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**Hospitality in a Culture of Othering:  
A Critical Exploration of Multigenerational Community-Building Dialogues  
in Crumly's Chapel**

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Doctor of Ministry

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## **Abstract**

### **Hospitality in a Culture of Othering: A Critical Exploration of Multigenerational Community-Building Dialogues in Crumly's Chapel**

By John Baldwin II

This study outlines a model for bridging generational gaps and confronting racial tensions in the Crumly's Chapel Community. Through creating space to engage social justice related scriptures in multi-generational and interracial contexts, this model serves as a beta-test for a more inclusive church. To place this visionary model in context, I first examine the culture of othering at the Crumly Chapel United Methodist Church (CCUMC). Then, I offer the project design with careful attention to the sample setting, methodology and module descriptions. The project invited youth and young adults into an open dialogue bible study space to explore scripture affirming marginalized persons and cross-cultural dialogue as a strategy for the Crumly Chapel UMC to strengthen community relationships.

**Hospitality in a Culture of Othering:  
A Critical Exploration of Multigenerational Community-Building Dialogues  
in Crumly's Chapel**

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**Hospitality in a Culture of Othering:  
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**I. Introduction: Church History and Demographics**

“Why don't you all engage the surrounding community?” This question looms like dark clouds and casts shadows over the holy hills in my northwest Birmingham community. Unfortunately, an all too common response from parishioners at Crumly Chapel United Methodist Church is, “We invite them to service, but they just won't come.” They, like others attending declining United Methodist churches in the area, are disappointed over not reaching an annual goal of increasing Sunday attendance. As pastor of this congregation, I feel the great disappointment of this unaccomplished goal. I also sense congregants' fears that if attendance continues to decline our faith community may face closure like the five other United Methodist churches in our geographical area that have closed over last the fifteen years. This fear and looming hopelessness intensifies as members struggle to face daunting questions of how to welcome persons from the community into the church.

While the attendance dilemma is common for many United Methodist churches in the Birmingham metropolitan area, it is new for the Crumly Chapel United Methodist Church (CCUMC). CCUMC was once the very center of this community. In fact, when the first four Caucasian families from Habersham, Georgia, established their small farming community in northwest Birmingham, they named the community Crumly's Chapel. The families built a small wooden church to establish that structure as their central gathering space in the community.

The church soon grew into a multi-functional facility for all community meetings and celebrations. History also notes that this location served as the first schoolhouse.

In October 1858, a fire destroyed that small wooden multi-functioning church space and claimed the life of a four-year-old boy. Though fire consumed the original building, the communal spirit of Crumly's Chapel remained strong. A local family donated a portion of their farm to establish the community's first cemetery, and friends and families pulled together to build their new church on that land in 1859. In years to come, this community continued to grow and strengthen in unity.<sup>1</sup>

Shortly after the Civil War, Birmingham's steel industry began to boom. The city saw exponential growth as mining companies attracted employees from all over the United States. Companies like the U.S. Steele Corporation and Drummond Company developed major mining camps in northwest Birmingham, and brought new families to the small rural farming communities. Their work radically impacted the lifestyles of those who called the area home. In the late 1800s, while performing an underground mining blast, a dynamite explosion ruptured the creek bed that furnished water to local farmers in Crumly's Chapel. The effects of the blast on the water source created unexpected strain on the agricultural industry and forced some community members to seek alternative means for economic stability.

In the wake of the explosion, several of the original Crumly Chapel United Methodist Church families started businesses including, but not limited to, the community's first restaurants, flower shops, hardware shops and grocery stores. As a result, all major businesses in Crumly's Chapel were owned and operated by persons who lived in the community and were endeared to their sacred place of worship, the Crumly Chapel Methodist Church. The church

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<sup>1</sup> Ida Varnon, *Transformation of a Wilderness* (Birmingham: DeArman Printing Service, 1952), 13-14.

became an exclusive place of belonging. Members enjoyed their close community and were committed to protecting its ideals. This changed over time. New generations developed fresh interests, most of the original shops closed and many of the descendants of those first four families moved out of the community. Despite their relocation, many continued to make their way home on Sunday mornings for worship.

Astoundingly, this trend of traveling home for worship continued for nearly 130 years. However, in the 1980s, the church began to see a major decline in membership and giving as families moved farther and farther away. Times changed. The church that once averaged 300 Sunday worshipers in 1980, recorded an average weekly attendance of sixty-five by 2019. The youth department that once boasted more than eighty youth participating in a thriving drama ministry and vacation bible school programming, struggled in 2019 to maintain ten members. The decreasing number of youth is amplified by the fact CCUMC has held only one confirmation class in the past twelve years. Numbers continue to dwindle as this once thriving congregation recently suspended auxiliary ministries and is now primarily populated by retired seniors on fixed incomes who revel in nostalgia. Therefore, the question must be addressed: “Why don’t you all engage the surrounding community?”

This study outlines a model for bridging generational gaps and confronting racial tensions in the Crumly’s Chapel Community. Through creating space to engage social justice related scriptures in multi-generational and interracial contexts, this model serves as a beta-test for a more inclusive church. To place this visionary model in context, I first examine the culture of othering at CCUMC. Then, I offer the project design with careful attention to the sample setting, methodology and module descriptions.

