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SPIRIT-ENABLED: Discipleship in a Multicultural Congregation

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Abstract

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This work is a reflection on congregational multiculturalism by the pastor of The Way STL, a congregation in the St. Louis, MO metro area. The paper conceptualizes and argues for the importance of a contextual hybrid congregational spirituality that can foster an environment conducive to spiritual maturity/discipleship in a multicultural congregation. More specifically, this essay aims to make the case for the primacy of discipleship above all else where any Christian congregation is concerned. Indeed, the assertion is that multiculturalism cannot be the reason people are church together. Rather, a congregation must always be the gathering of disciples who exist in Christ and are led by the Holy Spirit even when they hail from different cultures. The essay explores both individual and congregational discipleship before offering recommendations for multicultural congregations based on the aforementioned case study of The Way STL. These recommendations include bringing together the various elements of worship from the cultures represented in a given congregation in order to birth a hybrid spirituality that is unique to that particular congregation.

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INTRODUCTION

My aim for this project is to conceptualize and argue for a hybrid/multicultural congregational spirituality that can foster an environment conducive to spiritual maturity/discipleship. Since people cannot reasonably be expected to exist together who have no vested interest in one another, it behooves the leadership of the congregation to design and implement worship and other relational practices that would facilitate people Praying and engaging the Bible together as a community.

The essay is intended for congregations such as our host, Wellspring Family Church, which are discerning how God is calling them to become a culturally diverse body of disciples. More specifically, the essay is for the leaders of said congregations because “leadership is key to building authentic community.”¹ Are considered competent leaders for multiculturalism, those individuals who possess “the ability to create a safe environment or container in which the uniqueness of individuals, difference in culture and experiences, and healthy conflict can be affirmed.”²

Thus, the overall purpose of this essay is to make the case for the primacy of discipleship above all else where any Christian congregation is concerned. I will argue that individual discipleship, on the one hand, is cultivated primarily through Prayer and engagement with the Bible and that congregational discipleship, on the other hand, is cultivated by means of Holy Spirit-inspired and Christ-centered worship experiences as well as facilitated relational practices.

¹ Jacqueline Lewis, *Leadership in Multicultural and Multiracial Congregations*, 44.

² Ibid

The essay will caution against the dangers of not relying on the Holy Spirit who intercedes for us (Rom 8:26) and reveals to us the will of God (John 14:26; 1 Cor. 2:10).³

As I explore the guiding question of this essay, I must inevitably address the primordial query: what is it, *according to Scripture*, that is essential to Christian faith and practice? I put the dependent clause in italics to emphasize the fact that Scripture is the ultimate authority for Christian living. I intend to show that the Bible clearly stipulates that two things, at a minimum, are needed for a Christian's spiritual growth as well as congregational growth. They are Prayer and knowledge of Scripture. I will use Acts 2 as the primary case study text in presenting this argument, but it will be fairly heavily supplemented by additional scriptural texts.⁴

The essay will flow as follows: I will begin with a brief telling of the story of our congregation, The Way STL. I will then offer some comments on multiculturalism in general and how it is lived out in our congregation specifically. Here, I will offer a definition of culture before talking about the various subcultures which make up our congregational culture. I will then suggest that any congregation (including multicultural ones) that wishes to thrive must be intentional about cultivating a spiritually vibrant communal identity/environment that is rooted in love and mutuality. I will expound further and suggest that to accomplish this, a congregation must do at least a couple of things well at two levels: First, at the individual level, a Christian congregation must (1) teach and encourage individual commitment to prayer and (2) teach and encourage personal bible study. Secondly, at the communal level, a Christian congregation must

³ This work is not hypothetical, but the practical wrestling of the leader of a multicultural congregation. By its conclusion, the essay will hope to make the case that, where multicultural congregations are concerned, a focus on spiritual vitality/discipleship is paramount for the health and growth of a congregation and that both are entirely dependent upon the implementation of Holy Spirit-inspired and Christ-centered worship experiences as well as facilitated cross-cultural friendships.

⁴ All scriptural references in this paper will be from the NRSV translation unless otherwise specified.

prayerfully use scripture to (1) design corporate worship experiences that help people learn to love God and (2) implement relational practices that help people learn to love neighbor as self. Summarily, the essay will conclude that for a multicultural Christian congregation to thrive, it must birth a Holy Spirit-inspired and Christ-centered spirituality rooted in Prayer and Biblical engagement; a spirituality that transcends cultural differences in order to make disciples of Jesus Christ.

THE WAY STL

Let us begin, then, with the story of The Way STL. After all, this essay was born out of a desire to continually seek to better understand and therefore better serve the congregation even while offering its story as an example that others would hopefully find compelling. The Way STL is a small church plant on the periphery of the city of St. Louis, Missouri, USA. The congregation was legally constituted in October, 2017 after years visioning, prayer and discernment. The first worship service of the initial trial phase was held in February, 2018. By God's grace and through the agency of the Holy Spirit, the congregation survived winter and discerned her call to ministry to be vital enough to officially launch on October 13, 2018 with 17 active participants, including the pastor. In the process of surviving winter, the congregation also fully embraced and grew into its multiculturalism. Indeed the original seventeen were an assembly of various cultural backgrounds, from African American to Indian to Caucasian American to various African nationalities. These were represented exactly as follows: 1 African American, 1 Indian immigrant, 9 white US Americans, and 6 African immigrants. At the time of the writing of this essay, The Way's composition has changed, having lost some congregants

over the course of the pandemic and having gained others upon our return to in-person worship.⁵ The new cultural makeup of the congregation includes from the US: one African American, 8 whites; from Africa: one Cameroonian, One South Sudanese, One Nigerian, two Zimbabweans, three DR Congolese, three Liberians, and four Ghanaians; and from Central America: one Mexican.⁶ This is the congregation in which I serve and whose lessons in congregational multiculturalism – its trials and triumphs – I wish to offer here.

CONGREGATIONAL MULTICULTURALISM

Beyond just telling our story however, the aim in wrestling with the issue of congregational multiculturalism is also to equip any congregation where cultural diversity is proving more of a barrier than a bridge for transformative ministry. Yet the work remains crucial for us as well because our congregation, which is both new and multicultural, needs to understand what has brought us together if we hope to sustain our existence beyond the initial excitement of being a part of something new. So, what is culture and what does it mean to say that The Way STL is a multicultural congregation?

