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Praxis To Practice: Living Theology with the Recovery Community

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Abstract

Praxis To Practice: Living Theology with the Recovery Community

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My research question is: How does incarnational theology function in the integrative transformation of the local church and the Recovery Community? On January 3rd, 2023, our congregation began an exciting partnership with three local recovery leaders and launched Recovery United. As their pastor, I was interested in ministry “with”, not “to”, and I wanted to fully explicate a robust view of the incarnation, as well as what it looks like for us to live into an understanding of “God with us” as God with ALL of us. I believe God’s redemptive and restorative work is an integral part of incarnational theology, and living our faith, living “God with us”, in this context, is being part of God’s doing a new thing, the work of tasking two communities (the local congregation and the Recovery Community) and blending them into one new community. In this paper, I identify drug-related deaths as the problem to research and propose Just Show Up as innovation. I conduct interviews with people in recovery, recovery leaders, and also church members who want to foster community-building. I also create a survey and give it to thirty-six people in the recovery group, studying the importance of presence, non-judgmental stance, compassion, and empathy. I outline several objectives for the future, including the creation of Grace, Grit, and Gratitude, a non-profit that will serve as a central location that offers services for long-term success, including helping people in the recovery community have access to counseling, interview skill-building, and more.

Praxis To Practice: Living Theology with the Recovery Community

By

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I. Another Day – Another Seven Dead.

It was only nine o'clock in the morning on that cold day in March, but Kevin Harrod was already tired. He was tired of losing his friends to drugs and alcohol. It was another morning and another day of grief, processing the loss of yet another friend who fought a battle with addiction and lost. Kevin was beyond frustrated; he was at a breaking point and decided to act decisively. Turns out, it was not a moment too soon. What he did next would save Kayla Richardson's life.

Three months before that day, Kevin, along with his wife, Melanie Harrod, and their friend, Lindsay Compton, each of them a recovering addict, launched Recovery United, what they describe as a Christ-centered recovery group, at First United Methodist Church in Hillsville, Virginia. To be sure, there was much to celebrate. Their numbers started with six and grew steadily. They hosted local experts on addiction and recovery, some of whom work locally in that area, as well as addicts in long-term recovery to speak at Speaker Meetings. The emerging Recovery Community found support from many in the church who cooked meals and provided childcare. Local civic groups, such as Rotary hosted Kevin as their speaker, and many in the community rallied to their cause.

Though the early response to Recovery United in a rural community was heart-warming, addiction was still claiming lives all around them. "In 2021, an average of 7 Virginians died of a drug overdose every day, a twenty-nine percent increase from 2020."¹ To Kevin, those numbers were not just statistics, rather a growing number of people whom he could name.

During his twenty years in alcohol and opioid addiction, Kevin tried many different rehabilitation services unsuccessfully, saying he came to a place where "I had tried everything

¹ <https://www.vdh.virginia.gov/drug-overdose-data/>

else, and I came to a place where the only hope I found was that God is who He says is and Jesus did what He said he did, and surrender made all the difference in my life.”² Kevin’s testimony is proof that “seeing programs and initiatives launched from varying governmental levels is heartening, but what is needed in this age is a return to trust in the power that comes from God and the radical transformation of life that comes through the cross.”³ Along with Melanie and Lindsay, Kevin had previously led a Christ-centered local recovery group at a different site, which closed permanently in March 2020 at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Kevin and his co-leaders felt unsupported through the pandemic and were redescent about the prospect of relaunching Recovery United. However, it was the promise of support by the pastor and local congregation of First United Methodist Church that convinced Kevin and his co-leaders to give Recovery United a new home and a new start. That decision was nothing short of lifesaving for many in the community who struggled daily with addiction.

On March 14th, 2023, grieving the loss of yet another friend who lost his life to addiction the day before, Kevin made a Facebook post, wherein he reminded people that people in the local area are still losing their lives to addiction and imploring anyone reading to stop struggling in silence and come to that night’s Recovery United meeting. Kayla Richardson read the post and walked more than a mile to get to the meeting. Kayla said, “I was trying to give up alcohol and marijuana, and I was isolating, and I didn’t know how to cope, and I was thinking of killing myself when I read Kevin’s post, and I decided to go [to the meeting] because he missed his friend so much and I didn’t want to be another person that someone would miss.”⁴ Kayla attended the meeting, counseled with Kevin, stayed for the group meeting that night, and has

² Interview with Kevin Harrod.

³ Pam Morrison, *Jesus and the Addict: Twelve Bible Studies for People Getting Free from Drugs* (Central Florida: EA Publishing, 2018), 225.

⁴ Interview with Kayla Richardson.

faithfully participated in Recovery United ever since. Kayla summed it this way: “It saved my life.”⁵

II. A Local Church Stops Saying “Them” And Starts Saying “Us”.

The decision for the congregation of First United Methodist Church to take an active role in partnering with the Recovery Community was born out of realizing that Carroll County was at the epicenter of the drug epidemic, and their desire to take a proactive role in being part of the solution. Several families within the congregation had lost family members to addiction, and they were under no illusion that addiction only affects big cities or “other people”. It was clear to the congregation that addiction affected them, their families, their neighborhoods, and addiction was having a devastating effect on the community as a whole.

Dr. Oliver McBride, former School Division Superintendent and member of First United Methodist Church explained that he had become increasingly aware of the impact drugs and alcohol were having on the community. Dr. McBride stated,

It was becoming more obvious that more and more of our folks were becoming involved in abuses of all kinds, and you have to understand that impacts the health of the community in all of its facets, physical health, financial health, economic health, spiritual health. If a community is ever going to be all that it can be, and what I believe God intends for it to be, then we have to be mindful of those issues that harm it. When I would read in the newspaper, and they would list the grand jury indictments, again and again you saw methamphetamine, Schedule 2 Drugs, distribution, and you just had to believe this cannot be the future of the community.⁶

Tom Jackson, local attorney and member of First United Methodist Church, agrees, adding, “When you look at the grand jury indictments of the past several years, ninety percent of the indictments are methamphetamines, and another five percent of the crimes committed are committed so that someone can have access to buy or sell methamphetamines, and so it is

⁵ Interview with Kayla Richardson.