## II. Assessing the Problem: A Culture of Othering

### A. A Resistance to Change

With threats of losing more congregants and having to shut its doors looming overhead, the church continues fighting to bring in new members by connecting with the surrounding community. CCUMC's need to engage the community is shifting the church into new spaces. Cultural norms are being challenged and deemed insufficient for relevant ministry. This church that has never had to ask for help is now forced to develop partnerships. Those members who were once content to worship in this exclusive family church are now required to seek members beyond familial bloodlines. Further, persons whose exclusive privilege was once dangled as the community's carrot are now learning that more than an invitation to worship is needed to make a church hospitable.

Compounding the church's attendance challenges is the reality that CCUMC has not evolved demographically as its surrounding community has transitioned. Over decades, descendants of those first four families moved out of the community. As time progressed, new families moved in—families who do not share the same history, stories of growing up in the area or endearment to CCUMC. Demographics show that this farming community that was once 100% white is now more than 68% Black/African-American, 29% White and 3% Hispanic, Asian or other. Of those living within a three-mile radius of the church, 69% work white collar jobs, 30% work blue collar jobs and less than 0.5% work in agriculture. The total population of Crumly's Chapel has been slowly declining over the last ten years. It has decreased by 4% within the last nine years and 13% over the past twenty years.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> "Demographics Report," Accessed, October 28, 2019, <https://peopleview.missioninsite.com/app/#/map/42111/reporting-demographics>



Family structures in the community have also changed. The percentage of married couple households is decreasing while the percentage of single parent households is increasing. Both single parent and married households with children below the age of eighteen have decreased over the last nine years. Married couple households with children under the age of eighteen have decreased by 23% and are projected to decrease an additional 4% over the next five years.<sup>3</sup>

### **B. Racial Tensions**

External racial tensions exacerbate CCUMC's dilemma. In Spring 2018, a very popular majority white congregation released plans to launch a ministry campus in a majority black community near Crumly's Chapel. Several black pastors in the area complained about the potential new church and the possibility of having more black people attending churches with white leaders. One pastor placed a message on his church marquee that read, "Black folks need to stay out of white churches." The church plant was met with great resistance. The community's response revealed a habitus of resistance developed from a hermeneutic of suspicion often embodied by marginalized minority groups in the South. This is a common racial tension that continues to divide the body of Christ in the American context. In *The Post Black and Post White Church*, Efrem Smith writes,

The homogeneous church is not without tension, but there is a greater sense of cultural comfort than there is in the post-Black post-White church... Sometimes leaders within the Black church are more resistant to this kind of multi-ethnic and biblical discussion. As the world is becoming more and more multi-ethnic and multicultural, a significant portion of the Black church seems stuck in survival mode instead of being the innovative force behind a multi-ethnic and missional church. This may be because race is still a large factor in our society. Many argue that the Black church is still

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<sup>3</sup> "Demographics Report," Accessed, October 28, 2019, <https://peopleview.missioninsite.com/app/#/map/42111/reporting-demographics>

needed – not because the White church is not welcoming to other ethnicities but because of a power dynamic that promotes assimilation.<sup>4</sup> Many Black churches and members within the Black community harbor distrust for institutions and practices that reflect the dominant culture. The Black community's collective memory has not relinquished the pain associated with oppressive practices designed to strip away the culture and humanity of minority groups.

The response of local pastors and community members to the new church plant intensified preexisting racial tensions in the community. Unfortunately, the hermeneutics of suspicion toward newcomers lessened compassion toward persons of difference. This lack of compassion supported the propagation of prejudice and preference. The end result is a community gripped by systemic othering. Social circles like families, churches and community groups play critical roles in the establishment of a community's habitual suspicion and fear of "otherness." These divisive practices are reinforced when influential figures, like pastors, openly affirm the divisions.

### **C. Multi-Generational Trauma**

The average age of persons living in the community has steadily increased. This presents additional challenges for historic institutions seeking to connect with aging community members. Erik Erikson's life cycle theory offers insight on how to understand the implications of aging on a community. Erikson asserts that as individuals age, they face a tension described as "integrity vs. despair." In this stage, the individual becomes more settled in their identity and affiliations and concretizes their sense of identification with and participation in humanity. According to Erikson's developmental theory, the older a person becomes the less likely they are to make

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<sup>4</sup> Efram Smith, *The Post-Black and Post-White Church: Becoming the Beloved Community in a Multi-Ethnic World* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2012), 67-68.

significant overarching commitments to changing the way they socially posit themselves in relation to other persons, organizations or institutions in the community.<sup>5</sup>

In light of the despair that Erikson suggests may come with aging, several senior black community members carry painful childhood memories of riding their bikes and being run off the road by white people in Crumly's Chapel. These elders also share heart-wrenching stories of having bricks and stones thrown at them if they left their predominantly black mining communities and walked anywhere near the more privileged Crumly's Chapel. While these stories are shared by community members surrounding Crumly's Chapel, they are still ignored by those who live inside. Despite this generational trauma, there has been little acknowledgement of the pain carried by disenfranchised community members. Without acknowledging the source of this pain, personhood fails to be affirmed and healing is thwarted.

Tensions are also evident in CCUMC programming. During a CCUMC gathering, members were asked to share their sentiments on the church's programs. Youth members and young adult leaders spoke of their disdain for the local youth who attended the open gym sessions on Wednesdays, but refused to attend worship on Sundays or participate in youth bible study. During the conversation, one youth member referred to a few of the local youth as "hoodlums" and scoffed at their unwillingness to sit quietly for mid-basketball game bible study lessons. I thought to myself, "Who would want to pause a basketball game for bible study?"

