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Replanted: New Life In Old Soil For Dying Homogenous Churches

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Abstract

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The Stained Glass Project presents cross-cultural ministry appointments of church-planters in declining homogenous congregations as a means of birthing healthy multicultural churches. This study explores the viability of cross-cultural church “replanting” as a means of church revitalization and community engagement. Many Mainline, as well as Non-Denominational churches are suffering decline and closing due to cultural tensions and corresponding ministry challenges. Many of the 900+ Southern Baptist Churches that close annually have declined because the historically homogenous congregations refused to shift their ministry strategy for their newly diverse community. We will scale The Stained Glass Project model through the largest denomination in North America via the North American Mission Board and SEND Church Planting Network for national impact and influence. The Stained Glass Project not only serves as a model for revitalizing dying ethnically homogenous churches, but also serves as a model for training and resourcing church-planters called to plant multi-ethnic/ multicultural churches.

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A Final Project submitted to the Faculty of the
Candler School of Theology
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Ministry
2019

Don't Water Me

When too much is poured, without a release
 The excessive fluid floods my roots with disease
 My caretaker perceives brittle leaves and assesses my needs
 While in fact my decline stems from my water increase
 Root rot ensues, with no sign of relief
 My brittle extremities- falling leaves drop hints of what lies beneath
 My careless caretaker saw brittle branches and started to prune
 When the root-cause was the ravenous routine of flooding my roots
 Now I'm drowning in sorrow, submerged in abuse
 How I wish for neglect, as I soak in my truth
 How I wish for respect, as I choke on my food
 How I reminisce and reflect, as I cope with the proof
 Of How just a pinch of neglect, would restore me to youth
 So, I cringe and detest what I'm prone to refuse.
 Don't Water Me

William K. Gravely

Potted & Unplanted

On the Brink of Death, And Yet Alive...
 We are potted and unplanted.
 Unwilling to change with the will to survive...
 We are potted and unplanted.
 Once shining fruit, now dead on the vine...
 We are potted and unplanted.
 In death is life, let hope arise...
We are potted and unplanted.

Unearth these roots, our bones are dry...
 We're unpotted and unplanted.
 In death we live, reborn as we die...
 We're unpotted and unplanted.
 Our roots released, we prune our lives...
 We're unpotted and unplanted.
 Release each seed, to bloom and thrive...
We're unpotted and unplanted.

Our fears revealed, with unearthed eyes ...
 We are potted and replanted.
 No Longer blind, we regain our sight...
 We are potted and replanted.
 Where death once withered, branches thrive...
 We are potted and replanted.
 Our roots remain, new fruit arrives...
We are potted and replanted.

William K. Gravely

What's In A Name?

The Stained Glass Project was named because, other than a steeple adorned with a cross, there is no clearer indicator of a “church” than stained glass windows. *Stained Glass* serves as an incredible metaphor of identification not only in distinguishing architecture and the accompanying internal composition of pews and pulpit, but to identify Christ’s true church whose composition consists of people and purpose. The stained glass window is a collective of broken colored pieces which creates a beautiful, transparent picture that comes alive as light shines through it. As with the window, the local church should be a collective of diverse hues (ethnicities), living in transparency, and loving in authentic community that comes alive as Christ’s light shines through us all. However, this same diversity of hue is not seen in most local church congregations.

Introduction | The Secret Life of Plants

It is much easier to throw away a dying plant. The amount of energy, resources, time, and emotion required to revitalize a struggling seedling seem far too great an investment for most casual horticulturalists to make. As a result of the perceived going-rate for revitalization, many plants retaining a fighting chance of survival still find themselves *relegated* to garbage cans rather than *rooted* in more life-giving environments. How could one discard a living component of God’s creation as worthless while it still retains the potential to thrive as a contributor to the larger ecosystem? It is so much easier to simply throw away a dying plant than it is to engage in the difficult work of replanting. After all, this form of life is cheap and seemingly easy to come by, and it is much easier to invest in the exhilaration of a new plant than the exhaustion of replanting one that is struggling. The same is true regarding local churches.