⁶ Interview with Dr. Oliver McBride.

absolutely the worst problem that this community faces, and the ages range from the young to those past retirement age.”⁷

For months leading up to the launch of Recovery United at First United Methodist Church in Hillsville, the pastor conducted meetings with Dr. McBride, Tom Jackson, and other leaders in the church, focusing on how the members of the church could live out their faith by partnering with Kevin and Melanie Harrod and Lindsay Compton in their desire to resume their work of providing Christ-based Recovery services to the community. As a list of goals were created, it became clear immediately that the congregation wanted to do much more than provide a meeting space, but they instead wanted to partner with and walk alongside of those in recovery. The leaders said they wanted to adopt a new posture, a posture of being recovery-minded. “The recovery-minded church, in contrast, knows where the party is – and wants to host the party: receiving those on the path to recovery and celebrating their homecomings, giving them a place to call home where they can discover – and recover – their true identity as beloved children of God.”⁸

After several meetings of the pastor and church leadership, Kevin, Melanie, and Lindsay were invited to participate in a Church Council Meeting. The Church Council had resolved to not only offer meeting space to Recovery United, but also to provide meals and childcare for participants. Many expressed that they would like to attend the meetings for emotional support, if allowed, and offered to be a part of the Recovery Community as support people. The Harrods and Lindsay initially expressed concern about launching Recovery United in a church, due to past negative experience. However, after initially deciding they would not relaunch Recovery

⁷ Interview with Tom Jackson.

⁸ Jonathan Benz and Kristina Robb-Dover, *The Recovery-Minded Church* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2016), p. 10.

United at First United Methodist Church, the three leaders met privately and came back with a change of heart. After all, they explained, Kevin, Melanie, and Lindsay all had one thing in common: they had all tried many different services and support groups, during their decades in addiction, and they each had failed repeatedly until they gave their lives to Christ. Kevin added, “surrender was the key, and it wasn’t until I surrendered to Christ that I could admit I couldn’t give this up on my own, and surrendering to Christ was the only way I could give up the drugs.”⁹ Their shared story, along with the promise of support from the pastor and congregation, led the three leaders to change their minds and agree to relaunch Recovery United at First United Methodist Church. The leaders also expressed their desire to lead recovery meetings that were not only for those dealing with drug and alcohol addiction, but open to anyone dealing with any addiction, as well as those who struggle with mental health disorders, in need of a support system. “This view makes clear that addiction is not limited to the use of alcohol and drugs, considering addiction is a pattern of behavior that interferes with life and I not amenable to a person’s efforts at self-control.”¹⁰

III. With Nothing Left To Lose, Recovery United Launches at First UMC.

Leaders Kevin and Melanie Harrod and Lindsay Compton launched Recovery United at First United Church of Hillsville on January 3rd, 2023, hosting Speaker Meetings, offering breakout small groups that allowed space for more personal sharing, and teaching life skills and coping skill sessions, infused with a faith-based approach. Kevin added:

We’re teaching recovery life skills, learning how to deal with cravings, and learning how to get out of the shame cycle, learning how to accept grace, learning how to recognize some of the things that take us back to unhealthy thought processes, and learn that we have inherent value,

⁹ Interview with Kevin Harrod.

¹⁰ Dann, Bucky Dann, *Addiction: Pastoral Responses* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002) 35.

purpose, and hope. And it's not just about getting clean, but it's about learning how to live. A lot of us stopped maturing socially and mentally and cognitively when we started using so a lot of us don't know how to do adult things like balance our funds. So [in leadership], that's the beginning. And there's a ministry piece in [teaching] that.¹¹

Both the recovery leaders and the congregation were excited to have everyone on the same page and start something new together. However, getting both groups on the same page about how to go about it was no easy task. For the congregation, their identity, a community of faith, would need to evolve and grow. For the Recovery Leaders, their identity was expanding too, and questions arose around what it would look like to have people from the congregation sitting in on Recovery United meetings, making meals, watching children, learning names, and walking alongside of the Recovery Community. The congregation expressed a desire to go deeper in what it would look like to live and love like Jesus does, understanding, "He does not see God's community as exclusive but inclusive."¹² The congregation understood that to walk with someone on a journey of transformation is, in itself, a transformative experience, and therefore, the congregation wondered aloud what their own transformation, as a body of believers, would look like as they prepared to engage in new relationships. Perhaps the most helpful way to frame the question that the congregation and recovery leaders would spend more than a year exploring is, "How does incarnational theology function in the integrative transformation between the local church and the Recovery Community?"

IV. Incarnational Theology: From Praxis To Practice

C.S. Lewis refers to the incarnation as "the central miracle asserted by Christians"¹³ (Lewis, p. 173). Meaning "enfleshed", the incarnation in Christian theology refers to the Word

¹¹ Interview with Kevin Harrod.

¹² Don Williams, *Jesus and Addiction: A Prescription to Transform the Dysfunctional Church and Recover Authentic Christianity* (San Diego: Recovery Publications, Inc., 2002), 42.

¹³ C.S. Lewis, *Miracles: A Preliminary Study* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers Inc., 1947), 173.

becoming flesh, as referenced in John's Gospel: "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us" (John 1:14). "The affirmation of that is the divine Logos who is incarnate emphasizes the preexistence and divine personhood of the One who is born of Mary."¹⁴ Matthew records the proclamation of the angel, "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel (which means God with us)," (Matthew 1:23). This proclamation is nothing less than the announcement of the pending fulfillment of thousands of years of Messianic prophecies. "No greater blessing can be conceived than for God to dwell with his people."¹⁵

Incarnation in reference to Jesus presupposes that God is, and that the Creator God is a God also of revelation and redemption, who has revealed His purpose and at least to some extent to Israel, the chosen vehicle of his saving purpose. Incarnation, then, is essentially a way of envisaging one of his modes of revelation and redemption, for Christian theology, the climatic mode.¹⁶

Expounding upon the meaning of incarnation in Christian theology,

Traditionally, the doctrine of incarnation has sought to articulate three central Christological truths: 1) Jesus Christ was a divine person. 2) Jesus Christ was an authentic human being. 3) The divine nature and the human nature of existed in hypostatic union in the person of Jesus Christ.¹⁷

Understanding the incarnation, as well as its implications for what it means to be Christ-like, would prove to be a critical step for envisioning and living into a new understanding of community for the local congregation. Since the days of the Church Fathers in the 4th Century, prominent theologians and church leaders have taken the significance of the incarnation from the cradle of Bethlehem to the daily lives of Christ-followers. Christ's coming as a human is not only the bedrock of faith for the believer, but it also elicits a challenge for the believer to not

¹⁴ David Noel Freedman (ed), *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000), 634.

¹⁵ Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary Revised Edition – 9: Matthew – Mark* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2010), 106.

¹⁶ Katharine Doob Sakenfeld (ed), *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible: I - Ma, Volume 3* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2008), 32.

