwalks. The second section will look at follow-up ministry opportunities based on this project specifically in my context in Sharon. The third section will address issues of transferability to other contexts. Finally, I will propose avenues for future research based on my project's thesis and results.

Section One: Thesis Evaluation

My thesis for this project is that taking a group of Sharon civic, business, and non-profit leaders with Christian backgrounds on prayerwalks and assembling them for a

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[192] Focus group.

focus group afterwards will change how they see God at work in their communities, deepen their understanding of their own vocation, and help create a community with a common language for future conversations about faith and community leadership. If this thesis holds true, I also believe that two sets of secondary outcomes would result. These leaders would be more effective at undertaking the ministry of the church in the wider community that falls outside the work of individual congregations in a way that brings great joy to the city. Through their discussions and participation in the project, these leaders would also provide insight into ways that the church in the city can more effectively meet the community's deepest and most pressing spiritual needs.

The design of this project was a phenomenological study with a focus on the transformation of those involved. This design means that I should be able to describe the common experience that project participants had, while also demonstrating some change in their attitudes and behaviors as a result of the project. The common experience that participants engaged in was a series of two prayerwalks. The change in attitudes and behaviors being sought involves an understanding of God's work in their community and their own vocation. Since catalyzing this transformation was the purpose of the prayerwalk, these changes in participants are the desired outcomes. Additionally, I hope to show that participation in the final focus group allowed for development of a common language for future conversations concerning faith and community leadership.

Perhaps the best overall description of participants' experience with the prayerwalk itself was the exchange between Art and Emma in the focus group:

> Art: It just seemed so strange to go out and pray.
> Emma: Collectively, we all thought it was going to be weird.

Art: And it was weird…[Then] you suddenly realize that this isn't weird, in fact I was weird before [for not prayerwalking]. [193]

While most participants regularly walked around the community, only Maya had any prior sense of connecting prayer with walking.[194] Overall, participants were engaging a new combination of behaviors, prayer and walking.

Besides overcoming the feeling of prayerwalking being weird, participants expressed two significant experiences during the prayerwalks. One experience was of personal enrichment in some way, such as feeling calm, happy, or having a better perspective. The other experience involved recognizing God in the midst of the city and what we were doing. Comments pointing to the first experience included Sam saying on the prayerwalk I felt "at ease. I feel calm...I'm thankful we slowed down."[195] Emma noted that, "This might be selfish, but if I am feeling dumpy, I just might do it on my own so I will feel better because I had such a good feeling after I did it."[196] Nick discussed the way that the prayerwalk helped him express and deal with some of his negative feelings about things he sees in the city[197], and Zoe even commented on the combination of exercise and the opportunity for talking to people in the community that prayerwalking brings.[198]

Participants experienced the connection between God and the community on their prayerwalks in a variety of ways. These included Art's understanding of himself on a

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[193] Focus group.
[194] Zoe indicated in her interview that she rarely walks, except on short walks with her son.
[195] Sam interview.
[196] Focus group.
[197] Nick interview.
[198] Zoe interview.

"three-way call with God,"[199] and Nick's connection to praying for the people he saw as we walked.[200] Matt saw God hoping for a change in living conditions in poorer neighborhoods,[201] and David saw a connection between God and economic development, while also noting the personal connection, saying, "I found that…every twenty feet there was something we could pray about that was really personal."[202]

Almost all participants were able to describe seeing a connection between God and the city on their prayerwalks, which is the expected outcome of my thesis. For some, like Art and David, prayerwalking brought out this connection in ways they could describe. Emma was also clearly able to feel God at work in the neighborhood where she grew up through the prayerwalk.[203] Nate was able to see God in the neighborhood where we prayerwalked through natural beauty and the human efforts to maintain a beautiful environment.[204] For others, such as Maya, this connection was already experienced through her own practice of going into depressed places in the community and sending out positive energy.[205] Maya did not use explicitly Christian theistic language in describing her practices and understanding, nor did Zoe who spoke of a "higher power."[206] Sam clearly has a spiritual understanding of his work in the community, describing both the "spirits" of the old buildings he worked on and feeling "at one with God with a jackhammer in my hand because I'm touching dirt," yet he valued the ability