#### **D. Beyond a Culture of Othering**

Congregants' negative references and the sentiments shared by the local pastors evidence a culture of othering. This culture of othering is deeply entrenched in the community's ethos and shows up among majority and minority populations. This culture diabolically opposes Jesus'

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<sup>5</sup> Donald Capps, "Life Cycle and Pastoral Care," in *Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counseling*, ed. Rodney Hunter (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005), 248-249.

gospel message to love your neighbor and creates tensions that foster hate, instill fear and propagate distrust. In light of this culture, one must question, “Who is our neighbor and how do we learn to love our neighbors?” More importantly this culture of othering warrants the question, “How can the Christian community claim to love a God whom it has never seen, but hate a neighbor who is physically present daily?” The truth of the matter is that many have never learned to see their neighbors.

Seeing is more than a recognition of physical presence. Seeing acknowledges interconnectedness. The imperative of seeing gives life by fostering a recognition that my healthiest existence is only achieved when others are afforded opportunity to be their whole selves.

*How might CCUMC learn to see beyond otherness? How can aging CCUMC members develop connections when racial tensions and voluntary blindness divide and counteract trusting relationships? How can this predominately white congregation in a minority community create connections in light of a painful history?*

In light of these difficult questions, there is one place where CCUMC successfully attracts local citizens: Wednesday Night Faith and Fellowship (WNFF). This dynamic ministry draws local millennials, a group making up 30% of those living within the three-mile radius of the church, to gather for a time of recreational activity and bible study in CCUMC’s Family Life Center. The program averages thirty-five to fifty persons weekly, giving participants safe space to release energy, enjoy a hot meal and learn valuable life lessons. This ministry is creating bridges, but has not eradicated tensions or pejorative perceptions of “others” in the community.

On Wednesday nights, impressionable members of the community are invited to participate in activities that establish relationships with “the other”; intentional didactic

conversations are facilitated to discuss communal similarities and differences; and participants are invited to critically engage social justice texts. The discussion is grounded on several pillars. The first two are critical examination of the Bible and inclusive-justice oriented readings of scripture. The third hinges on case studies from persons of difference who revealed insight into their personal struggles and celebrations. This study reveals a model for bridging social gaps by increasing diversity sensitivity among young millennials in the Crumly's Chapel community through strategic engagement of social justice teachings. This study was designed to help the development of strategic methodologies for building an inclusive church in Crumly's Chapel's ethnically diverse community.

### **III. Project Design**

#### **A. Sample and Setting**

To begin conversations in Crumly's Chapel about fostering cross-cultural relationships, I extended an open invitation to local high school seniors and young adults (ages 17-25) living within three miles of CCUMC. Modules averaged approximately forty-three participants each week. Eleven participants were senior adult members of CCUMC. There were two African – American middle-aged adults, one twelve-year-old female and approximately twenty-five to thirty youth and young adults. Of the youth and young adult participants, there was one African-American female each week, two Caucasian males (17 and 18) and the remaining participants were African-American males ranging in ages from seventeen to twenty-five. All participants were invited to enjoy the WNFF recreational space and participate in a six-module discussion study. In addition to the study, participants were also encouraged to partake in a weekly meal before the discussion.

The Family Life Center was chosen as the location for the study because it provides recreational space and is strategically positioned in the center of the community. Although the Center is on the church's property, it is located across the street from the main church and educational buildings, making it more welcoming to those who are less churched or have experienced pain from CCUMC. Additionally, this location lacks much of the traditional church architecture and images prevalent in other buildings. The only traditional church image is the United Methodist cross and flame, on the exterior of the building. Images depicting Jesus or celestial beings as white or black were intentionally removed from display throughout the interior of the Center.

### **B. Process**

The program schedule included a time of recreational play that began at 5:30 pm. During this time, participants could enter the building, sign-in at the front desk and enjoy a host of activities. Some participants chose to play basketball or use the dance space while others played video games or watched videos.

At 6:15 PM, all persons (from children to seniors) in the building were asked to assemble in the meal serving space for a community dinner. Before the meal was served, a youth or young adult was invited lead prayer and ask God's blessing over the food and fellowship. Additional youth and young adults were asked to gather bibles from the storage area and place them on tables in the dining room. When all meals were served, the intergenerational group sat down together for the discussion and meal.

This process of hard community building conversation over meals was inspired by earlier research. In 2010, during my Masters of Theology degree, I devoted a year of study and experimentation on creating restorative initiatives for young minority males who were victims of

sexual exploitation. Early in that study, I focused on ways that these victims of sexual abuse might be restored to community; however, after conducting several interviews, I realized that the work of restoration would not and could never be achieved solely by restoring these young men to the communities that surrounded them. Instead, they needed to be restored to the community and the community (or its stalwart pillars) needed to be restored to them. This revelation came as I listened to several stories detailing how police departments, schools, retail establishments, community centers and (*of course*) churches had become institutions of degradation for these young men. These places represented hope for many others, but for young marginalized minority males, those same institutions had come to represent hate, ignorance, fear, and damnation. This was particularly true of the church and its representatives.