¹⁷ Freedman (ed), *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*, 634.

only critically analyze the full implications of Christ's coming, but also to assess how the believer is called to live in community with others, in light of the incarnation. It is clear Christ came with a purpose; the task of the believer is to understand that purpose and then to then dedicate their life in pursuit of that purpose. St. Athanasius of Alexandria writes:

The idea of restoration is most prominent in his determination of the necessity of the incarnation. God could have wiped out our guilt, had He so pleased, by a word, but human nature required to be healed, restored, and recreated.¹⁸

St. Augustine also helped fully explicate what it meant for the Word to take on human flesh, writing, "The Maker of man became Man that He, Ruler of the stars, might be nourished at the breast; that He, the Bread, might be hungry; that He, the Fountain, might thirst; that He, the Light, might sleep; that He, the Way, might be wearied by the journey...that He, the Foundation, might be suspended upon a cross; that Strength might be weakened; that He who makes well might be wounded; that Life might die."¹⁹

Bernard of Clairvaux also preached that the incarnation emphatically calls for a response:

Jesus Christ, the Son of God, us born in Bethlehem of Juda. Awake, you who lie in the dust; awake and give praise!²⁰

John Wesley brings out several foundational themes about the incarnation that serve as common themes in both the local congregation as well as the recovery community, namely our shared humanity and shared need for the second chance of new life through Christ that every person needs. In his sermon, In Wesley's sermon entitled *On the Holy Spirit*, which he preached in 1736, he proclaimed:

¹⁸ Saint Athanasius, *On the Incarnation* (Apollo: Ichthus Publications, 1891), 3.

¹⁹ Augustine, *Augustine (354 – 430), For the Feast of the Nativity, Sermon 191*, <https://deovivendiperchristum.wordpress.com/2014/11/04/augustine-354-430-on-the-incarnation-of-christ>.

²⁰ Bernard of Clairvaux. *Bernard of Clairvaux (1090 – 1153), First Sermon in the Vigil of our Lord's Nativity*, <https://deovivendiperchristum.wordpress.com/2020/12/24/bernard-of-clairvaux-1090-1153-the-son-of-god-was-made-man-to-make-men-the-sons-of-god/>

When he was incarnate and became man, he recapitulated in himself all generations of mankind, making himself the center of our salvation, that what we lost in Adam, even the image and likeness of God, we might receive in Christ Jesus. By the Holy Ghost coming upon Mary, and the power of the highest overshadowing her, the incarnation of Christ was wrought, and a new birth, whereby man should be born of God, was shown, that as by our first birth we did inherit death, so by this birth we might inherit eternal life.²¹

Karl Barth speaks about the incarnation as the method in which God, through the coming of Christ, makes a way for the adoption of believers, adopted not only into the family of God, but also in the redemption mission of God. Barth writes, “Jesus Christ alone is very God and very man. And it is on the basis of this union, but clearly differentiated from it, that there is an adoptio.”²² It is through the humanity of Jesus, as well as the adoption into God’s family that Jesus brings, Dietrich Bonhoeffer argues, that makes it possible for believers to embrace every person as a brother or sister, united in our humanity and called to love and to stand in solidarity with all of humankind. He writes:

And in the Incarnation the whole human race recovers the dignity of the image of God... Through fellowship and communion with the incarnate Lord, we recover our true humanity, and at the same time, we are delivered from that individualism, which is the consequence of sin, and retrieve our solidarity with the whole human race. By being partakers of Christ incarnate, we are partakers in the whole humanity which he bore. We now know that we have been taken up and borne in the humanity of Jesus, and therefore that new nature we enjoy means that we too must bear the sins and sorrows of others. The incarnate Lord makes his followers the brothers of all mankind.²³

Finally, Barbara Brown Taylor urges readers to consider the limitless possibilities of what God can do in and through believers, in light of the incarnation. She writes:

On the one hand, [Mary] was just a girl, an immature and frightened girl who had the good sense to believe what an angel told her. On the other hand, she was the mother of the Son of God, with faith enough to move mountains. To sing about the victories of her son as if he were already at the right hand of his father instead of a dollop of cells in her womb... When we allow God to be born in us, there is no telling, no telling at all, what will come out.²⁴

²¹ John Wesley, *The Complete Sermons: John Wesley* (Oxford: Hargraves Publishing, 2013), 653.

²² <https://theologyforum.wordpress.com/2011/02/10/the-church-as-an-extension-of-the-incarnation/>

²³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Touchstone, 1959), 301.

²⁴ Barbara Brown Taylor, *Mixed Blessings* (Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1998), 36.

In Scripture, it is clear that Paul views the incarnation as a call to action for Christians to be at work in the ministry of reconciliation, as Paul writes, “All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people’s sins against them” (2 Cor. 5: 18-19). John Wesley points out that these verses explicitly link the incarnation with redemption and reconciliation, writing of these verses, “The whole Godhead, but more eminently God the Father was in Christ, reconciling the world – which was before at enmity with God [who is] taking away that enmity.”²⁵ For Paul, the incarnation is at the heart of his theology and teaching, and he regularly speaks of the way the incarnation is to be understood as actively at work reshaping the very identity of believers. As his letter to the Corinthians progresses, Paul writes, “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake, he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich” (2 Cor. 8:9). “In 8:9, he points to the supreme illustration of what is at the heart of the gospel, namely, the incarnation, when the eternal Son became “poor” in accepting our human lot so that we might become “rich”, i.e., enriched by divine grace.”²⁶ Furthermore, Paul is also drawing a comparison between earthly existence (described as poverty) and heavenly existence (described as wealth), and making the point that Jesus traded wealth for poverty, through the incarnation, so that believers may be able to trade their own poverty (i.e. spiritual poverty; life on earth) for wealth (i.e. spiritual blessing; opportunity for a future heavenly existence).

Christ “became poor” by the act of incarnation that followed his preincarnate renunciation of heavenly glory (cf. Php 2: 6-8) - from wealth to “poverty”! Here Paul depicts the glory of

²⁵ John Wesley, *John Wesley Explanatory Notes Linked to Bible Verses* (Oxford: Hargraves Publishing, 2013), Kindle Location 49249.

²⁶ Verlyn D Verbrugge and Murray J. Harris, *1 and 2 Corinthians (The Expositor’s Bible Commentary), Revised Edition* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), Kindle Location 8528.

heavenly existence as wealth, in comparison with the lowliness of earthly existence amounts to “poverty.”²⁷

It is also important to understand that for Paul, the incarnation was a crucial piece of God’s plan, through Christ, to ultimately expand the scope of God’s redemptive plan, moving solely from Israel to all humankind. Paul notes he was “called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God – the gospel he promised beforehand through the prophets in the Holy Scriptures regarding his Son, who as to his earthly life was a descendant of David, and who through the Spirit of holiness was appointed the Son of God in power by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord” (Romans 1: 1b – 4). Paul continues “And you are also among those Gentiles called to belong to Jesus Christ” (Romans 1: 6). Here, Paul puts the incarnation in context as a part of the arc of God’s redemptive plan for humanity, working together with Christ’s life, death, and resurrection, and providing the power needed for the redemption of humankind. In short, God is at work in the life of the community, through the resurrection power, which starts with the incarnation and the recognition that if the Lord is truly in the midst of a community, then nothing is impossible.