[199] Art interview.
[200] Nick interview.
[201] Matt interview
[202] David interview.
[203] Emma interview.
[204] Nate interview.
[205] Maya interview and focus group.
[206] Zoe interview and focus group.

to slow down that the prayerwalks offered so that he could pay more attention to these and other experiences.[207] Matt and Nick both had an understanding of God's interaction with the city. Nick had a more general sense while Matt's involved God's desire for good neighborhoods for everyone. The prayerwalks allowed them to discuss these understandings, but did not seem to significantly change them.[208]

The second outcome of my thesis, that participants would feel a deeper sense of vocation, is supported in two ways. First, participants' expressions of their own sense of fulfillment through the prayerwalks combined with seeing God at work in the community indicates an implicit sense of vocation. While they may not identify it as such, their recognition that God is a part of the work that they are undertaking is an essential part of understanding vocation. David expressed this strongly, when noting that prayer needs to happen more by leaders engaging economic development.[209] Such vocational connection could also be seen in Matt's ability to articulate that God wants the same things for the community that he has worked for as a volunteer, or in Sam's identification of God protecting him as he works in old and potentially dangerous buildings.[210] The strongest supports for this aspect of my thesis, however, are changes or anticipated changes in behavior that acknowledges a responsibility to engage in God's work in a particular way. For two participants, that cooperation with God is in the form of prayer, which was the project focus. Zoe noted that after the prayerwalks, she found herself "at least two times where I had just gotten in my car and seen something that upset me or I wished for better,

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[207] Focus group.
[208] Matt interview and Nick interview.
[209] David interview.
[210] Sam interview.

and I just put some good vibes out."[211] Emma's description of how she plans to

incorporate prayerwalking with her children when they go on neighborhood walks is

another clear example of a deepening sense of vocation.[212] After the prayerwalk, Emma

now sees prayer as part of her effective work for the community. Not everyone

expressed themselves in post-prayerwalk interviews or in the focus group in ways that

suggested a deepening sense of their own vocation, but the change in attitude and

behavior of these participants was clearly commensurate with a greater vocational

understanding.

The third component of my thesis, to provide a community with a common

language for future conversations about faith and community leadership, was not entirely

successful. I do believe I succeeded in creating a new group of people who would be

comfortable discussing matters of faith, the city, their own vocations, and the connections

between those topics. Sam expressed this sentiment most strongly at the focus group,

noting that, "I feel like what we have going on here is the connective piece…I don't

know everyone in this room, but I know I could call you [Nate], and I've only known you

for maybe an hour."[213] My thesis participants' community builds on the sense of

comradery among those actively engaged in Sharon's redevelopment. Nevertheless, an

additional piece exists that stemmed from the discussions we had together. As Art said at

the end of the focus group, "I like it enough we should do this again," and Sam and

Emma both chimed their agreement.[214] Most of the participants do encounter each other

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[211] Focus group.
[212] Emma interview.
[213] Focus group.
[214] Focus group.

somewhat regularly, and their trust with each other and experience of discussing matters of faith could facilitate further conversations.

At the same time, I did not note any common language developing that would foster continued conversations, at least on spiritual matters. Issues like hope and the community's need for permission to move forward in various areas did come up in ways that allowed participants to hone a more deeply shared understanding. Outside of the shared experience of prayerwalking, most of the discussion of prayer, vocation, and God remained in the vocabularies and idioms people brought with them to the group. Even for a term as basic as "prayer," participants used a variety of words from "positive energy" (Maya) to "good vibes" (Zoe and others). Maya even noted that she did not know if her own practices were "witchcraft, positivity, or prayer."[215]

This lack of a development of a common language should not be surprising for two reasons. First, the single focus group was not enough time to develop a shared language. Second, neither I nor anyone else in the group wanted to critique participants' faith understanding in ways that would have led to revised language. In fact, this respect for participants' beliefs was one of the core values within my project design. While their experiences in the project did allow them to deepen some of their perceptions, participants seemed to expand their current language to encompass new insights rather than breaking with their old language and adopting a new idiom.