In light of the revelation that restoration must be communal, the 2019 study took on a unique direction after I learned that the majority of volunteer participants would be young black males taking part in a study at a predominately white church. Likewise, in the 2019 gathering at CCUMC, an initial survey revealed that 93% of the youth and young adults taking part in the study were highly uncomfortable having conversations about individual needs with people from differing ethnic groups. To this end, the discussions were designed to increase opportunity for youth and young adults to have hard conversations across cultural and community barriers. The module discussions were designed around three research questions:

1. Will Crumly's Chapel youth and young adults participating in intergenerational dialogue about social problems that divide their communities increase their willingness to proactively address these issues?

2. Can scriptural lessons affirming marginalized persons and supporting cross cultural initiatives inspire Crumly's Chapel youth and young adults to express compassion for disenfranchised communities?
3. Will youth and young adults in Crumly's Chapel increase their willingness to identify strategies to help others after studying God's story of divine redemption in scripture and hearing case studies of others who suffer in the world?

Scripture served two roles in the study. First, scripture was communicated as the central and primary revelation of God's love for creation. Secondly, scripture served as a moral compass for ideal character development and social engagement. As a moral compass for the study, scriptural texts were paired with real case studies from persons of diverse communities representing diverse social locations.

For six weeks the discussion and study followed a familiar pattern. After our communal meal, the study began with centering exercises where participants were invited to meditatively connect with themselves through breathing and sensory exploration. Next, participants began a process of thinking through their day, step-by-step, paying attention to the small but significant details. When this reflective portion was completed, the group listened to a case study of one person who either experienced hardship or celebrated a success that connected with the weekly theme. Study participants then read scripture highlighting hope for a marginal group or a cross-cultural encounter and discussed the three as a group.

Throughout each module, I listened for how language, offensive or inclusive, was used to identify persons in the "other" group. I gave specific attention to moments when the youth and young adults began to ask questions. These questions reflected their efforts to understand the circumstance or condition impacting the lives of others, and I recognized that asking questions



can be a sign of vulnerability for members of this particular study group. I also looked for moments when participants interjected personal testimony in efforts to compare or contrast personal experiences with that of either biblical characters or the subject of the case study.

These case studies revealed deep human emotion and convictions, giving study participants opportunities to compare and contrast their personal experiences with those of others. While this practice was included to encourage empathy, I was more interested in hearing if participants would use their experiences to recommend strategies for serving others. In reflections on case studies, participants referenced how social media outlets, local hangouts and social organizations served as support networks.

### **C. Six Modules**

#### **1. Prejudice and Misperceptions: Jesus and Zacchaeus**

The first module critically examined Luke 19:1-10, the story of Zacchaeus, through the lens of prejudice and misperception. The participants primarily discussed stereotypes attributed to Zacchaeus because of his social status and career as chief tax collector and Jesus' commitment to seeing and engaging stigmatized persons who are often misunderstood. To further contextualize Zacchaeus' story and amplify the themes of prejudice and misperception, participants analyzed a case study of a homeless man living on the streets of Birmingham, Alabama. The homeless man's story offered reflections on the daily mistreatment endured from living on city streets and misperceptions around education levels, career choices, and family that are projected on those without homes.

Reflections on Zacchaeus and the case study prompted participants to speak openly about their daily activities. Many were challenged to compare their routine actions with the potential

challenges of being homeless. Finally, they were encouraged to think through the many ways they had been misunderstood and misrepresented within the Crumly's Chapel community.

## 2. Crossing Cultural Barriers: Jesus Outside Samaria

The profound story of Jesus at the well outside of Samaria found in the fourth chapter of John's gospel, provides the framework for the second module. John's gospel highlights Jesus as a cosmic redeemer who is the embodiment of God's word. The book also identifies Jesus as the moral example and showcases the works and acts of Jesus as blueprints for social interaction.<sup>6</sup> Jesus' moral guidance and actions became the focal point of the participants' reflections on cross-cultural relationships.

Our conversation began by focusing on the fact that most people find comfort in socializing with individuals who like them, appreciate their values and share similar cultural heritage. However, in John 4, Jesus sets a different example for crossing boundaries of difference. In this passage, Jesus pushes beyond societal expectations and cultural differences to meet the fundamental needs of others. His social identity is not prioritized over human need—his own or the woman's. To this end, we discussed three relevant themes in this text: God is not a respecter of persons, Christians are challenged to respect and love all people, and Jesus sets a precedent for going into new spaces, encountering difference, and blessing those perceived as other.

This scriptural lesson was paired with the case study of a young girl who was displaced by war. In this case, the girl shares her deep grief about being forced to leave her friends, pets and toys behind when she was involuntarily moved to a "safer" location with her grandparents. The refugee girl speaks of her fears of being in a new space, her hopes of meeting new friends,

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<sup>6</sup> Carl Holladay, *A Critical Introduction to the New Testament*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005), 207.

and her excitement about learning new things. When considered alongside John 4, participants began to converse about God's intent for Christians to engage people of difference, the emotions associated with being forced into new spaces, and the potential for fresh identity and experiences to be a blessing in the midst of crossing cultural barriers.

### 3. Finding Hope and Affirmation: The Story of Hannah

Module three focuses on finding hope and affirmation in the midst of social denigration. The session's goal was to encourage participants to understand the importance of social analysis prior to judgement. The scriptural references in this module draw from 1 Samuel and the story of Hannah, who prays amidst immense distress. Scripture suggests that after trying all she could and still finding herself in a place of marginalization and ridicule, Hannah turns to God for help. In her pious act of desperation, Hannah is misunderstood and underestimated by religious leaders. Nevertheless, God favors her, grants her petition, and redeems her value among family and community.