Nothing in all creation, Paul assures his readers, can separate them from that loving grace, since it is the Lord of that creation who is the author of such grace. Where the reality of that grace, incarnate in God’s Son and present in the gift of the Spirit, is recognized and allowed to work, there the redemptive power of that grace is already transforming the reality of the community of the faithful. Within that community therefore the future redemption of God’s total creation has become visible in anticipatory (proleptic) form.²⁸

At first, my task, as a minister, was to teach and preach about the incarnation. However, the challenge to the congregation extended much further than merely understanding the incarnation. The challenge was to ask how understanding the incarnation could better put us on

²⁷ Tremper Longman III, Tremper and David E. Garland, *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary Revised Edition – 11: Romans - Galatians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2008), 928.

²⁸ Paul J. Achtemeier, *Romans (Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching)* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1985), 153.

the path to be a part of God's redemptive and restorative work in the world, beginning with the Recovery Community. "When systematic theology uses biblical theology to connect text and present it in a normative fashion, we are engaged in the theological interpretation of Scripture."²⁹

V. Jesus "Just Shows Up" For Zacchaeus, And Proclamation Leads The Way.

Eager to support the Recovery Community in their new partnership, Recovery United launched in the church Fellowship Hall on January 3rd, 2023, and many from the congregation of First United Methodist Church were on hand to welcome them with open arms. Some in the church cooked meals; others provided childcare; and more showed up to listen and be available to help however they could. The question the congregation asked most was: How specifically can I help? As pastor of the church, my goal was for our congregation was to understand incarnational theology and God's redemptive plan for communities through people living as Jesus did in community with others. Through preaching, teaching, and personal conversations, I answered their questions as simply as I could. Again and again, I told the congregation, in every way that I could, "Just show up." In preaching, I talked about how humankind was forever changed through Jesus showing up. Zacchaeus was, for me, a perfect example of a time in Scripture when Jesus just shows up, and not only is an individual (Zacchaeus) forever changed because Jesus showed up, but the community is changed too, as Zacchaeus declares, "Here and now, I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount" (Luke 19: 8). This is a moment in Scripture where there is no account of a miracle, no account of a sermon or teaching of any kind, not even a gentle rebuke. Jesus has the power to affect change merely by His presence, simply by showing up.

²⁹ Graham A. Cole, *The God who Became Human: A Biblical Theology of the Incarnation: 30* (New Studies in Biblical Theology) (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2013), 174.

This account is also significant because not only does Zacchaeus' change of heart benefit the community (in particular, those he swindled), but Jesus also restores Zacchaeus to the community.

In verse 8, Zacchaeus shows that he is no longer the man the crowd has labeled a 'sinner'. In verse 9, Jesus reminds the crowd that Zacchaeus 'too is a son of Abraham' (cf. 13:16). This statement presupposes that promises of salvation were given of Abraham (i.e. the Jewish people; cf. 1: 54-55, 72 – 75; Acts 3: 25-26; 13:26) and that these promises include Zacchaeus, even though previously he had been excluded by other Jews. Jesus is reinstating Zacchaeus as a Jew and is bringing him the salvation promised by God to the Jews.³⁰

This text became a Biblical model for the congregation to follow.

Throughout the Gospels, Jesus does much more, of course, than just show up. However, I argued showing up was a powerful starting point for Jesus, and will be for us, as a church. From there, on a person-by-person basis, Jesus assessed needs and met those needs, but always in the context of the needs of relationship, and understanding the specific needs of people, varying person to person. Every sermon was contextual; every miracle was contextual; everything Jesus ever said or did was done in the context of relationship. Jesus changed entire communities and was at work in a redemptive way throughout humanity, one person at a time, always starting the same way: He showed up. We too, I insisted, must show up for people, and then see what they need. "There is no ambiguity about the role of the church as witness to this new life: God calls Christians to participate, not just as bystanders, but as agents deployed by God to share in Christ's liberating, life-giving work."³¹

"Just Show Up" became our primary tool for innovation, a repeated mantra among our congregation, and was even made into a beautiful piece of art that adorns the Fellowship Hall as

³⁰ Robert C. Tannehill, *Abingdon New Testament Commentaries: Luke* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 277.

³¹ Dean, Kendra Creasy Dean, *Innovating for Love: Joining God's Expedition through Christian Social Innovation* (Knoxville: Market Square Publishing, LLC, 2022), 16.

a reminder that we embody incarnational theology, first and foremost, by just showing up, and then seeing where, or with whom, we are needed. From this starting point, together, friendships were formed, prayers were prayed, victories were celebrated, and tears were shed. We did more than learn names. Our congregation threw several birthday parties for our new friends in the Recovery Community, and a baby shower too. We provided childcare and played Pickleball, painted murals, and did arts and crafts with the children of our new friends during Recovery meetings. We provided transportation to probation appointments and doctors' appointments, even taking one new friend in the Recovery Community to an obstetrician's appointment seventy-five miles away. "Just Show Up" not only helped ease the nerves of people in the congregation who wanted to help but did not know how to, it was also a clear mission. Just as Jesus did, people just showed up and made a difference wherever they could.

From his unique perspective as both a caring church member and also as an attorney who has represented people with drug charges, Tom Jackson spoke to the importance of just showing up.

Beyond treatment, and after the treatment, for all of these people, the common denominator with our community folks who suffer from addiction is that they are isolated. They have burned through their relationships with their families. They've burned through relationships with others who have cared for them throughout their lives, and over the course of all of these failures in their life and inability to get away from the drugs, they have become isolated. My personal experience with people I've represented is that they can go through a terrific rehabilitation program and when they come out, they're still isolated. Their phone contact list is full of people they did drugs with, and they have to reestablish a new community in order to have a chance because all of us have got to have folks who care about us if we're going to have any have self-esteem, and confidence, and any ability to make a change, and have hope. Just showing up, to me, is about having people who are willing to commit to have a relationship with someone who is a recovering addict, to be there for them, to be able to just sit down and talk to them. You don't have to be able to quote fourteen Bible verses. I think they want somebody that will listen to them, that will understand some of what they've come through, and to give them hope and encouragement about tomorrow. We desperately need people to show up in that regard.³²

Lindsay Compton, in recovery and co-leader of Recovery United, echoed the sentiment that

³² Interview with Tom Jackson.

the community showing up for one another was a critical component to the success of those in recovery, sharing:

Everyone has their own journey, but we're all here for the same reason, which is to find community and share in our struggles and be there for each other. And that's so important because really, when you get clean, your whole friend group has to go. You can't have the same friend group you used to have – that's impossible. Without these meetings, I would have no one really. Not right off. You have to have the right type of people in your life who are going to support you, and not want to see you fail. That's the most important thing to me. I feel like everyone in this group can relate to each other and you can't make it without that.³³

Dr. Oliver McBride added, “You never build relationships with anybody unless you show up, and it's just a first step, but it means an awful lot.”³⁴ John Doe, a participant in Recovery United, also said he found the presence of people from the congregation meaningful. When asked what was most meaningful to him about having people from the congregation attend Recovery meetings, John answered:

Just that they were engaged with me. Not overly. I mean, it was pretty obvious, and people knew I had a problem. You can look at me and tell. And they didn't say anything about addiction, but I knew that they cared, and for me, it doesn't have to be anything overt. Their expressions that they care meant a lot.³⁵

As their pastor, I made it clear to the congregation that recovery ministry was not to be viewed as evangelism program and they were not to invite the participants to church services. I argued their role was to be present for people struggling with addictions, people from all religious backgrounds and no religious backgrounds. From there, I said, the people in the room know who you are and that you are part of the church, and if they have questions or are interested in church, let them initiate those conversations. Surprisingly, to me anyway, several participants did just that. Many from Recovery United visited our Sunday morning worship

³³ Interview with Lindsay Compton.