One expected secondary outcome of the project was that participants would more effectively undertake the ministry of the church in the wider community that falls outside the work of individual congregations in a way that brings great joy to the city. While I

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[215] Focus group.

still believe that this outcome will occur on some level, I cannot show support of it now for two reasons. On the one hand, the time between the prayerwalks and the focus group was too short to document any significant changes. On the other hand, I have not developed any useful baseline metrics to establish what either greater engagement in the work of the church outside of individual congregations or the joy level of the city would be. This project, then, shares similar efficacy questions with most ministry. At the same time, I do think, were we able to measure it, there would be small but noticeable changes over the medium-term due to the work of this project.

The other secondary project outcome I anticipated was that participants would provide insight into ways that the church in the city can more effectively meet the community's deepest and most pressing spiritual needs. This expectation was fulfilled beyond my anticipation. As Chapters Five and Seven highlighted, Sharon's leadership offered avenues for the church to minister to the city around art and beauty, hope, spiritual disciplines, a need for belonging, memory, a shared common vision for the betterment of the community, and offering permission to people wanting to move forward with aspects of that vision. Discussion around these topics during the focus group was often lively and insightful, and provided important information for the wider church.

Section Two: Follow-up Ministry Potential in Sharon

The relative success of this project in terms of engaging community leaders, and the positive experience that all of them reported, opens a number of potential avenues for

follow-up ministry from the project itself in my current context. Later in this chapter, I will address questions of potential follow-up from the perspective of academic research.

The first potential follow-up is to continue to work with the nine participants who completed at least one prayerwalk. Many have expressed a willingness, or even desire, to continue this practice. By taking the initiative, I could schedule additional prayerwalks with some people, potentially to the point that it could become a habit for them even without my participation. Additionally, a next step would be to prayerwalk with more than one participant at a time so that they have the experience of doing this together and potentially partnering in this work going forward without me.

I could also convene another focus group, as some have requested, and ask a variety of follow-up questions to explore spiritual and community topics more deeply. Regular focus groups may allow for the eventual development of a common language or more shared experience that results in deeper bonds and common work. Even if only a subset of my original project participants continued, such an ongoing group could become a place that engaged questions of spirituality and the community, and other community members could be invited. Obviously, time for already busy community leaders becomes a constraint on these initiatives.

Another possibility would be to repeat the project with another group of eight-to-twelve community leaders. Additional people would certainly be willing to commit to two prayerwalks and a focus group. While the need for thesis research provided a reason and a deadline for current project participants, the value of the experience would be enough for some leaders to participate. Such additional work could also provide a larger pool for on-going focus groups or other shared future work. Pairing up parishioners with

community leaders on prayerwalks would be another way to leverage this project to reach more people. Any of these opportunities could expand on the prayerwalking project in potentially fruitful ways.

At the same time, participants highlighted opportunities for the church to engage society beyond my thesis project's immediate focus. Prayerwalking with community leaders certainly could allow the church to engage around some of the areas raised, especially when those participating from the church have a healthy understanding of their own "take" in relation to that of others. At the same time, in the context of Sharon, my own congregation has the capacity to continue developing its engagement as a public church, as an intentional community, and in cooperation with other groups. While this essay is not the place for a detailed plan for engaging society around spiritual disciplines, support of the arts, or outreach ministry partnerships, these project insights must be taken into consideration moving forward.

Section Three: Potential for Project Replicability

My project arose from my own ministry interests and engagement in the city of Sharon. Neither the project design nor the project outcomes are limited to my context, however. Nothing in my project was dependent on this area, and particular components could be easily adapted to another community.

Successful replication of this project would occur with the following three conditions. First, the project facilitator would need to have a practice of and comfort with prayerwalking. While prayerwalking is not difficult, anytime people are being introduced to a new practice, the teacher needs to be able both to instill confidence and to

ensure that any issues along the way are easily dealt with. One particular issue with prayerwalking is the ease in which conversations and other distractions take focus away from prayer. Having the experience to gently and appropriately restore that focus is essential so that participants can feel free to engage on their own terms but the time is not wasted.

The second condition for successful replication are relationships between the facilitator and community leaders. While these relationships do not need to be deep, community leaders believing that the facilitator has something valuable to offer them through their participation is important. Participants' trust that the facilitator has the best interest of them and their community at heart, rather than merely engaging in an outreach project for a particular congregation, is also essential.