According to church replanting expert and author Mark Clifton, over 4,000 churches permanently close their doors annually in the United States of America.¹ Over 900 of the 4,000 churches are Southern Baptist in affiliation. According to the Pew Research Center, The Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) is the largest protestant denomination in North America.² Clifton also states that 90% of these 900 dying SBC churches are situated within growing neighborhoods.³ How could a local church die while surrounded by a thriving environment? These one-time church plants remained in the proverbial ‘pot’ where they were initially planted, but never branched out to *connect with* nor *adapt to* their surrounding community. These churches die because they remain *isolated from their community* rather than *invested in their community* as a part of a larger *ecosystem* of care and collaboration. Sadly, when churches close under these conditions the surrounding community typically does not even notice due to the lack of relationship between the church and community.

The exhilaration of planting a new church is far more attractive than the exhaustion of replanting a dying church. Many of these dying churches enter struggle and exist in indefinite stagnation due to an aversion to cross-cultural community engagement. Far too many of these dying churches are in communities that have experienced drastic shifts in their racial and ethnic demographics, over the last decade in particular.⁴ Unfortunately, the local churches resisted,

¹ “The Need For Church Replanting- Featuring Mark Clifton,” accessed May 16, 2017, <https://thomrainer.com/2017/04/need-church-replanting-featuring-mark-clifton-rainer-leadership-320/>.

² “[The] Fifteen Largest Protestant Denominations,” accessed September 14, 2018, http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/chapter-1-the-changing-religious-composition-of-the-u-s/pr_15-05-12_rls_chapter1-03/.

³ “The Need For Church Replanting- Featuring Mark Clifton,” accessed May 16, 2017, <https://thomrainer.com/2017/04/need-church-replanting-featuring-mark-clifton-rainer-leadership-320/>. The irony of the unhealthy state of these churches is the surrounding community is thriving and growing. Typically struggling churches are nestled within struggling communities that are experiencing anything but growth.

⁴ “A Changed Church For A Changing Community: Fielder Church,” accessed September 17, 2018, <http://www.sbclife.net/article/2489/a-changed-church-for-a-changing-community-fielder-church>. Author Mark Kelly speaks of a pastor’s perspective as he recognizes the shifts within his community and the lack of shift within his congregational composition. Mark writes, “As [Gary Smith] looked at that predominantly black cheer squad, Smith realized Arlington [TX] had changed racially without the church recognizing it. He set out to learn what other

regressed, or worse, refused to shift their ministry strategy for community connection in the newly diverse context. This kind of isolation of the local church is common across denominations, but there is a muddled history stemming from the germination of the SBC that established a correlation between majority white churches that wilt as their surrounding communities blossom with new color.

The Southern Baptist Convention has a long history of racism that has stained her banner of ministry for over a century.⁵ The Southern Baptist Convention was solely founded on the theological premise of supporting slavery in 1845. This stance prompted a split from the American Baptists and precipitated in the founding of a collection of independent churches with a shared missional tie and affiliation. The Southern churches split in order to carry out their desire to support and commission slave masters as missionaries.⁶ This was the singular issue of the convention's founding and this created a very segregated and insulated environment as a result.⁷ Concerning the restoration of other denominational splits over slavery

Emery Farnsley II, author of *Southern Baptist Politics*, notes:

One popular explanation for the “unity” is emphasized in the names of current American denominations (e.g., Lutheran Church in America, United Methodist Church, Presbyterian Church USA, United Church of Christ). According to this explanation, many of these groups were united before the Civil War. Just before (or during) the war, they split over slavery, and in the twentieth century they reconciled. Southern Baptists, however, have yet to reconcile with Northern Baptists (later to become the American Baptists), and the two remain separated halves of an antebellum whole.⁸

predominantly white churches had done to adapt and survive. “I discovered there were no models for it,” Smith says. “In those neighborhoods, 95 percent of those churches die.” But Smith also knew the issue was larger than just survival.”

⁵ H. Shelton Smith, *In His Image, but: Racism in Southern Religion, 1780-1910* (Durham, N.C: Duke University Press, 1972), 127.

⁶ Smith, *Southern Religion*, 125-127.

⁷ Ibid, 127. As noted by Smith, the SBC is the only denomination in North America that is solely defined by their historic stance of racism. Other mainline denominations split over racial issues, but only the SBC has remained separated from her original body to this day.

⁸ Arthur Emery Farnsley, *Southern Baptist Politics: Authority and Power in the Restructuring of an American Denomination* (University Park, Pa: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994), 1.