Definition of Culture

The first thing that needs to be said in defining culture is that there is no real scholarly consensus on the definition of the term since it is widely accepted that no two cultures are alike, nor even equivalent. It is for this reason that the field dedicated to the study of the subject is the

⁵ We are still a very small congregation with roughly 16-18 people gathering weekly for worship, 8-10 of us also gather weekly for Bible Study, and 3 of us gather weekly for prayer (About 12 show up for the monthly prayer meeting).

⁶ Two of our young leaders now serve in other ministerial contexts, one in a UMC congregation and the other in the local diocese of the Episcopal Church as Assistant Pastor and Contemporary Worship Design Lead respectively.

plural form Cultural Studies and not the singular Cultural Study.⁷ That being said, there are some generally accepted definitions, which serve as a basic starting point for speaking about culture. The definitions referenced below, as borrowed primarily from the Merriam-Webster dictionary, will help frame our conversation on the matter.

Generally speaking, we will be referring to the “the customary beliefs, social forms, and material traits of a racial, *religious*, or social group” when speaking of culture (Italics mine). However, there will be instances, such as when speaking of the culture of the African diaspora, when the better understanding of our use of the term will be in reference to “the characteristic features of everyday existence (such as diversions or a way of life) shared by people in a place or time.” Lastly, the term culture will also be used to refer to “the set of shared attitudes, values, goals, and practices that characterizes an institution or organization”⁸ such as our congregation because “each congregation has a culture of its own—a way of acting, speaking, and socializing new members”⁹ and ours is no exception. Having thus briefly defined culture, we can now take a closer look at the various “subcultures” that make up The Way’s congregational culture. For the sake of brevity, I will only lift up three subcultures of our congregational culture, namely religious, ethnic, and national subcultures.

The Culture of The Way STL

First, to understand our congregational Culture, it is imperative to consider the numerous religious backgrounds represented within it, which have instilled in people a given religious/faith identities that we will refer to here as a culture. As of the time of this writing, our congregation

⁷ Brian Blount, Can I Get a Witness, 6-26.

⁸ Merriam Webster Dictionary

⁹ Nancy Tatom Ammerman, Congregation and Community, 56. (For a full definition of congregational culture, see pg. 54-62).

has the following Christian backgrounds represented within: United Methodist, Methodist, Presbyterian, Baptist, Non-denominational, Pentecostal and previously unchurched. However, many of these faith denominations do not constitute the sole contributors to people's religious identities. Some, for instance, have a religious identity that cannot reasonably be divorced from their contact with other religions and faith expressions. For example, we have a congregant from South Sudan who, though being a Protestant Christian, does not eat pork. This may seem odd at first, but it makes sense when one remembers that although South Sudan is predominantly Christian, Sudan, from which it recently seceded, is a majority Muslim nation whose secular way of being as a people is directly informed by their religious beliefs and practices.

Secondly and equally important for understanding our congregational culture is the understanding of the various national cultures found within (see above). While it is often the case that many in the US lump all Africans into one cultural group, the reality is that there exists a great diversity just as is the case with different US regions, for instance. Still, some generalization is useful for understanding the kind of "African Spirituality" found in our congregation. Greg Luche offers perhaps one of the most comprehensive such generalizations when he writes that "in the African worldview, to live is to communicate; and the height of all communications is prayer."¹⁰

¹⁰ Greg Luche, *The Flow of African Spirituality into World Christianity* in *Mission Studies* 32, 334.

The rest of the paragraph reproduced below is useful for understanding generally African spirituality: "Prayer is not just a matter of words, but a total articulation of one's state of mind and life in celebrations, lamentations, praises, supplications, vindications, and so on. To the African, prayer is essentially an existential articulation of one's life situation to God, which could be spontaneously verbalized, dramatized or even permanently expressed in names and inscriptions. Most Africans give God-bearing names to their children. Generally, African names describe the circumstance of birth, tell life stories, profess faith in God, celebrate victory over undeclared enemies, express optimism for the future, utter lamentations or praises, declare vindications, and so on. In all such cases, what is central is the art of bringing God into the picture of one's life – this is a normal African phenomenon. Giving names is mostly an ongoing prayer. Likewise, it is common to see inscriptions on vehicles, buses and lorries, all making

However, as much as most, if not all, of our Africans congregants would agree with Luche, we would also insist that the reader likewise understand the distinctions which exist. So, let us highlight a few of those. Being aware of these, by the way, has proven highly important in doing ministry in our congregation. The most basic distinctions can be made at the level of cardinal points, with West African culture being variably different from Central, Southern, East African, and North African¹¹ cultures. However, even within West African culture for instance, one will find that there are marked differences between our Ghanaians for example, who had a strong Animist influence and say the Nigerian, who was fairly equally influenced by both Christianity and Islam. Unless we understand what circumstances unique to them have formed people, we might fail to understand what informs how they pray and/or otherwise relate to the Divine.

Lastly, but certainly not least, is the need to understand the ethnic subcultures present in our congregation. There are, as previously detailed, four primary ethnicities. I make mention of this grouping of cultures last because it is actually to serve as our starting point. The truth is that whatever else our congregants might be described as, our ethnic cultures must always be taken into consideration along with our religious cultures. In other words, as we continuously work to harmonize our hybrid culture, we must always be cognizant of the fact, for example, that a Black African Methodist understands and relates to God and church in a much different way from a White US American United Methodist. As previously stated, it is safe to presume that “Africans are [spiritual] in all aspects of life, and a failure in any one sphere of life requires a [spiritual] solution.” The West, on the other hand, has over the centuries gradually espoused “an

prayerful declarations. The African uses every avenue to express himself and to communicate to God; he deploys his entire body in prayer and worship.”

¹¹ I include North Africa for the sake of being thorough, but we do not have any congregants from the region.

enlightenment-based faith which differentiates faith from the rest of life.”¹² So, while the average African immigrant in our congregation would lament over the “peace we often forfeit [and the] needless pain we bear all because we do not carry everything to God in prayer,”¹³ the average American congregant would insist that some things do not require prayer, but action, in order to be addressed and ultimately resolved.