Third, a respect for leaders where they are along with a trust that God will use their experiences as needed is also essential. Helping people engage an important and potentially transformational experience is not the same as a new member class. This respect and trust allows community leaders to have the best experience possible while also allowing the facilitator to maximize their own learnings through a focus group or other conversations.

I believe that if these three conditions are met, others could replicate this project in a wide variety of contexts. While the particulars of participants' experiences might differ dramatically based on their own background and environment, I believe the basic project outcomes would be similar, with the possible exception of slightly different potential areas for the church to engage the broader society being raised.

Section Four: Additional Research Opportunities

The outcomes of this thesis project suggest a number of avenues for future research. A similar phenomenological study could be done on the project extensions suggested in section two of this chapter. Seeing what might be learned by on-going prayerwalks with current participants, duplicating the project with new participants, or by bringing participants together for joint prayerwalks could be fruitful. Valuable insight might also be gained by having a regular meeting of the same focus group discussing the intersection of faith and community, although the questions and facilitation would necessarily go in different directions than this project was limited to. Additionally, I believe that two research projects expanding on my work could be extremely valuable.

The first project that would build on what I have done would be a long-term study of people committed to prayerwalking. The goal would be for participants to commit to engaging in prayerwalking until it becomes a habit. In my project, people agreed to prayerwalk with me, but, except possibly for Maya, did not ever come to own prayerwalking themselves. A longer study, however, would investigate changes in participants' understanding of God at work around them and in their own vocations as they engaged this practice over an extended period of time. The methodology for such a project would likely be narrative research and involve multiple interviews with participants, as well as journaling, photography, and other ways of capturing their changing understanding over time.[216]

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[216] See Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry Research and Design*, 112-114 for more details on narrative research design. See Ammerman, *Sacred Stories, Spiritual Tribes*, for a variety of ways to acquire data on participants' understanding of their spiritual practices.

The second project that could offer exceedingly interesting insights would be to replicate my project but to include only participants who actively identify as non-Christian. Such a project would likely prove helpful in understanding how the church engages our secular society around spiritual disciples, as well as other topics. The prayerwalks would require a respectful agreement about how prayer would be offered, but the ability to explore an even wider spectrum of ways that God (or whatever transcendental concept is used) is understood to be present in the city and how vocation stems from that would be worth exploring. A final focus group could have components of inter-faith dialogue that could move a group of community leaders forward in their ability to serve the city together, as well.

This chapter has analyzed whether or not my data has supported my thesis and looked at opportunities for deepening ministry and research based on my work. Overall, participants have gained a deeper sense at God at work in the city and at least some have a deeper sense of vocation. While they have not developed a common language of faith, they have deepened their sense of community. They have also clearly offered significant insight into ways that the church can engage our secular society. My thesis project has also pointed to possibilities for continuing ministry in Sharon and additional academic work. I have detailed some of these possibilities, as well as addressing this project's transferability to other locations. In my next, concluding chapter, I will step back to reflect on this project and the broader horizons of the intersection of ministry and society.

Chapter 9

Conclusion

I feel like maybe God is…part of this somehow. What's funny is that we talk about [how]… gathering in his name brings God to the table…Most all of these people are selfless, and at someplace inside of them they are spiritual and attached, not just to one another, but also to God.

-- Art[217]

On April 26, 2010, I was sitting in the Sharon city manager's office for the first time. The then City Manager said, "The place where things are happening is at the Community and Economic Development Commission. Their meetings are at 7:30am on Tuesday." While my mouth sputtered, "OK. Thanks," my brain was not happy. I didn't want to be anywhere at 7:30am on a Tuesday morning, especially not with a bunch of people I had not met who would be discussing topics I did not know much about.

I was meeting with the city manager because of a visit with my spiritual director some weeks earlier. I had recently taken a new call to St. John's church in Sharon, Pennsylvania, and he said, "Get out and go to some meetings. Your whole ministry can't be only with the group of people already at your church."   I called the city manager's office and asked for an appointment. He was thrilled that a new minister in town cared what was happening in the city. I came to his office and we talked. I asked where I might start to engage the community, and he said Tuesday at 7:30am.

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[217] Art interview.