The Southern Baptist convention was founded on the affirmation of slavery and has not reconciled with the larger body from which it split over the issue. According to religious historian of Duke Divinity School H. Shelton Smith, “In the fall of 1844 Georgia Baptists apparently heard a rumor that the Home Mission Society was questioning the advisability of continuing its policy of appointing slaveholders as missionaries.”⁹ Smith describes the knee-jerk reaction of Baptist boards across the South to the Boston board’s rule against slaveholding missionaries:¹⁰

The board of the Virginia Foreign Mission Society called it “unconstitutional” and a “violation of the rights of the Southern members of the Convention,” and exhorted “aggrieved” southerners to gather in the convention at Augusta, Georgia, on May 8, 1845, “to confer on the best means of promoting the Foreign Mission cause, and other interests of the Baptist denomination in the South.” Baptist leaders poured into Augusta on the appointed day and speedily organized “The Southern Baptist Convention,” with William B. Johnson as its first president.¹¹

The segregated and insulated environment of the SBC continued from The Emancipation Era through the American Civil Rights Movement. According to author and historian Kyle Haselden,¹² “The religious community in American society produced and sustained -- sometimes on biblical grounds-- the anti-Negro bias which has permeated the American mind from the beginning of the nation until the present day.”¹³ Curtiss Paul DeYoung, Michael O. Emerson, George Yancey, and Karen Chai Kim note, “At the conclusion of the Civil War there

⁹ Smith, *Southern Religion*, 126.

¹⁰ Ibid, 126. The Boston Board ruled in November 1844 with these words, “*if any one should offer himself as a missionary, having slaves, and should insist on retaining them as his property, we could not appoint him. One this is certain, we can never be a party to any arrangement which would imply approbation of slavery.*”

¹¹ Ibid, 126-127.

¹² Haselden is celebrated by Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. who offered the forward to his book *Mandate for White Christians*.

¹³ Kyle Haselden, *Mandate For White Christians* (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1966), 49. The term “present day” refers to 1966, United States of America.

was a “mass exodus” from white denominations and biracial congregations.”¹⁴ However, there were some white Christians that served as allies for African-Americans. DeYoung, Emerson, Yancey, and Kim continue, “The Quakers were by far the most militant religious group addressing the ills of slavery. Once they decided that slavery was morally wrong, they freed the enslaved Africans they owned and in many cases compensated the persons who had served them as slaves.”¹⁵ The authors mention despite their radical efforts, The Quakers still remained segregated due to their lack of proximity to enslaved persons and their refusal to allow blacks to join their assemblies.¹⁶ As seen amongst the abolitionist Quakers, the issue of segregation was not solely the sin of the SBC.

With the affirmation of slavery serving as the founding issue of the SBC and with no accompanying theological issue, the convention remains a majority white institution to this day.¹⁷ Perhaps as a step toward repentance for past sin, yet still as a majority white organization, the SBC has invested heavily in what they call “urban church planting.” The SBC currently has a strong desire to plant new churches in majority black neighborhoods and has done so for the last decade. Considering the SBC’s history and demographics, what challenges arise in these urban church replanting and church planting efforts? The issue of segregation is not only a concern for dying churches, but for new church plants as well. J.D. Greear, the recently elected president of the Southern Baptist Convention in 2018 is poised to take steps toward racial reconciliation, states that 21% of all SBC churches are non-white, however the majority of these

¹⁴ Curtiss Paul DeYoung, et. al., *United by Faith: The Multiracial Congregation as an Answer to the Problem of Race* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 52,53.

¹⁵ DeYoung, *United By Faith*, 51.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ “Members of the Southern Baptist Convention,” accessed October 16, 2018, <http://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/religious-denomination/southern-baptist-convention/>. According to The Pew Research Center, having performed a survey of over 35,000 congregants in 2014, the Southern Baptist convention was 85% White with the next demographic being Black/ African-American at 6%, 2% less than in 2007.

churches are still homogenous congregations.¹⁸ According to columnist Tobin Grant, Southern Baptist churches are among the top 5 religious organizations that reflect their surrounding communities the least (alongside Hinduism, Reformed Judaism, Pietists, and Anglicans).¹⁹

Baptist Press News reports the number of non-white congregations has increased by 66% since 1998, however these congregations remain homogenous and no longer reflect their surrounding communities due to gentrification and white flight.²⁰ The SBC voted in their first and only black president to date, Fred Luter, as recently as June 19, 2012. The result is a convention with many attempts at diversity, yet one that has been historically behind the curve of integration with such a rich history on the wrong side of racial issues. One such attempt at reconciliation and the hope of diversity was made in 1989 at the Las Vegas convention. This is a small excerpt from the SBC's Resolution on Racism:

Therefore, be it RESOLVED, That we, the messengers of the Southern Baptist Convention, meeting in Las Vegas, Nevada, June 13-15, 1989, affirm our intention of standing publicly and privately for racial justice and equality.