There is a holy metaphorical place in our congregation where the various cultural identities meet and find common ground. Our task is to discern that particular hybrid culture that has been birthed out of this *métissage*¹⁴ – i.e. cultural mix – because if we are not intentional and open about our diversity and if we are not willing to learn one from the other, the community is already doomed to fail. Indeed, open and honest dialogue together with open minds and hearts are absolutely paramount in order to ensure that when we theologize and indeed worship together, we actually communicate meaningfully with each other instead of just flinging ideas and concepts “out into thin air.”¹⁵

Allow me to briefly illustrate this point. Towards the beginning of our congregation’s existence, we had two young men who rotated in the role of worship leader, one black African and the other white American. While one was shocked that people were “unresponsive” to the invitation to pray, the other was taken aback by a congregant continuing to sing, a different song at that, after the band had already ended its set. Talking about these incidents, we have come to realize that unlike our people from the Global South, our people in the West are typically not

¹² David Mushayavanhu & Graham Duncan, *The Spiritual Weakness of Churches Founded by Western Missionaries*, 1.

¹³ Joseph M Scriven, “What a friend we have in Jesus,” *The United Methodist Hymnal*, 526.

¹⁴ I borrow this French term to define and describe the hybrid congregational culture of The Way STL because it more directly and more effectively conveys the meaning I wish to communicate

¹⁵ Stephen Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, 39.

comfortable praying extemporaneously, out loud, and all at the same time at that. Likewise, we have also learned that people from the Global South tend to be more vocal and “unstructured” in singing as well as prayer. It is from these conversations that the shift from worship leadership to worship moderating came about. We came to the understanding that the task of the one standing before the people was not to tell them how to worship, but to invite and encourage them to worship in the manner most authentic and true to them.

In light of this reality, we have come to discern a standard of spiritual vitality that is both intercultural and cross-cultural. In the words of the song writer, “when the music fades and all is stripped away,”¹⁶ our congregation understands and agrees that spirituality in our community is defined as the practice of praying and meditating on the word of God (Scripture) both individually and communally. How these two are practiced may not necessarily look the same for everyone, but their centrality to Christian Discipleship is nonnegotiable.

CHRISTIAN DISCIPLESHIP/SPIRITUAL MATURITY

Christian discipleship looks the same across cultures insofar as disciples are understood to be individual believers who pray to God in the spirit and seek God’s wisdom and search God’s ways by focusing on the model life that Jesus exemplified in the scriptures. In the words of Scott Aniol, “a disciple of Jesus Christ will be characterized by a certain collection of behaviors,”¹⁷ which must flow out of one’s love of God (Deut. 6:5) and of neighbor as self (Lev. 19:18). We, at The Way STL however, have found that being church together is all but impossible for people who don’t have the same cultural understanding of how one expresses love for neighbor. Therefore, building a congregation on the foundation of mutual love is a non-starter. For such a

¹⁶ Matt Redman, “The Heart of Worship.”

¹⁷ Scott Aniol, *Practice Makes Perfect – Corporate Worship and the Formation of Spiritual Virtue*, 94.

congregation as ours, and really any congregation for that matter, there really is hierarchy as Jesus stated. A disciple must understand that love of God is primary and love of neighbor is the second that is like it (Mat. 22:34-40).

That being said, scripture seems to suggest that individual Christians cannot be disciples or learn to make disciples on their own. This level of spiritual maturity is best attained in a communal setting. Indeed, “observing Christ’s commands, as the Great Commission explicitly states, is something that must be taught—it is a learned moral behavior...[and] corporate worship is one of the primary means of making disciples through the ritual formation of spiritual virtue”¹⁸ (more on corporate worship later). Logically then, our next step is to examine a bit more in depth what Christian discipleship looks like at the individual level, then we shall consider the same at the communal level before reflecting on how this all comes together in our multicultural congregation.

Definition of Spirituality

Before proceeding further however, let us first state a working definition of spirituality in general and Christian spirituality in particular. Minette Drumwright in “The Role of Prayer in the Witnessing, Giving Life,” wisely reminds the reader that sometimes to define something well, we must begin by stating what it is not.¹⁹ This is what I will do to begin and to aid me in the task, I turn to Bradley Holt. In his exploration of the history of Christian spirituality, Holt offers an exposition on spirituality that I agree with overall even though I take issue with some of his claims as I understand them.

¹⁸ Aniol, *Practice Makes Perfect – Corporate Worship and the Formation of Spiritual Virtue*, 94.

¹⁹ Minette Drumwright, *The Role of Prayer in the Witnessing, Giving Life*, 4.

Let us begin by considering what, in disagreement with Holt, I dare posit spirituality is not. According to Holt, “spirituality actually refers to three distinct realities: a capacity, a style, and an academic discipline.”²⁰ I agree that corporate spirituality necessarily takes a specific form so that it requires an accompanying adjective to properly identify and differentiate it from other varying and differing forms (*style*). However, I disagree with the author’s position that spirituality can in fact refer to an academic discipline. We may perhaps coin a phrase or field such as *Spiritual Studies*, but we can hardly justify equating an academic discipline to the very nature of our being. I likewise, disagree with what appears to be the notion that spirituality is a capacity, if implicit in that statement is a suggestion that spirituality would ever be dormant or absent altogether. Perhaps Holt would offer nuance on his statement given the opportunity; perhaps not. But he could not very well deny that to be human is necessarily to be spiritual.

Definition of Christian Spirituality

If in fact as every Christian ought, we believe that we are created in the image of God who is Spirit, then it stands to reason that we are *ipso facto* spiritual beings. Unfortunately, this essay cannot hope to address the full intricacies of the *Imago Dei* because that would require an essay of its own, but also because there is no scholarly consensus on what exactly *Imago Dei* means. Peter Kline states that in his examination of Claus Westermann’s commentary on Genesis 1:27, he finds that Westermann has identified no less than nine different scholarly interpretations of the *Imago Dei*. However, Kline then goes on to offer an additional perspective, one developed by Soren Kierkegaard, which is helpful here. According to Kline, Kierkegaard basically argues that “because God is essentially invisible... ‘the image of God in the human being . . . eludes

²⁰ Bradley Holt. *Thirsty for God: A Brief History of Christian Spirituality*, 6.

representation in anything external, even language.”²¹ Therefore this essay stipulates, broadly, that the image and likeness in which humanity was created is the spirit nature of God because while function and capacities can be represented using language, at least, God’s nature cannot. If therefore, humans are spirit just as much as we are flesh, it follows that spirituality is not a capacity that we have, but rather the very nature of the being that we have in God, the IS.