At that moment, I was confronted with the pressures of declining churches described in Chapter Two which result in retreat from community engagement. Nobody was going to miss me at the meeting, but I had a lot of work to do in the parish and people would certainly let me know if I did not have time to keep all the programming on track. I had to decide if I felt that this work was important enough, and potentially fruitful enough, to wake up early, turn my family's morning routine upside down, and show up.

I did show up. That bleary-eyed Tuesday morning meeting was the initial chapter in my engagement with a cross-section of Sharon's community leadership that eventually led to this thesis project.

As often happens in ministry and academia, one meeting turned into others. I began the work of partnering with secular groups and organizations to better the community, although I would not have framed it in that way at the time. In almost all cases, people in the community were grateful that a priest would come alongside them in their work. My presence also provided an opportunity for community members to ask about the church's "take," and to think more deeply about spiritual and religious issues. While engaging with community members over a number of years, something else happened that changed me. I fell in love with my community and its people.

Love of the people in our communities, both within our churches and within our cities, is the foundation of any meaningful ministry. I believe that some of the love I developed for the people of my community deepened as I prayed for those I worked with, since prayer has a powerful way of taking our love to new levels. This love also developed as I worked alongside of dedicated, compassionate, inspiring people who

wanted to see their city thrive. Some of this love also arrived, no doubt, as a gift that God provides to clergy willing to embrace a call.

This love is really the underlying heartbeat of this thesis project. Love stemming from the love of God who first loves us allows us to see our communities with the hope that rips off our blinders about the present while seeing what can be in the future. In a practical and ministerial sense, such love makes me want to see Sharon live into its vocation and more closely resemble the redeemed city described in Isaiah 65. Barriers to the city discovering its vocation, like the brokenness of a church that is not united enough to bring the whole gospel to the whole city, must be addressed. Love compels us as Christians to share our "take" so that people see and experience the ways that God is present our communities. My engagement with members of my community whom I have come to respect and admire also leads me to reject as incomplete any theoretical constructs that undervalue the gifts and capacities of the dynamic, insightful, and inquisitive community leaders who also love their community enough to hope, to dream, to sacrifice, and even to take a weird prayerwalk with a local doctor of ministry candidate.

Love and passion do not mitigate the need for rigorous research, however. On the contrary, care for the community raises the stakes for effective interventions. The problems we face in rustbelt America and in our secular society generally are significant enough that we no longer have the luxury of mediocre ministry or half-hearted community engagement. Hopefully, this thesis project is an adequate offering in advancing the theory and practice of how the church can engage society and help community leaders see God's calling within their own work. Our future efforts will

continue to call forth increasing creativity and rigor as the church carries out its own vocation to our communities.

This essay has explored my thesis that taking a group of Sharon civic, business, and non-profit leaders with Christian backgrounds on prayerwalks and assembling them for a focus group afterwards will change how they see God at work in their communities, deepen their understanding of their own vocation, and create a community with a common language for future conversations about faith and community leadership. Additionally, I have explored two secondary outcomes from a project exploring this thesis. First, that deepening Christian leaders' understanding of their work as Christian ministry and developing their capacity for effectively undertaking it will allow them to do the work of the church in the wider community between the ministries of individual congregations and bring greater joy to Sharon. Second, that community leaders participating in a project testing this thesis will provide insight into how the church can more effectively meet a city's deepest and most pressing spiritual needs.

As I have shown in my previous chapter, my data supported the first two aspects of this thesis by showing a change in how participants saw God at work in their community and deepened their sense of vocation. The project did not achieve the creation of a common language for faith among participants, but it did create a sense of community that could facilitate future conversations around issues of faith, vocation, and the city. The data was necessarily inconclusive about whether participants' participation caused them to do the work of the church in the city more effectively or to bring joy to their city. The community leaders involved did provide extensive insights into a variety of ways the church could engage the community.

As they discussed places where they saw God at work in the community, project participants highlighted a number of important areas. These areas point to places that they church can address society, and I believe that different aspects of the church have the best potential to gain traction in these various areas. The church in the role of public church can engage society around art and beauty and hope. The church as an intentional community can provide a place to belong, teach spiritual disciplines, and provide a place to explore memory. As a partner with secular society in bettering humankind, the church has a role in outreach work that engages with the society to help the city better resemble the description of Isaiah 65's redeemed city, as well as being able to offer the city permission to do the work it feels called to do.