Be it further RESOLVED, That we repent of any past bigotry and pray for those who are still caught in its clutches; and

Be it further RESOLVED, That we bear witness to the devastating impact of racism; and

Be it further RESOLVED, That we call upon individual Southern Baptists, as well as our churches, to reach across racial boundaries, establishing fraternal rather than paternal friendships;

Despite such public statements about the organizational stance of the Convention, the autonomy of the local churches within the convention as well as the lifestyle and perspectives of the individual members have largely kept the SBC segregated and markedly white.

¹⁸ Greear, J.D., "Racial Reconciliation and Cultural Diversity In The SBC," J.D. Greear Ministries (blog) March 19, 2018, <https://jdgrear.com/blog/cultural-racial-diversity-sbc/>.

¹⁹ Grant, Tobin; "Why Is The Southern Baptist Convention So White: Two Surprising Looks At The SBC," Religion News Service, March 5, 2015, <https://religionnews.com/2015/03/05/southern-baptist-convention-white-two-surprising-looks-sbc-religious-groups/>.

²⁰ *White Flight* is a casual sociological term for the mass exodus of white families as they leave urban centers and move deeper into the suburbs, supposedly to avoid proximity to people of color.

This is the soil from which church plants have come and the soil that has nourished thousands of local churches within the convention for decades. Horticulturalists might consider this a form of soil pollution. According to the Journal of Pollution Effects and Control:

***Soil Pollution** is when humans introduce harmful objects, chemicals or substances, directly or indirectly into the soil in a way that causes harm to other living things or destroys soil or water ecosystems. Soil pollutants include a large variety of contaminants or chemicals (organic and inorganic), which could be both naturally-occurring in soil and man-made. In both cases, the main soil pollution causes are the human activities.*

The main reason why the soil becomes contaminated is due to the presence of man-made waste. The waste produced from nature itself such as dead plants, carcasses of animals and rotten fruits and vegetables only adds to the fertility of the soil. However, our waste products are full of chemicals that are not originally found in nature and lead to soil pollution.²¹

Whether churches are planted or whether churches have been in existence for over a century, the polluted soil of segregation has touched them all. This issue of isolated growth in ‘separate pots’ (segregation) is not unique to the church, yet local churches across the country remain statistically more segregated than their surrounding communities. Society has progressed on the integration spectrum as education and wealth gaps have closed marginally over the years, however churches remain behind the curve with regard to breaking the proverbial pots that have kept congregations separated from other congregations and communities of differing ethnicities.

***Secrets In The Soil** | Digging Into The Diagnosis of Potted Plants*

There have been legal advances with regard to segregation, yet the laws have not changed what seem to be social prejudices and preferences among many American churchgoers. The government could not force churches to desegregate due to the separation of church and state and

²¹ “Soil Pollution,” The Journal of Pollution Effects and Control, accessed January 26, 2018, <https://www.omicsonline.org/scholarly/soil-pollution-journals-articles-ppts-list.php>.

these churches have remained largely segregated in the midst of a society that has been slowly but surely integrating ever since. Schools, restaurants, and public meeting places have been integrated through legislation, yet an area of explicit racial and ethnic segregation still festers in our liturgical lives. One institution that remains incongruously segregated amongst other institutions is the local church. Regardless of the passing of numerous bills, laws against Jim Crow segregation, and progress in universal civil rights, the local church is still largely racially polarized. Ironically to many, even within the proverbial ‘melting pot’ that is the United States of America the average local church does not look like the neighborhoods and communities that they serve. Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. stated the following in a televised interview with *Meet The Press* on April 17, 1960:

I think it is one of the tragedies of our Nation, one of the shameful tragedies, that 11 o'clock on Sunday morning is one of the most segregated hours, if not the most segregated hour(s) in Christian America. I definitely think the Christian church should be integrated, and any church that stands against integration and has a segregated body, is standing against the very spirit and teachings of Jesus Christ, and it fails to be a true witness. [But] This is something that the church will have to do itself. I don't think that church integration will come from legal processes. I might say that my church is not a segregating church; it is segregated, but not segregating. It would welcome white members. (Meet The Press April 17, 1960)

King highlighted several issues that I want to emphasize as the “sickness in the soil” of the local church. Not only did King state that the American Church should be desegregated regardless of the social and cultural norms of the country, but also that there is a difference between ‘segregating churches’ and ‘segregated churches.’ Some churches are segregated by choice as they use their proverbial pot as a tactic of isolation, while others happened to be segregated due to their historical roots on the receiving end of oppression. There are some churches that both implicitly and explicitly promote isolation, while others are simply relegated to it. King had to admit, even as one of the paramount voices and most influential figures in the Civil Rights

Movement, that his own church was still segregated. The so-called black church was birthed by necessity as white so-called Christians refused to worship with their ‘slaves’ and later free Negro neighbors. The Black Church bloomed as enslaved Africans once planted in darkness relegated to worship under floorboards in Savannah, GA and balconies across the “Bible Belt” emerged into the light of open fields and dimly lit slave cabins where dignity’s rays allowed them to grow.²²

I have found that many churches have open doors and closed minds. There is such a deep sense of separation and exclusivity in some church’s racial identity that although their mouths may confess a desire for racial reconciliation and diversity, they have cultivated an environment, whether intentionally or subconsciously, that is polarizing, self-serving, and marginalizing. Churches like these would see many ‘relative minority groups’²³ come and never join because, although their doors were open, the minds of the people may be closed to strangers.²⁴ These self-serving liturgical practices, in turn, cultivate an environment that reflects a rejection of other people groups.²⁵ This happens in majority white and black congregations alike.²⁶ When churches or organizations say that they want ‘diversity’ they simply want other minority groups to ‘assimilate’ to their way of doing and being. Diversity has become a popular catchphrase and trend that typically speaks to skin color rather than ethnic background or culture. In other words,

²² “The Oldest Black Church In North America,” accessed January 3, 2019, <https://www.firstafricanbc.com/history.php>. Many churches like First African Baptist Church (FABC), founded in 1773 in Savannah, GA, were birthed from slavery and still bear the marks and fixtures of antebellum innovation. The floor boards in FABC contain holes that are in the shape of what is known as the *BaKongo Cosmogram*, a symbol representing “birth, life, death, and rebirth.” These ornate holes enabled slaves relegated to worshiping in secret to breath beneath the floor. These facts are sourced from the churches official website listed above.

²³ I am referring to a minority group relative to the congregation of a local church. This would also include white visitors at a predominantly black congregation.

²⁴ *Strangers* of a different race or ethnicity in particular.

²⁵ Song choice, culturally bound sermon illustrations, style of dress, and the visible leaders in the pulpit/ onstage can be alienating to certain attendees.

²⁶ LatinX and Asian churches share this outcome, yet have unique complexities due to perceived language barriers.

diversity in church typically means assimilating black and brown people into a Eurocentric cultural context, rather than fostering an environment that reflects multiple ethnicities and their cultural expressions of the faith through music, dress, word choice, and social norms. The same is true for the so-called “Black Church.” Many churches claim that all are welcome, but don’t recognize how the music, social culture, and language are alienating in both implicit and explicit ways. Many of us attempt to ignore cultural differences, but this method typically falls short of its attempt at reconciliation. Bryan Bantum notes:

The solution was to ignore the difference, see people for the “content of their character,” to parrot Dr. King. As much as I hoped this was true, I saw in my own life how intention is not enough. I was born in a racialized world. I would have to wrestle with my own bias, how the son of a black man could privilege white bodies and ideas. I would have to ask difficult questions about why ideas of beauty or intelligence seemed to be so racially coded in my own life and in America.²⁷

The problem here is that the local church in America is lagging behind the broader society in racial reconciliation.

Ironically, the American Church is struggling to fulfill the call to make disciples of all nations while nestled in one of the most ethnically diverse countries in the world. Many churches, both black and white, are dying in their pots while the communities they either consciously or subconsciously refuse to connect to thrive. Churches that stay in their own pots while a lush ecosystem flourishes around them are perishing in the very pots that they believe are *protecting* them. There are parallels in horticulture that offer much insight into the consistent stagnation and impending death of churches that no longer reflect their community. These ‘pots’ are sufficient in the initial phase of church planting, but over time they will kill the plants themselves and the only salvation for these struggling saplings is to replant them.