Therefore, from a Christian perspective, one might argue that spirituality can best be understood as living aware of the limitations of the flesh and endeavoring to transcend them. Let us consider a couple of Biblical texts that bear this out. In the first case, Paul, addressing the church at Galatia and reproving Peter, states that right relationship with God is not dependent on rules and regulations, or what some might call best practices, such as circumcision and abstaining from eating unclean food. Instead, he insists that whoever wishes to be a follower of Jesus, and thus a child of God, ought to reach a point of transcendence so that “it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God” (Galatians 2:20). The word here rendered “flesh” is the Greek σάρξ (sarks), which in Paul’s time was used to refer both to the actual “material that covers the bones” as well as just the physical body itself. But the term also carried a more existential meaning, of which Paul would certainly have been aware. Sarks was understood to also mean “human nature.”²² Thus, by saying that the life he lives in the flesh it is Christ who lives it in him, Paul is suggesting that Christ is πνεῦμα/pneuma – i.e. Spirit – since Christ would need to be a “transcendent...and independent noncorporeal being” functioning in the capacity of “God’s being as a controlling

²¹ Peter Kline, *Imaging Nothing – Kierkegaard and the Imago Dei*, 698-699.

²² William Danker, Ed., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature*, 914-916.

influence” in order to occupy the same physical space that Paul’s flesh occupies.²³ Therefore, Paul is pointing to an ideal Christian reality where the spiritual nature has primacy over human nature – i.e. the flesh.

But, Paul was not alone. In fact, before he ever gave his perspective on the matter, Jesus had already made it abundantly clear that right relationship with God is not dependent upon one’s proximity to sacred mountains or presence in Jerusalem because “God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth” (John 4:24). This is where I agree with Holt’s observation that

One of the basic premises of any spirituality is that our non-physical selves also thirst [and hunger]. We may not know what we need, and we may try to satisfy our needs with possessions, foods, or relationships that do not satisfy and which may bring dangerous side effects, but Christian spirituality identifies what we really long for as the living water of God...This water is not merely moving liquid...but is the Spirit of the living God.²⁴

Thus, Christian spirituality can more specifically be understood as living aware that we are meant to connect and exist on a level beyond just the sensory. It takes for granted that “there is a Source of all things who is at the same time indescribable by human language and revealed by the cosmos and by historical events and persons...[and that] the Bible is the key record of those revelations.”²⁵

INDIVIDUAL CHRISTIAN DISCIPLESHIP/SPIRITUAL MATURITY

So what revelations about God are recorded in the Bible and how might individual Christians go about putting them into practice? Let us now turn to the case of the Pentecost narrative. Acts 2 is widely accepted in the ecclesial milieu as the birth moment of the Church.

²³ Danker, Ed., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature*, 598-601; 832-836.

²⁴ Holt, *Thirsty for God*, 5-6.

²⁵ Holt, 13.

However, I posit that the moment is not solely whence upon the Church was born, but also the instance in which the Church became multicultural. Upon having been imbued with the power of the Holy Spirit, the small congregation, which had been gathered in Prayer, began to preach the Word of God so that it was audible and comprehensible in various languages and thus attracted a diverse group of listeners from places and regions. (Acts 2:9-11)

As the sequel to the gospel of Luke, the book of acts opens with the ascension of Jesus, which compels the reader to at least review the ending of the gospel account. In so doing, the reader is reminded that before Jesus ascended to heaven, he commanded his disciples to “stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high” (Luke 24:49). The gospel account concludes by stating that the disciples heeded the admonition from Jesus and returned to Jerusalem and spent most of their time in worship in the Temple. As the book of acts opens however, the reader discovers that not only did the disciples dedicate much time to spiritual formation in the Temple where surely there was study of the scriptures, but they also continued to gather together outside of the Temple (presumably in each other’s homes) to pray and fellowship.

As can be deduced therefore, anchoring the first believers’, and every Christian individual’s spirituality thereafter, is their prayer life and their level of engagement with scripture. Scripture tells its reader that God seeks people to intercede like Abraham (Gen. 18:16-33) in order that God may save (Ez. 22:30, 2 Chr. 7:14); that Jesus told his listeners to “stay awake and pray” (Mat. 26:41); and that Paul advised praying without ceasing (1 Th. 5:16).

Scripture also speaks to its own centrality telling us that God, though speaking to Joshua, actually told all who wish to be in relationship with God to meditate on scripture day and night

(Jos. 1:8). We are then reminded that Jesus showed the importance of knowing the scripture in his showdown with the devil (Luke 4:1-13) and that Paul advised wielding the word of God as the sword of the Spirit that it is (Eph. 6:17b). Ultimately, we are told that those who will conquer in the end will do so by the word of this testimony (Rev. 12:11). So, each Christian believer must be committed to Prayer and Scripture, at minimum, just as Jesus' disciples were for these two are the pillars of Christian Discipleship. The only question now is: what then is Prayer and how precisely is one to engage scripture?

Prayer

Let us begin by defining and considering some basic elements of Prayer. Whatever else Prayer is and whatever format it takes, it is at its most basic defined as communication and communion with God.²⁶ In other words, “Prayer in Christian theology and experience is more than pleading or petition²⁷; it is our whole relation to God.”²⁸

Prayer as communion may more generally be referred to the *who* of prayer. To help me elaborate further, I turn to Rev. Dr. Etienne Veto. Veto would agree that, as communion, Prayer entails the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. We do not how pray, so we need the Holy Spirit to help us because the Holy Spirit is the principal “who” of prayer. According to Veto, when we are in communion with the Holy Spirit and therefore, pray in the spirit, the Spirit does primarily four

²⁶ Minette Drumwright, *The Role of Prayer in the Witnessing, Giving Life*, 4-6.

²⁷ See Drumwright, *The Role of Prayer in the Witnessing, Giving Life*, 4 for a more comprehensive articulation of what prayer is not.

²⁸ Holt, 26.

things: 1) Leads the person to pray, 2) Inspires about whom to pray to, 3) Inspires about what to pray for, and finally, 4) Inspires about how to pray.²⁹

As communication, prayer entails both human expression as well as divine revelation. As the popular dictum goes, communication is a two-way street. As such, on the one side of Prayer, there is the need for humans to make time to express themselves and address God – prayer – while on the other hand there is the response that must come from God. It should be noted that though speech is the most common and likely the easiest means for expressing oneself, it need not and indeed is not the only way. God understands speech, but God also understands sign language, art, silence/thoughts etc. Thus, Prayer as communication may generally be referred to as the *how* of prayer.