These diverse areas that community leaders put forward provide a variety of ways clergy and other leaders could build on my thesis project. The research ideas in Chapter Eight offer other avenues forward. The most basic aspiration of this thesis would be to encourage others to invite a community leader to walk around their community for half hour, to pray, and to see what happens. Additional engagement in any of these areas could be considered a successful continuation of this project.

Facilitating transformations of individuals and our communities as I have described, even on a basic level, is fostered by approaching our cities from a particular vantage point. This perspective has three critical components. First, we must believe that God has a vocation for our cities, and that he is already at work in them to bring the vision of the New Jerusalem into their midst. Any work we can do in cooperation with God's mission is a great privilege. Second, with Charles Taylor, we should see our current secular age of authenticity as a gift and a strength that will enrich our church and

our faith in new and unexpected ways. Even if we miss the glories of what we have been told about the church in the 1950's, the 1550's, or even the 1250's, we would not choose to go back. Finally, we should hope to fall deeply and passionately in love with our cities and their people. To paraphrase Saint Paul, "Though I prayerwalk for miles, if I have not love I am just scraping away the sidewalk." Those we are engaging through public art or spiritual disciplines or common charity work know whether we are doing it from a deep, abiding, sacrificial, Christian love, or if they are another objective on a church growth plan. We are in an age of authenticity, and authentic Christianity is a continual striving to live out Jesus' new commandment that we are to love each other as he has loved us (John 13:34).

This work of loving community engagement goes beyond just a calling to ministry. We, like those in our communities, are destined to be denizens of the eternal city. As such, our fulfillment lies in being virtuous citizens of a prospering earthly one. I return to the passage from Jeremiah at the opening of this essay: "seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare" (Jeremiah 29:7). Seeking the best for our city is essential for our own well-being. Part of Jeremiah's instruction on how to seek the city's welfare is to pray for it.

I spent two months helping nine people experience something of what it means to pray for their city with a particular prayer discipline. Their prayerwalks stimulated thoughtful reflection, lively discussion, and some greater understanding of how God was at work in their communities. I believe our prayers also advanced, in at least some small ways, the welfare of the city of Sharon and the welfare of this project's participants. The

growth in participants' understanding and practice of prayer offers greater opportunities for this important work to continue in the future. I will give Emma the last word as a summary of this thesis project: "You went to places that were important to me and prayed for those places with me, so that I can then do it on my own now that I know what I'm doing."[218]

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[218] Emma interview.

Appendix 1

Initial On-line Survey Questions

The following survey was sent to all participants to be completed before their first prayerwalk. The survey was done using google forms.

What is your name?

How old are you?
- 20-30 years old
- 31-40 years old
- 41-50 years old
- 51-60 years old
- 61-70 years old
- 70+ years old

What is your current employment?

Please list any volunteer work in the Sharon Community that you consider significant.

What church were you raised in?

Did you attend a Catholic or religious elementary or high school?
- Yes
- No

Did you attend Sunday School, CCD, or other religious education as a child?
- Yes
- No

How often would you say you attended church growing up?
- Weekly
- 2-3 times/month
- Monthly
- A few times a year
- Rarely
- Never

Do you consider yourself a member of a church now?
- Yes
- No

Which church?

How often do you attend church now?
- Weekly
- 2-3 times/month
- Monthly
- A few times a year
- Rarely
- Never

Have you read the Bible or other spiritual books in the past month?
- Yes
- No

How often do you pray?
- Daily
- A few times a week
- Weekly
- Monthly
- When I am facing a significant crisis
- Not in the past year

If you pray, what form does that usually take (check any that apply)?
- Memorized prayers
- Talking to God in my own words
- Asking God for things I or others need
- Silent contemplation
- Being in nature
- Singing
- Attending a church service or Bible Study
- Other

If you can think of a time when your faith informed a significant decision in your life, please describe what happened?

Please answer the following questions thinking about either your paid or volunteer roles as a community leader. Write as much or as little as you would like.

What in your work do you find the most fulfilling?

What in your work do you find the least fulfilling?

If God showed up as your new boss at work, where do you think he would be giving gold stars?