³⁴ Interview with Dr. Oliver McBride.

³⁵ Interview with “John Doe”.

services; three people from Recovery United made first time professions of faith, were baptized, and joined the church. Kayla Richardson was one of the three. When talking about why Kayla made the choice to come to Sunday morning church, Kayla's response affirmed Tom Jackson's comments on the significance of rejecting isolation and choosing community, Kayla said:

Sometimes I have negative thoughts, like 'you're gonna use again'. And when I come to church, I feel like everybody is warm and welcoming, and being there is just a hit of dopamine beyond what a drug could do. It's a spiritual awareness and a connectivity with others that I didn't have for many years.³⁶

For many in the church, seeing people from the Recovery Community show up in church on Sunday mornings was a visible sign that the congregation and the Recovery Community were not separate entities, but a new emerging community. The relationships shared and time spent with people in the recovery community gave our congregation not only a new sense of mission and purpose, but a new sense of identity and community. In this way, the congregation's partnership with Recovery United was as transformative to the congregation as it was to the participants of Recovery United.

As an innovation, "Just Show Up" served as our main objective. Over the next few months, I wanted to examine that objective a little more and talk about specifics beyond just being available to meet whatever needs arise. As the church's pastor, I wanted to know answers to questions like: "In what specific ways can we live out our faith among our friends in recovery?"; "How can we be a part of God's plans for redemption and restoration in the lives of our new friends in the recovery community; and "What would be the meaningful for our friends in recovery?"

VI. Survey Says: The Four Quadrants And The Scriptures

³⁶ Interview with Kayla Richardson.

Over the month of June of 2023, I conducted an anonymous survey and attended recovery meetings throughout the month, and asked participants to consider completing the survey so that the awareness of the needs of Recovery United could be better understood and shared with the congregation. Participants were asked to rate twenty relationship-building suggestions, on a 1-5 scale, with a ONE indicating “Not Important”, a TWO indicating “A Little Bit Important”, a THREE indicating “Somewhat Important”, FOUR indicating “Important”, and a FIVE indicating “Extremely Important”. Thirty-six participants completed the survey, and four checked a box at the bottom indicating that they were willing to be contacted for a follow-up interview. Follow-up interviews were conducted in August and September of 2023.

In the months leading up to the creation of the survey, I examined Scriptures and made notes about many different interactions Jesus had with people, noting specific qualities the Scripture shows about Jesus in these interactions. The survey questions were centered around what I labeled as four quadrants, which became the four quadrants of incarnational theology that I used in preaching, teaching, and conversation with church members who desired to go deeper in their mission to be a part of God’s restorative and redemptive work in the recovery community. These four quadrants are: presence, non-judgmental approach, empathy, and compassion.

VII. The First Quadrant: Prescence

Whenever pressed on “What does ‘Just Show Up’ really mean?”, my answer was always the same. “It’s exactly what it sounds like. Sometimes you will do something, other times not. Regardless of the outcome, it matters most that you showed up”.

“Ministry of presence” is a favorite phrase of chaplains to describe how they work – with or without words – to be the vehicle of God’s love when they enter the room of a dying patient, the cell of a prisoner, the cubicle of an employee, or the foxhole of a frightened soldier. Francis of Assisi expressed it well when he said, “Preach the Gospel at all times and when necessary, use

words.” Some speak of this as “incarnational ministry.” It is exemplified by the life of Christ who willingly “became flesh” (the literal meaning of incarnation) and chose to dwell “tabernacle” – (pitch his tent) among us.³⁷

There are many examples of Jesus engaged in the redemptive and restorative work of the ministry of presence, often in the company of those looked down upon by Jewish society.

Matthew 9: 10 recounts Jesus eating “with tax collectors and sinners.” John 4 records an account of Jesus breaking several cultural norms by speaking in a public place (a well) not only with a woman, but a Samaritan woman. In Luke 10, Jesus also instructs to put into practice what they have seen Him do, and take His example to the community, two by two (v. 2), house to house (v. 5), pronounce peace over the house (v. 5), eat and drink what they were offered (v. 7), heal the sick (v. 9), and proclaim the coming of the Kingdom of God (v. 9). This is an important move in the Scripture, as Jesus is calling them not to understand everything about Him, but rather to emulate what they do know about Him and to take His message and mission into the community. This is an instructive teaching for the congregation, who themselves are not perfect and have much to figure out still about their own lives and their discipleship. Jesus did not ask them to become theological experts; He asked them to do what they saw Him do. This is the true task of the church.

Out of thirty-six people surveyed with a list of relationship-building concepts that fell under the main question: “What would I like the congregation to know is important (or not important) to me personally?”, all thirty-six rated a FOUR (Important) or FIVE (Extremely Important) to the statement: “Be willing NOT to give advice; to just listen”³⁸. Recovery United participant John Doe added:

Humans, by nature, want connection. They want people to know someone cares. You have some people that don’t want to be bothered with church advice; they’re not believers. Maybe they’re

³⁷ Ron, Klimp, *Ministry of Presence*, 2023. <https://network.crcna.org/topic/leadership/chaplaincy/ministry-presence>

³⁸ Recovery United 2023 Survey: Appendix A.

atheists. It's enough you're extending that lifeline. It's enough that people know you're here, if you need anything. And that was helpful for me.³⁹

VIII. The Second Quadrant: Non-Judgmental Approach

The second quadrant I explored was how important, or not important, it was for people in the congregation to engage with the recovery community with a non-judgmental stance. “Our faith calls us to belief in the worth and dignity of every human being, not just likable human beings, or human beings who live their lives the way we suppose they should.”⁴⁰ In John 12:47b, Jesus declares, “I did not come to judge the world, but to save the world”. This mandate was put to the test earlier in John’s Gospel. In John 8, Jesus was at the temple courts when “the teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought in a woman caught in adultery” (v. 3). Jesus not only avoids the trap (v. 6) the Pharisees laid for Him in asking Him what He would do, He also essentially turned the table on her accusers, telling them that whoever was without sin should be the first to throw their stone at her (v.7). When her accusers dropped their rocks, Jesus told her that, as those who came to condemn her were gone, likewise, He did not condemn her either (v. 11). His final word to her, to “go now and leave your life of sin” (v. 11) was an instruction intended to restore her to the community.