As previously stated however, human activity, even when Holy-Spirit inspired, is only one half of Prayer as communication. For Prayer to truly be communication there must likewise be Divine activity – i.e. revelation.³⁰ As I speak of response and revelation however, I must insist that the reader remember that “prayer is subtle and so hidden. You have to let go of the idea that it’s visible results that count.”³¹ God’s response and revelation will not always be palpable. That is why God’s response and revelation are understood by different people to be made manifest in varying ways as Drumwright points out.³² But, however people have come to personally know God to reveal, a congregation must catalogue all the many means of revelation espoused by its congregants and embrace them all provided that they do not offend either God or neighbor.

²⁹ Etienne Veto, “Praying in the Holy Spirit”: Spirituality and Pneumatology, 159-160.

³⁰ Revelation here in the context of Prayer refers to three things: 1) biblical discernment and interpretation, 2) God’s extrabiblical anticipatory address to humans, and 3) God’s direct response to petitions and supplications

³¹ Martha Grace Reese, *Unbinding the Gospel: Real Life Evangelism*, 47.

³² Drumwright, *The Role of Prayer in the Witnessing, Giving Life*, 6-7.

Biblical Engagement

Having just identified the Bible as one means by which God reveals, we must now examine how the Bible is also, more broadly, the second pillar of mature Christian spirituality. Together with Prayer, Biblical Literacy is a nonnegotiable component of Christian discipleship. Plainly, I am asserting that no individual (nor congregation) can claim to be a spiritually mature disciple, let alone disciple maker, without a consistent life of prayer and deep biblical engagement. By biblical engagement, I mean to speak of three important phases, the first two of which are compulsory with the third needing to be birthed as a result. Simply put, it is my opinion that biblical engagement consists of Immersion, Interpretation and Proclamation.

The first step to engaging with the Bible is through what I call biblical immersion. It is my conclusion that no matter what cultural or denominational background one comes from, all can agree that simply reading the Bible cursively and indeed, superficially, is not enough to grow in the faith. Certainly, anyone who identifies as Christian has a right to claim the identity. But, given the fact that Christianity is a faith whose principles and teachings are recorded in the Bible, maturity in the faith would logically require a deeper understanding of said principles and teachings. This understanding can only come through a deliberate reading for comprehension. In sum, I believe that one cannot truly be a Christian if one never engages the Bible. Yet, I am willing to concede, albeit begrudgingly, that one might however, gain basic superfluous knowledge of the Bible and indeed manage to be a decent enough Christian. However, I insist that one must fully immerse oneself in the bible if one is going to reach spiritual maturity and thus be considered a disciple of Jesus.

That being said, biblical immersion cannot happen in a vacuum. The reader will recall that I opened the section on biblical engagement by stating that the first two phases of biblical engagement - i.e. immersion and interpretation - go hand in hand and thus, they must happen simultaneously. It is rather irresponsible, and quite frankly I believe impossible, to fully immerse oneself in biblical studies and not in one manner or another interpret what one reads in it. Whether we are aware of it or not, all bible readers who read it for comprehension are biblical interpreters. To be sure, the interpretations will vary greatly from person to person. However, we must commit to the notion/virtue that Fowl calls *Interpretive Charity*,³³ which stipulates that one interpretation is not less valid or authoritative than another so long as the interpreter is not interpreting for everyone else.

Needless to say, biblical interpretation is an entire field of study and we can hardly hope to address all of its complexities here. Suffice it simply to stress that all of us automatically interpret the Bible as we read it. The spiritually mature Christian disciple however, is intentional about their interpretation in that they always read the Bible in light of their lived experience. If biblical interpretation is reading the Bible in light of one's lived experience and current reality, then applying the Bible's teachings, or theologizing as it is formally called, "is expressing one's present experience in terms of one's faith."³⁴ That living of one's life on the basis of one's faith as outlined in the Bible is what I am calling phase three/Biblical proclamation.

There is a tendency to assume and indeed presume that biblical proclamation is, at best, what the preacher does when they stand in the pulpit to expound on the word of God. At worst, biblical proclamation is understood as an annoyingly invasive and sometimes even

³³ Stephen Fowl, *Theological Interpretation of Scripture and its Future*, 680-682.

³⁴ Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, 18.

confrontational proselytization of non-Christians. For these and various other reasons, most Christians today are rather reticent of phase three. However, when we speak of biblical proclamation, we mean simply that having fully immersed oneself in the Bible and having undertaken the task of interpreting said bible in light of one's lived reality, one eventually and inevitably begins to live their life in community in light of biblical teachings.

We would do well to remember that Jesus does not call disciples those who shout in the streets, knock on people's doors, or corner strangers on public transportation to "talk" about the gospel. Instead, Jesus says that "by this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for another" (John 13:35). The biblical proclamation of which I speak is therefore not something that others only hear from us when we converse. Rather it is something that, born out of immersion and interpretation, others also and in fact, mostly, see in us.

It is only when at the very minimum, the Bible and Prayer so fully permeate a Christian person's life that we can begin to speak of spiritually mature discipleship. It should be noted that a truly mature disciple would not mind nor be defensive over discussion and debate on their interpretation and/or proclamation as they come into contact with others whose interpretation is different from their own. Indeed, "theological interpretation should be methodical, rigorous, and open to correction."³⁵

COMMUNAL CHRISTIAN DISCIPLESHIP/SPIRITUAL MATURITY

So far, the exposition on Prayer and scriptural engagement has been from the perspective of an individual believer. However, in addition to their personal commitment, Christians must likewise be committed to Prayer and studying the Holy Scriptures when they gather together.

³⁵ Fowl, *Theological Interpretation of Scripture and its Future*, 687-688.

While each individual Christian has the responsibility to journey towards spiritual maturity, the Christian faith has long understood that the journey cannot be undertaken alone, hence the existence of faith communities. Faith communities are tasked with supplementing individuals' spirituality by bringing them together in order that they may pray, praise, and proclaim together. Therefore, as the first disciples gathered together to pray and exhort one another, so must Christian individuals throughout time gather together to do the same. Prayer and the Bible ought to be at the center of a congregation's assembly. Not solely at the center of its gathering, however, but also at the center of all the interpersonal relationships of its people if that congregation is to going to grow spiritually and numerically, especially if that congregation is multicultural.