If God showed up as a new volunteer to help you, what do you think he would want to change about your work?

Where in your work do you see yourself living out your faith?

What do you think is God's vision/hope/desire/longing for Sharon?

How does your work help bring about God's vision/hope/desire/longing?

Appendix 2

Interview Questions Following the First Prayerwalk

What surprised you on our walk?
> Have you ever experienced something like this before?

How did you feel during our walk?
> Where did you feel particularly good?
> Where did you feel uncomfortable?

What drew your attention on our walk?
> Did you have a sense of anything calling to you?

What feelings or memories or images come to mind as you reflect on our walk?

What did you learn from our walk?

Do you have any new insights into how God sees our city as a result of our walk?

What do you think was the most important thing that we did during our walk?

Informed Consent Document

Virginia Theological Seminary

CONSENT TO PARTICPATE IN A RESEARCH PROJECT

Project Title: *Finding the City of God in the City*

Principal Investigator: The Reverend Adam T. Trambley
                                  St. John's Episcopal Church
                                  226 West State Street
                                  Sharon, PA 16146
                                  724-347-4501 (church)
                                  814-688-7709 (cell)
                                  atrambley@gmail.com

Site where study is to be conducted: On-line and mutually agreed upon sites in Sharon, PA.

Introduction/Purpose: You are invited to participate in a research project as part of the Reverend Adam Trambley's Doctor of Ministry Thesis. The purpose of this study is to look at how civic, business, and non-profit leaders with Christian backgrounds might develop a deeper understanding of their work as a vocation and see how they are participating in God's purposes for their community. The thesis is that, through survey instruments, two individual prayer walks with Trambley, and a focus group, participants would see new and stronger relationships between their faith and their work, as well as building connections with other leaders through conversations about God's work in their city outside of a formal church context.

Process: The time commitment for this research project will be about four hours, broken down in the following ways.
1. An on-line survey concerning basic demographic information, faith background and participation information, current job information, and current understanding of how your faith relates to work and the broader community. The link to this survey will be emailed to you. (30 minutes)
2. A 30-minute prayerwalk in Sharon with Trambley, including a brief introduction and simple instructions and followed by a short interview. This prayerwalk will occur at a mutually convenient time and place. (45 minutes)
3. A 30-minute prayerwalk in Sharon with Trambley, during which you will be given a camera and asked to take photos of where you see God at work. This prayerwalk will occur at a mutually convenient time and place. (45 minutes)

4. A focus group with the other 5-10 participants, facilitated by Trambley, where photos taken in the city will be shared, and questions concerning faith, vocation, and, the wider community will be discussed. This focus group will occur on Saturday, November 4, from 10:00am -11:30am at a location in downtown Sharon. (90 minutes)

The interviews and focus groups will be recorded and transcribed, and information about why each photo was taken will be attached to them for discussion and research purposes.

Possible Discomforts and Risks: Your participation in this study may involve minimal risk, including injury from walking; discomfort, anxiety, or stress from discussing matters of faith and vocation; or a breach of confidentiality.

Benefits: On an individual level, the potential benefits are: 1) an experience of growth in faith and understanding of vocation and how God works in our community; and 2) deepened relationships with other participants. On a community level, part of the thesis of this research is that when community leaders participate in such a process, a positive improvement in the community will result.

Voluntary Participation: Your participation in this study is voluntary, and you may decide not to participate without prejudice, penalty, or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You may also decide to leave the study at any time, or to request that certain responses are not reported as data in the project research. If you would like to leave the study or remove certain statements, please contact Trambley to inform him of your decision.

Financial Considerations: Participation in this study will involve no cost to the subject. For your participation in this study you will receive no compensation.

Confidentiality: The data obtained from you will be collected via audio and video recording and on-line documents. The collected original data will be kept for a minimum of three years and will be accessible only to Trambley, the recording transcriber, and seminary faculty. The researcher will protect your confidentiality by coding the data and securely storing the data. The collected data will be stored on a password protected computer system and a password protected SurveyMonkey account. Audio and video recordings will be transcribed and coded. Subjects will be protected from breach of confidentiality by storing any digital data on a password-protected computer system and written documents and recordings will be stored in the locked office of Trambley. In the thesis itself and any future academic work, no one will be identified by their actual name. However, some identification by position, at least in terms of participants overall, will be given, and some people may be able to infer original attribution of quotes or photos.