During discussions about Hannah, multiple participants disclosed that they had either been the victim of bullying or knew someone who had. Most of the study's participants grew up in a time where the identification and denunciation of bullying gained international attention. Agencies and individuals of mass influence launched campaigns encouraging persons to report and stop the abuse. The discussion evolved to highlight the potential short-term and long-term psychological effects of bullying. We further identified oppressive strategies that systemically bully entire social groups.

Like the priest in Hannah's story, quick judgements and insensitivities have caused many churches to abuse those they are commissioned to serve. In Mary Hammond's book, *The Church and the Dechurched*, she writes of quick judgement as a form of spiritual abuse:

Spiritual abuse, whether personal or systemic, is not always overt. At times it occurs unintentionally as a result of insensitive responses and simplistic answers. Individuals who are fragile and hurt are particularly vulnerable to this kind of abuse. Some people hunger for compassionate and supportive presence. Instead, friends and neighbors may offer either condemnation which isolates and shames them, or trite theological formulas devoid of substance.<sup>7</sup>

Without critical social analysis of the roots of pain, the church often offers shallow messages for deliverance and salvation, victimizing those in pain and condemning them for their suffering.

Considering these realities of spiritual abuse, participants explored the following question, “How can the church be an agency of redemption and deliverance when prejudgments and voluntary blindness reinforce divides that counteract the development of trusting relationships?”

Unfortunately, as has been the case in the Crumly’s Chapel community, this kind of spiritual abuse has transcended generations, and Christian communities have bullied those in close proximity.

To stimulate conversation, this scriptural lesson was paired with the case study of a Chinese-American daughter whose mother made great sacrifices to support the family in their early migration to America. In this case, the daughter writes of the family’s struggles in a foreign country and speaks of her parents working long hours to support their struggling family. The case study ends joyfully with the presence of a strong family bond, a proud daughter, and prominent family businesses. The primary lessons discussed by participants in the third module were the importance of fortitude during struggle and the assuring presence of a loving God who delivers and even empowers those who are oppressed or living in distress.

#### 4. Civil Responsibility: The Parable of the Good Samaritan

Module Four looks at civil responsibility through Jesus’ parable about the Good Samaritan found in Luke 10. After reading the text, participants are presented two questions:

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<sup>7</sup> Mary Hammond, *The Church and the Dechurched: Mending a Damaged Faith*, (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2001) 43.

“What does it mean to care for your neighbor?” and “How does caring for neighbors look in the Crumly’s Chapel community?” While answering these questions, participants were challenged to understand the needs of various community members. They were further challenged to identify which practices they might employ to make their neighbor feel dignity and care. This lesson pushed the group beyond a general discussion about communal needs into strategic efforts to identify strategies to support neighbors who feel like strangers.

Module Four’s case study section took on a different form. Instead of reading a case study, I offered personal reflection of a time when I had been shown compassion and was welcomed as a neighbor. I further explained how this encounter radically transformed my life. To close the fourth module, participants were invited to share acts of compassion that positively impacted their lives.

#### 5. Character and Compassion: The Parable of the Sheep and the Goats

Module Five builds on the Matthew 25:31-40. In this pericope, the gospel writer records Jesus speaking of a day when sheep and goats will be separated based on the character and compassion they practiced during their lifetimes. Specific examples regarding feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, caring for the sick and visiting those in prison are identified as noble choices demonstrating mercy, compassion and justice.

During this module, participants were asked to envision life in their ideal community. They were instructed to consider all elements that would make their ideal community great. Together, they envisioned elements from the style of houses to the selection of stores in their community. They visualized the schools and types of people who live in the community. In small groups, these participants were asked to describe why they made those particular choices about their ideal community.

At the end of this module, participants were challenged to examine how their ideal community embodied compassion or perpetuated exclusion in the forms of ageism, classism, ableism, patriotism, sexism and ethnocentrism. After explaining definitions of these words and offering this challenge, they were asked to re-envision their community ideals with compassion at the fore. Together participants reflected on instances of prejudice or privilege embedded in their ideals.

#### 6. Community-Building and Envisioning Change: Putting Theory to Practice

The final module of the study was a critical thought exercise that asked participants to focus on others in the community and how they might mobilize their networks to bring people together. Community problems like crime, homelessness, and drug addictions were named as concerns of focus. Together, the group embraced the challenge of discussing various solutions and pathways forward. After this, participants were asked to 1) identify which social groups have the capacity to impact community challenges; 2) identify strategies each group could use; 3) identify in which of the named social groups they hold membership and 4) explain why they did or did not hold membership in the groups.

In this module, we framed practices on how to build community and show compassion for those who feel marginalized. Potential solutions to social problems included everything from closer attention to legal systems and community services to supporting food programs and advocating for accessible sidewalks. The conversation in this final session was so robust that we exceeded our scheduled time by over one hour.

#### **IV. Findings**

I watched each week as the study produced new revelations that inspired Crumley Chapel youth and young adults to analyze their roles in community. Their participation in the study gave

the church an opportunity to hear and learn from those outside its fellowship. It also gave local youth and young adults opportunities to further their understanding of the church and the potential relationships commissioned through scripture. Three major thematic findings stood out in the study.