²⁷ Brian Bantum, *The Death of Race: Building a New Christianity in a Racial World*, Theology for the People (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2016), 46.

The Root Cause | The Sickness Is Hidden In Plain Sight

According to the Encyclopedia Britannica:

Root rot is caused by numerous fungi, especially *Armillaria mellea*, *Clitocybe tabescens*, and *Fusarium*, and many oomycetes, including *Pythium*, *Phytophthora*, and *Aphanomyces*. Plants lose vigour, become stunted and yellow, and may wilt or die back and drop some leaves. They do not respond to fertilizer and water.²⁸

Root Rot is a consequence of overwatering a plant with no drainage in the pot. Insignificant drainage causes fungus to grow due to stagnant water surrounding the roots. For churches this means that resources are flowing in, but nothing is flowing out to the surrounding community. The extremities of the roots rot first, limiting nutrient absorption, and in turn the foliage is impacted which begins to wilt and fall off. The symptoms of these churches can seemingly be remedied with a few surface level augmentations in the form of ‘pruning,’ yet the real issue lies beneath the surface. As with the roots of a plant, once the root system is impacted the holistic health of the plant suffers. *Root rot* in churches is unfortunately common due to the isolating nature of their proverbial ‘pots.’ The more isolated a church is from the surrounding community, the more likely the church’s proverbial water is simply gathering at the roots and not flowing out to the surrounding environment. Signs of *root rot* for churches can include such subtle signs as a congregation that bears little to no resemblance to the community demographics, and as explicit as warnings signs to keep neighbors off of the church’s ‘private property.’ Rather than churches creating environments to incubate the surrounding community, they become exclusive social clubs whose foundational mission of serving the community is exchanged for remaining secure from that very community. By the time the ministry’s branches are wilting, the roots have already begun to die. The church has become a container rather than a conduit.

²⁸ “Rot: Types of Plant Disease,” Encyclopedia Britannica, accessed December 31, 2018, <https://www.britannica.com/science/rot#ref290666>.

Local churches must have ample ‘drainage’ for the water (resources) it receives. When churches fill up with the resources of passion, principle, provision, and people and do not allow these resources to *flow through* them rather than solely *flowing to* them, the local church can experience *root rot* in the very pot they believed was facilitating their growth. In order to grow and thrive, “church plants” need pots with holes; they need holey pots. This means when considering location that churches ought not solely seek out the best property value, but discern which neighborhood, community, school system, and local government they are called to partner with and serve. Otherwise the temporary housing of the *pot* meant to serve as an initial housing to establish the *roots*, will become the very inhibition that stunts the *plant’s* future growth. Not only was the pot holding excess nutrients in, but the proverbial pot was also keeping the community out. Like house plants, potted churches contribute a proverbial ‘breath of fresh air’ as they launch, but if the church does not find its place in a long-term symbiotic relationship with the larger community it has in many ways failed.

Often excess resources are just as problematic as limited resources. After all, wilted leaves surface as a symptom of both watering surplus and watering scarcity. The isolated churches become ill because they refuse to exist as conduits of love, grace, and truth *to their surroundings*, but become containers filled with fear, apathy, and contempt *for their surroundings*. As a result, these churches inevitably fizzle while existing amongst an ecosystem they refuse to contribute to or become a consistent fixture within. Unfortunately, due to the similarity of symptoms these potted yet unplanted churches often attempt to prune their limp leaves rather than excavating and, in turn, exposing their rotten roots. Pruning in ministries that are experiencing *root rot* is attempting to alleviate the symptom without dealing with the literal root cause.