Contact Questions/Persons: If you have any questions about the research now or in the future, you should contact Trambley by telephone at 814-688-7709 or by email at atrambley@gmail.com.

Statement of Consent:

"I have read the above description of this research and I understand it. I have been informed of the risks and benefits involved, and all my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. Furthermore, I have been assured that any future questions that I may have will also be answered by the principal investigator of the research study. I voluntarily agree to participate in this study.

☐ I give consent to be audio and video recorded.

☐ I **do not** give consent to be audio and video recorded.

By signing this form I have not waived any of my legal rights to which I would otherwise be entitled.

I will be given a copy of this statement."

_____   _____   _____
Printed Name of   Signature of Subject   Date Signed
Subject

Adam Trambley   _____   _____
Printed Name of   Signature of Investigator   Date Signed
Investigator

Project Timeline:
1. *Initial On-Line Survey* – Link to open by September 1; to be completed by first prayerwalk.
2. *First Prayerwalk* – To be scheduled between September 1 and September 27.
3. *Second Prayerwalk* – To be scheduled after first prayerwalk and before October 24.
4. *Final Focus Group* – Saturday, November 4, 2017, 10:00-11:30am, at a place to be determined.

Appendix 4

Selected Photos Taken During Prayerwalks by Participants

The following eleven photos are a sample of the more than fifty photos taken by project participants on their second prayerwalk in response to the request to take pictures of places they saw God at work.

Participants took many photos of public art projects. This photo of Art's is one of several pictures taken of this new art alley in downtown Sharon.

Nick took this picture of a new literary garden outside of the local public library. Different area artists created book-themed artistic poles for the project.

Nick was one of multiple participants who photographed this new mural. The mural was a community project spearheaded by a local hotel company who sponsored an internationally recognized mural artist to work with about a dozen inner-city youth. Numerous other local artists, businesses, and community groups also assisted.

Many participants photographed areas of natural beauty, including the Shenango River, which runs through downtown Sharon. This photo is Art's.


Matt took a number of photos of a local park which volunteers have spent hundreds of hours rehabilitating. This photo is of the new community garden in that park.

Maya photographed this alleyway in downtown Sharon, noting how such city features can help build the sense of community needed for further revitalization.

Art took this photo of Sam's building with a new roof during our second prayerwalk after seeing contractors working on the roof during our first prayerwalk.
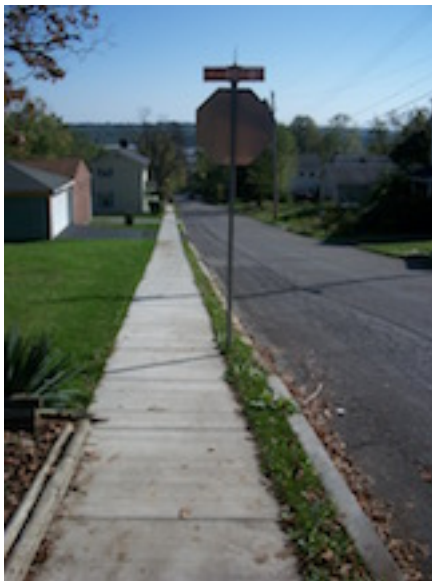
Nate took this picture of a new sidewalk running for blocks in an area of town that some see as depressed or troubled.

Zoe took this photo of a sign in front of a house about a block from where she lives. The sign reads, "No matter where you are from, we're glad you're our neighbor" in Spanish, English, and Arabic. Before our prayerwalk, she had never noticed the sign.


Nick took this photo of the exterior of St. John's church, as well as a photo of another downtown church with a strong community outreach ministry. He noted that God was clearly at work in what the churches were doing for the community.

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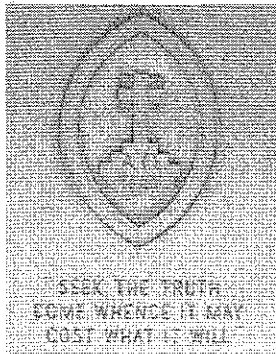
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