Indeed, where a multicultural congregation is concerned, a corporate spirituality must necessarily be developed that is an authentically honest hybrid amalgamation of the varying cultural expressions of Christian spirituality represented in said congregation. In other words, a multicultural congregation must undertake the difficult task of birthing a prayer-packed and Bible-based cross-cultural spirituality that authoritatively transcends cultural differences and openly transgresses cultural barriers. Such a monumental undertaking is doomed to fail unless it is done under the leadership of the Holy Spirit.³⁶

“In general, in the New Testament, doing something *en pneumatī* [in the Spirit] signifies being led or controlled by the Spirit. In other words, doing something in the Spirit actually means the Spirit is doing something in us.”³⁷ So, for example, when the Holy Spirit shows up in Acts 2 as we saw previously, she gives the disciples the ability to tell the story of God's grace in Jesus

³⁶ Stephanie Spellers, *Radical Welcome: Embracing God, the Other and the Spirit of Transformation*, 63-74.

³⁷ Veto, “Praying in the Holy Spirit,” 159.

(or in fact does the storytelling), in a way that all people can both hear it and receive it. For the crowd at Pentecost, as for any community that wishes to be a congregation together, there is a need to do things in the Spirit; and the way to do things in the Spirit is to begin by gathering together to pray. Only then can all peoples hear and heed the message; because only then can disciples learn to proclaim a message that can “(1) speak with integrity to the living text of each person... (2) be able to be understood in their ‘language,’ and (3) help build an emerging group story.”³⁸ Only then is the message powerful and relevant enough to get people’s attention and subsequently convince them to be community together. The words that the disciples spoke may not necessarily have been all that extraordinary in and of themselves, but the fact that everybody who heard them felt included was enough to bring about transformation.

So, while it is true that the disciples likely proclaimed no more than the wonders that they had seen Jesus do and the words they had heard Jesus speak,³⁹ the crowd only understood them and located themselves within the story because the disciples were available to the movement of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit, for her part, was only able and willing to be on the move among a people who would pray together and seek wisdom from the Holy Scriptures as Jesus had commanded. In fact, even though Jesus charges the disciples in Acts 1:8 to be his “witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and *to the ends of the earth*” (Italics mine), the reader would recall that Jesus also commanded them to wait for power from on high – i.e. the Holy Spirit. Hence, any congregation that wishes to grow, and indeed become multicultural, ought to make room for the Holy Spirit who enables the “multivocality”⁴⁰ necessary for community building. Congregational community building, for its part, happens through corporate worship and well-

³⁸ Jacqueline J. Lewis, *The Power of Stories: A Guide for Leading Multi-Racial and Multi-Cultural Congregations*, 70.

³⁹ Paul asks this of his disciples (Phil. 4:9), so it’s safe to assume that Jesus did as well

⁴⁰ Lewis, *The Power of Stories*, 70-73.

specified relational practices. Indeed, according to Scott Aniol, “how a church worships [and relates] week in and week out forms the people—it molds their behavior by shaping their inclinations through habitual practices.”⁴¹ So, let us flesh this out and examine in a little more detail how corporate worship and relational practices work together to make disciples.

Corporate Worship

J.J. von Allmen is absolutely correct in diagnosing the ailment of the Church today as being the fact that we are afraid to let the Spirit be free and in charge. But, if we are going to facilitate a meaningful and transformative worship experience for the gathered, then “we must remember that worship is the automatic outcome of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon the Church”⁴² and not something that we plan and execute on our own. Thus, part of the task of the leadership of a multicultural congregation is to recognize that most congregants are not naturally endowed with the ability to commune with varying cultural representations and therefore need help from the Holy Spirit. The way to make room for the Holy Spirit, Luke suggests, is through prayer and meditating on the word of God both individually and more importantly, together – i.e. in the context of corporate worship (Acts 1:13-16).

So, part of the work that I have done over the course of our brief existence has been to be heavily involved in every aspect of worship design and implementation and to observe how individual congregants engage. This is because I strongly believe that “how people worship both reveals their beliefs and values and forms their beliefs and values.”⁴³ So, over the course of our existence, through observation and conversation, the congregation has come to the realization

⁴¹ Aniol, *Practice Makes Perfect*, 101.

⁴² J.J. von Allmen, *Worship and the Holy Spirit*, 124.

⁴³ Aniol, 103.

that although we may not understand, let alone, practice our Christian faith in the same ways, we all agree that prayer and meditating on the word of God are the two pillars of Christian faith. In light of this discernment, we have resolved to be more intentional about ensuring that they are also the core of our worship experiences. To accomplish this, we have made changes and accommodations, which have resulted in a blueprint for worship experiences that fit neither one culture nor another, but instead both embrace and blend aspects of the various cultures and more importantly, are focused on God.

The Way STL is hardly alone in discerning the importance for a multicultural congregation to focus on communicating and communing with God through Prayer and Biblical engagement above all else.⁴⁴ In fact such revelation is not even localized to multicultural congregations. Indeed, the universality of this Christian truth is such that through prayerful observation, Glenn McDonald likewise discerned that discipleship - i.e. spiritual maturity - requires that one have “a heart for Christ alone,” which both precedes and is the direct result of having “knees for prayer” and “a mind transformed by the Word.”⁴⁵ If this is true of individual spirituality, then I posit that it must likewise be true of congregational spirituality.

So, what has been the role of corporate worship in building our hybrid/cross-cultural spirituality that can make disciples of Jesus Christ? We believe that corporate worship serves to teach minds, touch hearts and transform lives. This is so because when “the Holy Spirit induces worship...it transplants people into the eschatological world”⁴⁶ even as they are gathered

⁴⁴ See Jacqueline Lewis’ “The Power of Stories,” Eunjoo Mary Kim’s “Christian Preaching and Worship in Multicultural Contexts,” and chapter 6 in “Questions Preachers Ask” edited by Johnston, Smith and Tisdale for a some examples

⁴⁵ Glenn McDonald, *The Disciple Making Church: From Dry Bones to Spiritual Vitality*.