Out of thirty-six Recovery United participants, all respondents rated a FOUR (Important) or a FIVE (Extremely Important) to the statement that it was important (or extremely important) that people in the congregation “make a real effort to put themselves in my shoes”⁴¹. All respondents also rated a FOUR or FIVE to the statement that it was Important or Extremely Important that people in the congregation “pray for me”.⁴²

³⁹ Interview with “John Doe”.

⁴⁰ Denis Meachan, *A Ministry of Presence: Organizing, Training, and Supervising Lay Pastoral Care Providers in Liberal Religious Faith Communities*. 2014, Kindle Location 398.

⁴¹ Recovery United 2023 Survey: Appendix A.

⁴² Recovery United 2023 Survey: Appendix A.

Recovery leader Kevin Harrod shared that during his years of addiction, there were people in his home church that offered non-conditional support and adopted a non-judgmental posture that was evident in not only their words, but their actions. Kevin shared that it was through their support, in recovery, as well as in relapse, that ultimately was the deciding factor for him to surrender his life to Christ and then to pursue a leadership role for others. Kevin elaborates: “I know my flaws and we’re all still working on the sanctification process, but what made the difference for me is I’ve learned there is a group of people that I have life experience with and that I share with who have shared Christ’s love with me, and that enables me to share Christ’s love with others.”⁴³

A key part of the success of Recovery United is that, even though they meet in a church and take a faith-based approach, belief in God is not required. The recovery leaders and congregation present in Recovery United meetings emphasize that every person is welcome without judgment, regardless of their past, their struggles, and whether or not they claim any personal faith of any kind. Kevin Harrod adds:

We make it very clear up front that you are not required to be a Christian to come here. We don’t have to believe the same. We are not here to judge you; we’re here to love you. As a result of that and allowing people to be who they are and accepting them as they are, and the church doing the same, and this is the important part I think, is that our church has done the same. They have opened their arms and taken this one particular family in who does not have that Christian belief system. And as a result, we see the children from that family in church on Sundays. We see them getting positive interactions. We’ve seen the mom talk about prayer. The children get exposed to the Word and the Gospel. It’s sometimes messy. Sometimes we get a little bit dirty. But it’s very real. And we’re with people in those moments of discomfort.⁴⁴

As pastor, I stressed to the congregation that working with Recovery Community was not to be viewed as an evangelism opportunity and that our primary role was to just show up and be present. I was surprised to see how God moved in a restorative and redemptive way in that space,

⁴³ Interview with Kevin Harrod.

⁴⁴ Interview with Kevin Harrod.

through that approach. While faith in Jesus is not overtly pushed, participants know the meeting space they are coming to is a church. This leads to opportunities for conversation that might have otherwise not been possible. Kayla Richardson shared of her first experience coming to a Recovery United meeting, and how Kevin, using a non-judgmental stance, helped bring her out of addiction and into a relationship with Christ.

I felt like I wasn't worthy of Jesus' love and I didn't know what to do. I was always feeling lonely. I told Kevin that and he reminded me of the times I went to church when I was a kid, before the addiction, and I saw this picture of Jesus, and I started crying, and I felt moved spiritually, and I told him I didn't feel I was worthy of his love, and he reassured me I could become a new creation by believing in Jesus. And he prayed with me and led me to Christ.⁴⁵

In that moment, Kayla also shared how her new community of faith has helped her overcome her urges to use alcohol and marijuana, as well as restored her to her father and extended family.

Kayla was both reunited with the community she knew and became a valuable part of this new blended community of Recovery United and First United Methodist Church of Hillsville.

IX: The Third Quadrant: Empathy

The third quadrant I explored in the survey was empathy.

Empathy is when we feel with someone; sympathy is when we feel sorry for someone. God-given compassion is empathetic, not sympathetic. Sympathy distances me from you in your pain; empathy connects me in your pain so healing can occur.⁴⁶

In Luke 8, Jesus encounters a woman with an issue of blood for twelve years (v. 43) and after her touching His clothes, Jesus demonstrates empathy for her situation and declares her healed" (v. 48), which offers her not only physical healing but also reunites her to her community. Similarly, in Luke 13, there was a woman "who had been crippled by a spirit for

⁴⁵ Interview with Kayla Richardson.

⁴⁶ Jonathan Benz and Kristina Robb-Dover. *The Recovery-Minded Church*, 181.

eighteen years” (v. 10). Upon seeing her, Jesus has likewise demonstrated great empathy for her, calling out to her and declaring that she was “set free” from her infirmity (v. 12).

When Jesus sees her, he does not go to her but calls her to him, thus inviting her to join him in front of those gathered and so to join him at the focal point of this scene. Locating this woman of such low status thus is not unrelated to the healing moment but is directly relevant as symbolism of her restoration within her community.⁴⁷

Out of the thirty-six Recovery United respondents, all thirty-six indicated empathy was important to them. All of the participants agreed with the statement that it was Important (a FOUR rating) or Extremely Important (a FIVE rating) to them that people in the congregation “ask me what my needs are”⁴⁸ and “be willing to get to know me outside of a Recovery meeting”⁴⁹. Personal connection was also articulated in interviews as very important to those in recovery.

Recovery United participant Jane Doe addressed the societal stigma against the recovery community and spoke to how empathy leading to relationship can be transformative for both people who carry preconceived notions about the recovery community and also the recovery community themselves.

There’s a huge stigma against people in Recovery, and without knowledge, people don’t grow past that. And I really think that when somebody sees what we’re doing here and takes the time to get to know us as people, then it makes all the difference for them and for us. When somebody comes to a speaker meeting, eats with us, listens to somebody’s story, then they understand and can say, “oh that happened to you and it could happen to me”, so they can relate, so they can understand better. A lot of people don’t. they think that we’re all so different. And we’re not.⁵⁰

X. The Fourth Quadrant: Compassion

⁴⁷ Joel B. Greene, *The Gospel of Luke (New International Commentary on the New Testament)* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1989), 522.

⁴⁸ Recovery United 2023 Survey: Appendix A.

⁴⁹ Recovery United 2023 Survey: Appendix A.

⁵⁰ Interview with “Jane Doe”.

The fourth quadrant in the survey that I studied was compassion.

Authentic, long-term relationships with recovering addicts can't survive without compassion and understanding. Walking an addict home – helping her stay in recovery – depends on a capacity to suffer with her in her places of pain (compassion literally means “to suffer with”). And in this case, compassion requires an understanding of the dynamics of recovery. The more familiar churches are with the physical, emotional, and spiritual aspects of recovery and the nature of life after addiction, the more they will tap into their God-given reserves of compassion.⁵¹

In Matthew 9:36, Jesus looks at the crowds and “he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.” Similarly, in Matthew 14, while trying to grieve for the loss of his cousin, John, Jesus sees a large crowd of people had followed Him on his short boat ride, and “he had compassion on them and healed their sick” (v. 14). When the disciples told Jesus it was getting late and the crowd would need to eat soon, Jesus again showed compassion on the crowd, prompting him to take five loaves of bread and two fish (v. 17) and use that food to miraculously feed “about five thousand men, besides women and children” (v. 21).