A. Thematic Finding 1: *Marginalized Crumly Chapel youth and young adults are more likely to participate with the church when they are invited as citizens, not consumers.*

The first theme emerged early in the study. Each youth and young adult participant came to the study having previous interactions with members of the Christian community. Some participants were members of other churches. Others simply professed to have known Christians in their families or community. Regardless of their individual perspectives, each youth and young adult spoke of feeling underappreciated for their potential contributions to the church. They had all been invited to a church event or worship service. They had been invited to join congregations, but they had never been invited to take part in discussions pertaining to the development of the mission, external relationships, or the strategic direction of any church.

This type of evangelism perpetuates a culture that author Peter Block calls “consumerism,” in this practice members are treated as consumers or clients. In a consumerist culture, church members and those invited to interact with the church are asked to receive the church’s goods, but not to accept ownership and responsibility for the collective possibility of the institution. In his book, *Community: The Structure of Belonging*, Block writes, “The antithesis of being a citizen is being a consumer or a client... consumers give their power away. They believe their own needs can be best satisfied by the actions of others. Consumers also allow others to define their needs.”<sup>8</sup> In communities where the invitees are marginalized

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<sup>8</sup> Peter Block, *Community: The Structure of Belonging*, Safari Books Online (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2008), 63-64.

others and cultural indices of suspicion are prevalent, invitations to assume consumer roles are commonly rejected. This is the difference between doing ministry *for* community members, versus ministry *with* community members.

Youth and young adult participants indicated that they took part in the study because they were invited to participate in an open dialogue. The invitation to participate in dialogue was also extended by a member of the church who had shown a vested interest in the development of community youth and young adults. To this end, it is not enough for the church to invite others to be consumers of their ministries. The church must extend invitations for others to be citizens of God's kingdom who find places of belonging and connection within the church's fellowship. This means that the church must choose "to be accountable for the whole (*community*), creating a context of hospitality and collective possibility, acting to bring the gifts of those on the margin to the center."<sup>9</sup> Exclusive ideologies undergirding church practices of exclusion cause these churches to function as country clubs and not extensions of God's love for all people.

B. Thematic Finding 2: *Authentic Christian witness requires intentional consideration of others.*

The church must be willing to be a citizen within its community and reject practices that classify it as a provider to consumers in the community. In order to make this dynamic shift, senior participants in the room had to acknowledge that much of their worldviews, conversation and mindsets were subjective and able to be changed. This took place as youth and young adults who were not members of CCUMC began to openly ask questions and frame module

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 63.



conversations in contexts appropriate for relevant ministry and effective communication outside of the church.

Senior adult members of CCUMC were in the room during the modules, but they were not the subjects of analysis. They were particularly quiet at the beginning of the study; however, they began to offer more and more input in module discussions towards the end. I expected that youth and young adults would draw back and become silent as they had in our regular bible study meetings. To my surprise, the youth spoke up. They offered alternative perspectives to the church members' comments. Youth and young adult participants admonished senior church members by explaining how their language was offensive and/or would be misinterpreted when heard by youth at the local high school. On a few occasions, the young adults made concerted efforts to explain how the perspective of some CCUMC members clashed with their understandings of God's heart as revealed through scripture. These youth and young adults then took time to explain how they believed God's love for all must be respected and encouraged in local community settings.

The sentiments of the youth and young adults aligned with Peter Block's recommendation to shift away from norms where individuals create labels, build diagnostic categories around those labels, and project qualities onto others that they deny within themselves.<sup>10</sup> This practice denies others opportunity to express and find value to the portions of their identity existing outside of those labels. It is a prevenient rejection of the holistic other in community.

CCUMC became vulnerable when they hosted this study by allowing external voices from the community a chance to be heard even if the hearing and expressions could potentially

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 55.

hurt feelings within the church. This is an important commitment for churches that are seeking to serve as citizens and not consumer-providers within their communities. The language, contexts, understandings and misunderstandings revealed through the six module discussions were painful, but eventually empowering for CCUMC congregants. This act of vulnerability and possibly self-sacrifice for the sake of including others produced stronger relationships across generational and cultural barriers.

C. Thematic Finding 3: *CCUMC must be willing to own its theology and participate in theophany.*

The third theme I highlight is that the church can and will connect with others when it owns its redemptive theology and participates in theophany. When senior congregants and youth and young adult participants from the community discussed scripture, they promoted multi-generational cross-cultural dialogue. These conversations helped others gain access to power and the privileges. The dialogues also addressed how churches within the Crumley Chapel area have not been hospitable and can be more intentional about connecting with others. Furthermore, the discussions led to youth and young adults identifying strategies CCUMC could use to be more impactful in the local community.

Module discussions addressed the church's ontology as God's extension and invitation across natural and social barriers. If Christian theology says that Jesus was the living invitation who welcomed others into holistic relationship with God, then the church must also live this invitational lifestyle in every way that it plans programs, practices worship, and creates access in the world. Being a part of the church is owning redemptive theology and committing to the practice of that theology.

The goal of the church is to recognize God's revelation without idolizing the mediums, the revelation itself, or its place in time. The church must be intentional about being alert and receptive to the many possibilities of God's revealing—even if God provides convicting revelations through marginalized youth and young adults. The church must show up in unexpected places beyond the comforts of congregational walls and serve as an articulation of God's presence in the world. It must not only seek to receive theological revelation, but also articulate those revelations that challenge Christians to cross boundaries and build bridges.