⁴⁶ Von Allmen, *Worship and the Holy Spirit*, 125.

together in the “hear and now.”⁴⁷ Therefore, in our multicultural context, worship experiences are intentionally designed to lift up God as the sole focus but also to honor the different ways in which our neighbor experiences that same presence and power of the God. For this reason, it has been the experience of The Way STL that classical western liturgy (*Ordo*)⁴⁸ alone is not authentic or transformative enough.

Hence, instead of liturgical movements that open with the Gathering, followed by Proclamation and then Response before concluding with the Sending, the congregation has adopted the model of “Pillars of Worship” – i.e. Prayer-Praise-Proclamation, in no particular order. Such a worship “liturgy” requires a couple of concessions: the first being a strong pneumatology and the second being a shift in role from leading worship to facilitating worship – i.e. inviting, encouraging, and giving congregants permission to praise-proclaim-pray the way they know best even if and when that looks different from the person next to them. Such a worship experience is meaningful because it is culturally sensitive and it is transformative because it has God as its Alpha and Omega, but also as its central focus.⁴⁹

For the reader who is only now encountering the term or concept of pneumatology for the first time, it is simply the field of theology that concerns itself with the Holy Spirit. In Koine Greek, the language of the New Testament, the word for spirit is *pneuma* which is sometimes written in its long form as *pneumatos*. *Logos*, as the average reader might already know, means “word.” When used as a suffix it is translated as “words about” or “the study of.” So, *pneumatos*

⁴⁷ See Von Allmen, 125-127 for full argument on worship as Holy Spirit-induced eschatological play.

⁴⁸ See Ruth Duck. *Worship for the People of God*, 67-74 for full definition.

⁴⁹ Richard Clark, *Does Your Church Need a Multicultural Makeover?*, 70.

plus *logos* gives us *pneumatology* in English, which translates to “words about the spirit” or “the study of the spirit.”⁵⁰

Back now to the shift away from the assumption that worship liturgy has four movements. It has been our experience that while this blueprint worked some of the time when we first began worshipping together as a congregation, it didn't work all the time. So, we stripped our worship design down to one movement, namely Proclamation, and decided to build around it. The question then became: what else needs to happen in a worship service in order for people who don't necessarily experience God the same way to come out feeling that they each heard God speak to them in their own language? How do we make sure that every time we gather for worship, we experience the miracle of Pentecost?

Once we posed these questions, it became apparent that the answer was in the vision we had in choosing the name of our ministry in the first place. The people who gathered to hear Peter's proclamation, gathered to hear a man speak who had just emerged from a time of praying and praising God that was so intense that everyone present was touched and transformed. That day, the people gathered to hear a man who was a leader of a movement whose adherents were called people of The Way. It was on this basis that we decided to give as the foundation of our corporate worship the following three statements: 1) We gather together to praise God; 2) We gather together to pray to God; and 3) We gather together to proclaim God's word. Once we arrived at this conclusion, we then had to learn from each congregant how they pray, praise and proclaim (yes, proclamation is more than the sermon alone).

⁵⁰ Danker, Ed., 598-601; 832-837.

One thing became abundantly clear from hearing from everyone about how they engage and experience the three “Ps” of worship: we could not possibly hope to design one specific worship service that would cater to everyone every time. The only solution would be to settle on commonalities and highlight cultural particularities every so often, when it is warranted that we do so, because some of these particularities are so different and sometimes even contrary to what another cultural perspective dictates that they must be properly introduced lest someone be confused or even take offense. Thus, as might be expected, the flow of our corporate worship is heavily reliant on the movement of the Holy Spirit to reveal what is essential and what can be sacrificed. While we plan worship experiences and design them so that all of us will pray earnestly, praise faithfully and proclaim as well as receive proclamation joyfully, we also plan for the Holy Spirit to interrupt us at any point and change the flow of proceedings because “worship, through the presence and the action of the Holy Spirit, is a meeting between sacrament and sacrifice, between God’s gift and the Church’s answer, ...between the promise and the expectation, or - more correctly... - between Jesus Christ and his people.”⁵¹ In other words, worship, when it is led by the Holy Spirit, is an event that requires liturgical flexibility in order to accommodate both the Christ’s action as well as his people’s responses(s).

Needless to say, putting this ideal of worship into practice is easier said than done. If, for example, the worship moderator is not able to test and discern spirits (1 John 4:1, 1 Cor. 12:10), the whole affair could very quickly become chaotic as worshipful expressions, even when they are authentic, become disruptive. If the musicians are not familiar with a wide breadth of music and able to play by ear for example, then again the whole affair could very well become rather awkward when someone improvises sung praise and no one else in the congregation can join them. It is for this reason that praying for worship services, both before and during worship, is so

⁵¹ Von Allmen, 130.

paramount. And it is not too much to state once more that “only in and through the active operation of the Spirit is prayer actually possible.”⁵² In sum, it bears repeating that a multicultural congregation such as The Way or that which gathered on the day of Pentecost can only grow spiritually and make disciples in the context of corporate worship if it has a strong Pneumatology.

Relational Practices

However, corporate worship cannot be the only means by which discipleship is cultivated if it is true that being Christian is not limited to the sanctuary or the sanctified hour of worship. There must also be accompanying relational practices within and without the congregation such as covenant/care groups, Bible study groups, mission teams, outreach and volunteer opportunities, etc. that supplement the discipling work of corporate worship. At The Way, this takes the form of a weekly Bible study, once weekly prayer gatherings and once monthly praise and prayer meetings. Additionally, we helped birth and our people lead one organization that serves the homeless population and another that serves the immigrant population of the greater St. Louis metropolitan area.

There is one more intra-congregational relational practice, one born out of the realities of the Covid-19 global pandemic that we are in the process of establishing. This practice will be more intentional about bringing together people from different cultures to at least talk about prayer and the Bible. For context, before the advent of the pandemic, we had already instituted the practice of live-streaming our sermons while also maintaining a weekly vlog. The transition to virtual worship was rather seamless for us in that regard. However, soon it became apparent

⁵² Veto, 157.

that there simply is no substitute for human contact. So, enough of us came together to form a bubble, which allowed us to maintain contact and more importantly, conduct in person bible studies and lead online worship together.