This “powerful deed” is an integral part of Jesus’ mission as presents by Matthew and is thereby meant as a paradigm for the community. Jesus has compassion on the multitudes, and both heals and feeds them...The role of the disciples illustrates that this mission of Jesus is also intended to be mission instruction for the community; instead of sending the hungry crowds away, the disciples are to feed them.⁵²

In the survey, I listed possible ways the congregation could show potentially show their compassion, including “transport me to appointment, including doctor’s appointment, probation appointments, etc.”⁵³ Almost all (thirty-five of thirty-six) indicated that was Important or Extremely Important to them. On the survey, almost all respondents (thirty-four of thirty-six)

⁵¹ Jonathan Benz and Kristina Robb-Dover. *The Recovery-Minded Church*, 96.

⁵² Donald Senior, *Abingdon New Testament Commentaries: Matthew* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 169

⁵³ Recovery United 2023 Survey: Appendix A.

said it was Important (FOUR rating) or Extremely Important (FIVE rating) for the congregation to “provide childcare for Recovery Meetings and special events.”⁵⁴

Recovery United Co-Leader Lindsay Compton added:

When you have the support of people not even in recovery, they show that they care for you, in all these different ways, it makes such a difference. As a person that’s in recovery myself, and I’ve tried it many times before, but never before involved with a church when I was trying to get clean, I have come to realize you can’t do it without God, without prayer, without support.⁵⁵

XI. Grace And Grit: A Lot To Celebrate And Lot More To Do

More than a year has passed since Recovery United launched at First United Methodist Church in Hillsville. To be sure, there is a lot to celebrate. The recovery group has grown from six to several dozen. The congregation has given money, time, and structural support to Recovery United. And many of the lines that separated the two groups have steadily evaporated. Things that sounded impossible a year ago are common today. Today, it is common for people from the congregation to not only cook meals and provide childcare for the Recovery Community, but also to hang around and have a meal and talk with the Recovery Community. Today, it is common for people from the Recovery Community to attend Sunday morning worship services and midweek Bible studies. Today, it is common for people in the congregation and people in the Recovery Community to know each other’s names and greet one another, both on the church grounds and off. Today, when a recovering addict has a relapse, it is common for the congregation to participate in corporate prayer for the person. Today, on church workdays, it is common on workdays to see people from the Recovery Community painting the windowsills and trimming the bushes alongside of the congregation. Today, the celebrations of year-markers of sobriety are celebrated not only in Recovery Meetings, but among the congregation as well.

⁵⁴ Recovery United 2023 Survey: Appendix A.

⁵⁵ Interview with Lindsay Compton.

Today, when someone in the Recovery Community passes away, tears are shed and lives of the departed are celebrated, not just in Recovery Meetings, but also in the church services. Today, it is often hard to distinguish one community from the other. Through these shared moments, which range from the ordinary to the milestones, the two communities continue to blend into one, a little more with each passing day. For our congregation, this has proven to be an exciting opportunity to live their faith, to live out their understanding of incarnational theology, and to be a part of God's redemptive and restorative work in the world. Perhaps the most surprising part for many in our congregation was the realization over time that God's redemptive and restorative work in the world was never meant only for the Recovery Community. It was always for them too. As their pastor, it has been the joy of my career to see these two communities become one. That is not to say there have not been misunderstandings and the occasional confrontation over use of the space. On the contrary, those things did happen, but when they happened, the issues were dealt with, and everyone moved on and kept going – just like in any other family.

There is much to celebrate, but there is still much work to do, and the recovery leaders, the participants in Recovery United, and the congregation of First United Methodist Church do not see the work as being completed, but rather only beginning. There are many objectives that have been met, and there are many more ahead to meet. Kevin Harrod is working on getting his peer support certification. When adjudicating drug-related convictions, judges in Carroll County routinely mandate offenders participate in substance counseling, and with his peer support certification, Kevin will be the contact person for the people found guilty to report to, and Kevin will direct them to Recovery United. The local courts are already aware that Kevin has begun the certification process, and a result of this, the courts gave Recovery United permission to provide substance abuse counseling to minors, making them the first recovery group in the county to be

given that opportunity. The leaders are actively working with the first minor in their program, and the hope is that they will work with many more minors in the area. Additionally, Kevin and Lindsay Compton both reported they would like to see more growth in Recovery United.

Attorney and church member Tom Jackson said his future goal is to route the drug cases he works on, which are, as he said “at least ninety percent”⁵⁶ of his caseload to Recovery United through the court. Lindsay Compton stressed the urgency for the group to continue to reach out and grow, adding, “People are still dying every day out here.”⁵⁷

Recovery United participant John Doe added that he would like to see more people join the group because the sense of community among the group is so valuable that it has contributed to lives being saved and could benefit many more who desperately need community in their recovery journey.

People are being affected positively here by the sense of community. I see that every single time I go [to the group]. These people are coming from completely different walks of life, and I never thought I would relate to or be close to them, that sense of community is big thing. For people barely hanging on, it makes all the difference.⁵⁸

Dr. Oliver McBride expressed his goal to expand services for the Recovery Community by starting something new, something focused on their long-term success, something that would permanently restore them to the larger community in which they live. Dr. McBride wants to give the Recovery Community a double portion of Grace and Grit.

My goal is to establish a non-profit organization that is able to gather and combine other resources and funds that can have a multi-faceted approach to working with those who are in the Recovery Community. The working name is Grace and Grit. Grace is the manner in which people are received. Grit is the hard work and effort on their part to recover.. [We need] one central place in our region that would be multi-faceted. We have to have education resources; we have to have counseling. There has to be economic employment opportunities and linking people with employers who know their background and will hire them. We need to start with one

⁵⁶ Interview with Tom Jackson.

⁵⁷ Interview with Lindsay Compton.