## **V. Recommendations for Churches Like CCUMC**

Given the depth of feedback from participants in the six modules, I offer three pastoral recommendations to churches like CCUMC as they seek to stimulate multigenerational and cross cultural dialogues about community building.

**Develop and implement missional objectives reflective of the church's call to connect and minister in the local community.** Like many churches, CCUMC possessed a mission statement and vision statement that speaks to their commission to do redemptive work in the world; however, the church had not developed a strategy for codifying metrics and achieving benchmarked objectives to ensure mission achievement. I recommend that churches develop multi-generational and cross-cultural leadership focus groups, similar to the WNFF, to discuss how the church understands its mission and can measure its effectiveness in achieving that mission. Special attention should be given to identifying the various groups represented in the local community and intentional efforts engaged to build partnerships with various social groups in the community.

**Create space for faith-based discussion of scriptures focused on ministering to others outside of the dominant demographic represented in the local congregation.** I highly

recommend that churches like CCUMC host bible studies and using texts that affirm communicating across barriers. It is equally beneficial to choose scriptures that highlight the empowerment of marginal citizens to serve as reminders to congregants of their responsibility to advocate for justice and mercy. These types of studies heighten awareness and prompt congregations to be accountable to the whole of community. Such studies also compel congregations to practice hospitality, and work to bring the gifts of marginalized individuals and groups back to the center of community.

**Plan quarterly opportunities for non-member youth and young adults to dialogue with Church members about the nature of the church and community.** These quarterly conversations should be allotted fixed times and spaces (physical or virtual) on the annual church calendar. The conversations should include, but not be limited to, discussions of relevant current communal events, dialogue about emerging social relationships, and ongoing reflections the theological nature of the church. As listening and learning are critical to sustained relationships, all participants should be encouraged to center themselves as they prepare to explore the nuances of their relationship with each other, the broader community, and God.

## **VI. CONCLUSION: Reframing Ecclesiology, A Broader Vision for the Church**

My ministry assignment at CCUMC, this research project, and the entire D.Min. program have all informed and reframed my ecclesiology and vision for the church. Chief among these revelations is my belief, “The church has to be the Church...for *all* people.” Christian fellowship must not be selective regarding which people it chooses to see and serve. Preferential treatment of specific social groups in minority or majority churches paints an inadequate representation of who God has been and continues to be. In the book of Revelation, John writes to the church at Laodicea,

I know your works; you are neither cold nor hot. I wish that you were either cold or hot. So because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I'm about to spit you out of my mouth. For you say, 'I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing.' You do not realize that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind and naked.<sup>11</sup>

When the church practices a selective model of affirmation and redemption, it refutes Jesus work on the cross to redeem all of creation. It sends the message that only preferred parts are welcome in the body of Christ. The church begins to bargain for whom and with whom it will serve and begins to “view people as consumers of religious goods and services and the church as a vendor of those same religious goods and services.”<sup>12</sup> At this point, the church becomes a lukewarm or half-hearted witness to the gospel whose own redemption can only be reclaimed through a reaffirmation of what the church was created to be.

What I have sought to communicate to CCUMC and the youth and young adults gathered for WNFF is that the church is more than a body of individuals assembled for ritualistic practices of assumed piety. Its complexity supersedes didactic discourse, and its evolution continues to challenge antiquated systems and ideologies that have been the foundation of the church itself. The church possesses a role and responsibility to be an extension of God's grace and love to all people, but particularly to those who experience marginalization.

My ecclesiology sees the church as created by God, born out of God and led by God. At the core of its existence, the church is the embodiment or incarnation of the Spirit of Christ, and as such, should live organically as a witness to God's presence in, with and through creation. The church, as a segment of humanity made fearfully and wonderfully in the image and likeness of an emotive, creative, powerful and compassionate God, is a reflection of God's handiwork.

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<sup>11</sup> Revelations 3:15-17.

<sup>12</sup> Eric Swanson and Rick Rusaw, *The Externally Focused Quest: Becoming the Best Church for the Community*, 1 edition (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2010), 7-8.

The church, as a people redeemed through the liberating sacrifice of Jesus on the cross, ontologically exists as a witness to God's redeeming love and extension into creation. The church, as a people inspired by the Holy Spirit to have faith and led by the same Spirit's indwelling to express the love of God through means of grace, is an incarnational expression by and with God. While created to be an extension of God's grace and existing to embody that grace for others, the church has become subject to divisive preferences and prejudices that contradict the liberating nature of the Church. But the church has to be the Church if it is to develop trusting relationships across social barriers and experience revival.

The authentic nature of the church in emulation of God's nature cannot be authentically studied. Therefore, my ecclesiology is not a comprehensive assessment of the nature of the church, but it is a derivative of personal history, faith journeys, academic study and beliefs pertaining to how people have interpreted, and at times truncated, the true nature of God in, through and with the people of God post-Jesus. To postulate that I know what the church must be is arrogant and fallacious because the church is supposed to emulate and represent the God that has been and continues to be revealed in creation. The moment that the entirety of God is revealed, is the moment when the church has a complete and perfect example of how it is to embody its holistic Godlikeness. In H. Richard Niebuhr's writings on progressive revelation, he states, "...when the church recognizes the revelatory moment as truly revelatory it is *impelled* (personal emphasis) to continuing, progressive interpretation of every occasion of life..."<sup>13</sup> This is the practice of making sense of life and reclaiming historic experiences previously understood as meaningless or void of God.