In so doing, such strong relationships have been built between people who were not so well acquainted at first that we wish to build on them. One particular friendship between two women from different cultures and generations has inspired us to work towards making this the norm. This new ministerial practice, which we hope will be fully in effect by October of 2022, is to be called Companion on The Way (Companion for short).⁵³ Companion is to be our version of covenant/care partnerships (it may grow into groups as our congregation grows in number). It is to be a spiritual discipline practiced at minimum cross-culturally. Its purpose will be to pair two (2) individuals from differing cultural backgrounds who will check in with each other weekly. To help facilitate the conversation, we are suggesting four questions that companions should ask one of another:

- 1) What was difficult for you this week?
- 2) What made you happy this week?
- 3) What did you say to God this week? (prayer)
- 4) What did God say to you this week? (Prayer & Scripture)

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

In sum, a multicultural congregation can survive and will indeed thrive provided it is intentional about birthing, under the auspices of the Holy Spirit, a hybrid spirituality that through

⁵³ The second of weekend in October is the start of our ministerial calendar by virtue of the fact it marks the anniversary of the official launch of the ministry.

prayer and biblical engagement in the contexts of corporate worship and other relational practices, produces an environment conducive to making disciples for Jesus Christ.

Understanding cultural differences as well as shared similarities is the only means by which a multicultural congregation may pray together and study the word of God together. It is also the only means by which a multicultural congregation may design a meaningful and transformative worship experience for all involved and build life-giving relationships. By definition, a meaningful and transformative worship experience is one where, as eloquently put by Anscar Chupungco,

1. Worshippers direct their attention toward God (Prayer)
2. The story of God's ongoing relationship with humanity infuses the moment (Bible)
3. Scripture images and narratives are central and correlated with the experiences and needs of worshippers (Bible)
4. Active participation is encouraged (Prayer)⁵⁴

Thus, in a multicultural context, a worthy hybrid spirituality must allow for a full experience of God as well as a full expression of self. Understanding cultural differences and similarities is likewise the only means by which we might foster a climate of loving and compassionate support for one another in such a context. To achieve this, we must be intentional about a dialogical existence that explicitly acknowledges the cultural diversity of the congregation through initiatives such as Companion.

⁵⁴ Ruth Duck, *Worship for the People of God*, 36-67.

Putting our observations in conversation with the universally acceptable Christian means of being in relationship with God - i.e Prayer and Biblical immersion and Interpretation, we have concluded that there is no possibility for growth in a congregation of any kind where spirituality is either stagnant or dormant. As previously stated, this essay supposes that generally speaking, “spirituality is... a conception of what human life is and ought to be and is controlled and shaped by a... set of leading concepts.”⁵⁵ Further, it supposes specifically that Christian spirituality is “a set of character traits which blossom when somebody appropriates the picture of self and world embodied in the story of God's actions towards humankind in Jesus of Nazareth. These traits are referred to in the New Testament as ‘fruit.’ They are traits such as hope, joy, peace, gratitude, compassion, generosity, gentleness, kindness, confidence, self-control, patience, and perseverance.”⁵⁶ Therefore, this essay has endeavored to show that at its core, the basic definition of Christian spirituality is the same across cultures, even if the manifestations of it might indeed differ. It is my hope and prayer that this essay would offer insight into the truth that while there can be correlation between various factors and congregational spirituality and therefore growth, it is ultimately the centrality of Holy Spirit-inspired discipleship which is the primary determinant of a congregation’s health and its capacity for multiculturalism.

In fact, membership and attendance are not necessarily good indicators of a congregation’s health. Instead, a congregation’s health is better measured in the spiritual growth of its congregants. In the words of Glenn McDonald, a congregation’s health is measured not by the length and depth of its membership roll, not by the architectural marvel and the aesthetics of its building, nor either by how much cash it has. But instead a congregation’s health is measured

⁵⁵ Robert Roberts, *What is Spirituality?*, 14.

⁵⁶ Roberts, *What is Spirituality?*, 14-16.

by its ability to make disciples of Jesus and thus go “From Dry Bones to Spiritual Vitality.”⁵⁷

The question every leader of a multicultural congregation ought to wrestle with is to know: Is the people’s thirst for the “living water of God” being satisfied?

This essay is a reflection from a multicultural congregation offered in hopes that it may be helpful to other multicultural congregations as well as ones aspiring to multiculturalism. If in fact, you are a “monocultural” congregation, though in truth there really is no such thing, but if you are perhaps a mono-ethnic congregation looking to welcome diversity, May I suggest first that you consider Ruth Duck’s advice on what it takes to learn about those whom you wish to welcome, embrace what is dear to them, and genuinely love them.⁵⁸ If after this, the desire for multiculturalism remains, then may I suggest further Terry York’s article in the journal: *Family and Community Ministries*⁵⁹ for a well-rounded introduction to the conversation. For those congregations like The Way however, which are already culturally diverse, let us remember that living into that congregational diversity, all comes down to Prayer and Biblical engagement first and foremost because “the only way to do ministry successfully, to lead a church or to live a life in today’s [world] is to pray [and know scripture] deeply.”⁶⁰

The raison d’être for this project was a curiosity which sought to know: How might a multicultural congregation birth and live a hybrid spirituality which transcends cultural differences to make disciples of Jesus Christ? It is the conclusion of this essay that spiritual maturity, as defined above, is the standard for measuring Christian discipleship irrespective of cultural differences. Standing on the foundational pillars of Prayer and the Bible, a multicultural

⁵⁷ McDonald, *The Disciple Making Church*.

⁵⁸ Duck, 51-55.

⁵⁹ Terry York, *Multicultural Congregations and Worship: A Literature review*.

⁶⁰ Reese, *Unbinding the Gospel*, 42.

congregation can, with the help of the Holy Spirit, build an authentic hybrid communal spirituality by intentionally fostering and nurturing cross-cultural relationships and by designing and moderating worship experiences that both comfort and challenge.

As for us at The Way STL, we will know that Companion is functioning well as a facilitator of hybrid spirituality if when we conduct our annual ministry evaluation, we receive testimony that companions know each other more deeply, appreciate each other's culturally traditioned spiritualities, and can charitably articulate at least one practice that they learned from their companion which is not a part of their own spirituality. The ultimate goal is for whatever relational practices we adopt to lead to the formation of small multicultural house churches. We have a pilot program in the Pastor's home. But, we will consider that we are on the correct path when the first house church begins to meet absent the pastor.

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