⁵⁸ Interview with John Doe.

foundational piece where we can build a structure which offers the opportunities that are the most important for that community.⁵⁹

Growth for the local Recovery Community is no small task. More lives being saved is no small task. Being a part of God's redeeming and restorative work in the world is no small task. The creation of a new foundation focused on being a central location to help people in recovery reintegrate into the community is no small task. When thinking about what it would take to make these dreams a reality, perhaps there is no greater place to start than grace and grit. For the people of First United Methodist Church in Hillsville and their new expanded community with Recovery United, perhaps there is no better location to start than the pulpit. The pulpit was the first location where the local congregation was challenged to explore what incarnational theology meant, and what it meant to them personally. The pulpit was the first location where the congregation was first challenged to live out their faith in new ways, to be a part of God's restorative work and redemptive work in the world, to be a part of reimagining community in a radical way. The pulpit was the first location where the congregation was challenged to support people in recovery with their money, their time, and most importantly with their whole selves. The pulpit was the location where the congregation was first issued the challenge by their pastor: "The time has come to throw open our doors to people in our community struggling with addiction, or else close them for good and let a restaurant open here. At least with a restaurant, somebody is guaranteed to be served". The pulpit was the location of that dangerous sermon, and many more like it that would follow. Dangerous sermons are prophetic sermons that define a specific reality for a community. "To speak for another is to grasp, first, the mind of the other...genuinely prophetic preaching draws people into the reality of God in such a way that

⁵⁹ Interview with Dr. Oliver McBride.

they cannot any longer be content with conventional wisdom and superficial existence.”⁶⁰ As pastor, I used the pulpit as the place to define reality in several ways, first using the Biblical witness to establish God as Immanuel, God with us, then moving to give definition to who the congregation were as a people called by God to be at work in the world in God’s plan for restoration and redemption. Finally, I defined the mission of the church, which must be to reimagine and rebuild their community hand in hand with people in the Recovery Community who are suffering from substance abuse and addiction. The work of proclaiming the Word of God in such a way that it could form new realities in the hearts and minds of the congregation was not an easy one. Thankfully, I discovered the Scriptures are ripe with examples of people whom God used to birth new realities. Paul creates a new reality when he proclaims “if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things has come. The old has gone, the new is here! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation” (2 Cor. 5: 17-18). This Scripture, in particular, not only defines a new reality, but it also gives instruction for what believers are to do in light of this new reality. This passage of Scripture guided our congregation by not only establishing a new reality, but also guiding is to be a part of God’s reconciling work in our community.

Exodus points us to another time when God called people to embrace a new reality. Using Moses as an example for preachers to follow, Walter Brueggemann says that in order for Moses to lead the people from the life they knew to the life that awaited them, he was able, with God’s help to create a sense of alternative consciousness within them.

The alternative consciousness wrought by Moses also provides a model for energizing. Moses and this narrative crate the sense of new realities that can be trusted and relied upon just when the old realities had left us hopeless. It is the task of the prophet to bring to expression the new

⁶⁰ Leonora Tubbs Tisdale. *Prophetic Preaching: A Pastoral Approach* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 3.

realities against the more visible ones of the old order. Energizing is closely linked to hope. We are energized not by which we already possess but by that which is promised and about to be given.⁶¹

I made the case, through preaching, that one did not need to be a Bible scholar to follow Jesus and to walk in a new path. One need not have memorized dozens of Scriptures to be useful to God (as Tom Jackson reminds us in his interview). One needs only to just show up and hear the Word proclaimed for the Word to birth something new in the life of the church. Gail R. O'Day adds, "It is not what one knows about the Bible before hearing it proclaimed that is transformative; it is what one hears as a biblical text is proclaimed that is transformative."⁶²

The pulpit is not, by any way, the only place where transformation occurs. Throughout the months that led up to the launch of Recovery United at First United Methodist Church in Hillsville, there were many meetings with the congregation, many meetings with the Recovery leaders, many hours of follow-up conversation in my office and on the phone, and countless hours of prayers by many. Transformation occurred in many locations throughout the last several months of 2022, leading up to the launch of Recovery United in January 2023. However, the transformation began with the proclamation of the Word, preached in a prophetic manner that made the comfortable uncomfortable until they reached a point of being convinced by the Holy Spirit that God was doing a new thing, a new work of redemption and restoration, and God was calling them to partner with God, to be "co-laborers with Christ" (1st. Cor. 3:9) in the work of reshaping their community and sharing the love of Christ with the Recovery Community.

With each passing week, the recovery leaders are following up with new names in the community who are struggling with addiction. Some calls are referred to them from the court.

⁶¹ Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 13-14.

⁶² Scott Black Johnston, Ted A. Smith, and Leonora Tubbs Tisdale (editors), *Questions Preachers Ask: Essays in Honor of Thomas G. Long* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016), 7.

Others are past or present friends of those now in recovery. With each passing week, new people come to First United Methodist Church looking for the recovery meeting and finding new community. And as for Grace and Grit, the non-profit organization, is it destined to live and die as a hope and dream? With each passing week, money is being pledged, grants are being sought, and potential personnel are being identified. And little by little, a new reality is being defined. It's a reality that began with a local congregation and a recovery group finding new community in and through one another. It's a reality that will be fully realized when all of Carroll County sees the people they once knew only as addicts now actively working at coffee shops and local factories, now back in college, now actively claiming their recovery; it's a reality without an "us" and without a "them". It's a new day; it's a new reality. It's a new community. It's Immanuel, God with us – with all of us.

When I asked Kayla Richardson if she'd like me to use an alias for her name, her response was as immediate as it was hopeful.

No, tell them my name. I want them to know it's me. And if God can change me, God can do anything.⁶³

⁶³ Interview with Kayla Richardson.

XII. Appendix A: Recovery United 2023 Survey

RECOVERY UNITED 2023 Survey

How can the people in the congregation show care and support for you on your Recovery Journey?

Please rate 1 – 5 on the following.

- 1 = Not Important
- 2 = A Little Bit Important
- 3 = Somewhat Important
- 4 = Important
- 5 = Extremely Important

___ Listen to my progress on my journey (both struggles and successes)

___ Take the time to learn my name.

___ Take the time to learn about my day and my journey.

___ Make a real effort to put themselves in my shoes.

___ Give me 10 – 15 minutes to talk about whatever I want to.

___ Pray for me.

___ Ask me what my needs are.

___ Invite me to opportunities to go deeper in my faith (this could mean “invite me to church, a Bible study, or a church activity).

___ Share their favorite verses of Scripture.

___ Have a conversation with me about my faith.

___ Lead a Bible Study for myself and others in my Recovery Group.

___ Be willing to give words of counsel and/or advice.

___ Be willing to share a meal with me.

___ Be willing to NOT give counsel and/or advice: JUST LISTEN.

___ Come to a Recovery Meeting as a Support Person and be willing to SAY NOTHING (JUST LISTEN).

___ Prepare coffee and a snack (i.e. doughnuts) for a Recovery Meeting.

___ Be willing to meet with me and get to know me OUTSIDE of a Recovery Meeting.

___ Prepare and serve a meal for Recovery Meetings.

___ Transport me to appointments (including doctor's appointments, probation appointments, etc.).

___ Provide childcare for Recovery Meetings and Special Events.

I AM WILLING FOR PASTOR JASON TO TALK ME WITH ME
INDIVIUDALLY ABOUT THESE QUESTIONS (or Others QUESTIONS).

If YES, list your name and best way to reach you (phone number or other):

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