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<sup>13</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 71.

Through planting seeds in the youth and young adults in the Crumly's Chapel community, I have sought to expand the vision of CCUMC to recognize the merits and gifts beyond the congregation. Nurturing these seeds outside of the sanctuary has further expanded how the congregation can perceive worship. Therefore, in order for the church to be the Church, it must worship not only a historically revealed God, but the God who is capable of revealing God's self in, with and through modern mediums. This revelation witnesses to God as truly the omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent, immortal Creator whose commitment to principles and the preservation of humanity evidence a discipline revealed through mercy, justice, and care. When the church engages in qualitative worship, it encourages Christ's followers to identify, live, grow and connect with God as the Body of Christ wherever, whenever and however opportunity is presented. It must be inclusive, because to be exclusive means the church chooses to limit God's ability to reach humanity.

Good Christian worship is the authentic practice of fellowship that habitually embodies sentiments and practices indicative of a redeeming ecclesia who represent and become God's love for creation. In the words of Simon Chan in *Liturgical Theology*, the Body of Christ is more than a metaphor. He describes this responsibility in the following manner: "The Church is Christ as he is present among and meets us upon earth after his resurrection...Christ is present in his Church through his word and sacrament, and the Church is, in its essence, nothing other than this presence of Christ."<sup>14</sup> This assertion characterizes good worship for the Christian community because to truly value God is to appreciate, and even take part in the perpetuation of the practices, purposes and principles supported by the revelation of God's intervening relationship

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<sup>14</sup> Simon Chan, *Liturgical Theology: The Church as Worshipping Community*. (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2006), 27.

with creation. The church must serve in the practice of producing evidence of God's grace that may not look the same in diverse communities, but may serve the same purposes. When the church is understood as essentially communion in and of God's Body of Christ, the primary focus of the ecclesial life (*worship*) is not simply church hierarchy or ritualized practices, but *koinonia* characterized by agape.<sup>15</sup>

The Church practices good worship when it takes part in the revelation knowledge of who God is for all. When the followers of Jesus commit to living a missional life, they become kingdom people who think about the spiritual relationships and physical well-being of others.<sup>16</sup> To appreciate Jesus, the church must participate in acts that perpetuate this work of redemption. Worship should help to restore those suffering of society. Through proclamation, the community of faith is introduced and reminded of God's "otherness." In other words, on the surface, good worship is subjective, but at the core the church worships God when its serves in ways that assists individuals or communities with the acknowledgement of who God is and participation in what God does. Being open to fulfill this mandate among all people is the call of the church. When the church fails to remain alert, poised, positioned and prepared to embrace the revelation of God as revealed through the grace in others, idolization takes precedence and traditions, preferences and division become the centerpiece of what should be Christian community.

Youth and young adults play critical roles in the revelation of God. They also uniquely participate in the development of society through time. Though often viewed as careless and irresponsible, they bear the daunting challenge of carrying into the future precious historic

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid. 29.

<sup>16</sup> Eric Swanson and Rick Rusaw, *The Externally Focused Quest: Becoming the Best Church for the Community*, 1 edition (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2010), 181.



lessons and communal habitus carefully crafted by prior generations. Though often perceived as simple and impressionable, they embody an internal treasure that informs their engagement with the world around them. This treasure sifts, perceives and at times repurposes all that is entrusted into their care. It is the power to rethink, reimagine, acquiesce to or rebel against cultural norms to reflect a relevant God. It enables them to codify tangible practices and theoretical norms in their own terms or in terms that change the course of history.

This treasure can be likened to rocks in a river. The rocks in a river give shape and direction to all that flows around them. In the present it appears that only the water is being shaped, but in time evidence reveals that the rocks are shaped just as the river. Instead of asking whether the rock or the river has more impact, we marvel at the beauty that is created when the two come together. We marvel at the beauty created when some great and providential force placed the two in time, knowing the potential of each to impact the other. The providential force may be called God. The beauty created in the end reflects a plan or intention of God. The awe of that beauty that grips our hearts causes us to marvel, reveals the majestic, omniscient, complexity of God in time. It is revelation.

When youth and young adults are introduced to scripture supporting the affirmation of the marginalized, they have the ability to hear with a liquid intelligence that allows for the renaming of strategies for modern redemption. Unfortunately, churches like CCUMC have done a poor job of creating space where youth and young adults lead in the identification of Christian service initiatives. The Church has to be deliberate about how it creates space for youth and young adults—especially from diverse backgrounds—to participate in the worship process. This act of partnering in ministry is reflective of God’s invitation for disciples to go out and witness to and with all people. As stated in *The Externally Focused Quest*, a book on developing

community focused ministry, “Local people are often effective in reaching local people...but over the years, we have deteriorated into patrons of projects...Now we need partnerships around shared values rather than bringing in our separate agenda or program” to the space of ministry.<sup>17</sup> Leaders must begin to see their role as enhanced, not diminished as they take on the responsibility to equip diverse groups of parishioners and community members for service and also help people of all ages discover and live out there Ephesians 2:10 calling.<sup>18</sup> This practice of creating space to experience God through others is an act of worship that attracts others and builds God’s beloved community.

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 97.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 181.

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