Potted and Unplanted | A Church Disconnected From Her Community

Every local church is a plant, but some are just younger than others. We can distinguish between whether a church was a traditional plant or whether it was a split (uprooted) from an existing church, but every church has a beginning and an accompanying reason for being. Unfortunately, the older the church is the less likely she is to remain connected to her founding reason for being. Likewise, these older churches are more likely to have a reason for being that was either initiated from or was incubated within a place of segregation. According to Miles S. Mullin, the white evangelical church failed to collectively address racism and segregation because they largely viewed racism as an individualistic practice and not systemic injustice.²⁹ Mullin argues that the individualistic lens comes from the evangelical emphasis on personal conversion and thus viewing society as a collection of individuals.³⁰ This argument is not only held by Mullin. Michael Emerson and Christian Smith, while recounting a particular interview, note:

Mary, a 28 year old mother of 2... went on to discuss her frustration with the individual-level prejudice she sees from a few whites—including her father, who did not speak to her sister for years after her marriage to an African[-]American. But not supporting or engaging in such actions herself, she neither agrees with such people nor does she see such thoughts and actions as the center of the race problem.³¹

Emerson and Smith continue, “for most white evangelicals race was compartmentalized.”³² This mentality of individualism only developed in the isolation of segregated and disconnected churches. The American evangelical church, with the SBC at the helm, continued to plant

²⁹ J. Russell Hawkins and Phillip Luke Sinitiere, eds., *Christians and the Color Line: Race and Religion after Divided by Faith* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

³⁰ Hawkins and Sinitiere, *Colorline*, 15.

³¹ Michael O. Emerson and Christian Smith, *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

³² Emerson and Smith, *Divided By Faith*, 70.

churches that mostly served as clubhouses for particular groups rather than cross-sections of the surrounding community. The church plant's reason for being was stated as a missional outpost, but the lack of cultural depth and community engagement seemed more aligned with a clubhouse of consistency or safe haven for similar hues. The foundation of the local church plant's reason for being, whether explicit or implicit, was not always this way.

Like churches, every plant has a beginning. In considering the origin of natural plants many of us think of store shelves rather than forest floors. Likewise, we typically consider the church an institutional invention of social groups rather than an organizational outpost of social change. What Jesus established looked very different, in many regards, than what we consider and understand church to be today. Likewise, the two entities in many regards appear to have two different purposes, namely *service* and '*serve us.*' As one considers obtaining a plant we typically think of a store and acquiring a plant from the shelves rather than considering that a plant's natural home is amongst other plants in a larger ecosystem. Recognizing a plant's life begins as a seed and not on a shelf also denotes the hard work of cultivating the environment for a seed to flourish as a small part of a larger whole.

The Church that Jesus established was an interconnected web of relationships for the purpose of serving (loving) God and serving (loving) neighbor. The foundation of Jesus' church is relational. Why should churches dig into Jesus' relational model when isolation has become the norm? Relationships take work to cultivate, but the fruit can last a lifetime. However, church culture has become increasingly consumer-driven and churches, in turn, have become more individualistic and secluded. This individualism plagues both congregation and congregant alike. Church affiliation and membership has become about personal preferences regarding style

of song, clothing, and length of commute rather than service, calling, and love for one's community-context. According to Mark D. Mulder:

...it seems that worship functions as a forum for group cohesion rather than operating as a venue for transformation. Know that contemporary congregations already have more to do with affinity groups than geography, the disregard of the local during worship seemed to have a role in nurturing a perceived unity. That is, people already congregate to worship with people who they think and look like- not people who they live by. Moreover, inhibiting references to local issues during worship works to preempt the manifestation of fissures within the congregation and nurtures a perceived internal similarity.³³

Likewise, consumers choose plants according to what catches the eye from the shelf and not what was created to thrive in a particular environment. In doing so plants have taken on more aesthetic value than agricultural worth. The same is true for the local church. It is no wonder that something driven by such aesthetic allure has created a somewhat shallow theology and surface level relationships for far too many Christian churchgoers.

The Sickly Sapling | *The Small SBC Church With The Will To Be Reborn*

Ewing Road Baptist Church (ERBC) was poised for death as one of more than 960 Southern Baptist Churches that permanently close their doors each year. The Church was founded in 1977 and at one point boasted over 300 members at its membership peak. However, during the 1990's the surrounding neighborhood in Austell, GA began to shift in racial demographics. According to the 2000 U.S. Census Austell was 64.74% White, 25.32% Black/ African-American, and by 2010 the surrounding community was 32.99% White and 55.43% Black/ African-American.³⁴ According to 2017 Census data Austell was 33.2% White and 56.5% Black/ African-American.³⁵

³³ Hawkins and Sinitiere, 145.

³⁴ "Austell, GA Population," US Census, accessed February 2, 2018, <http://censusviewer.com/city/GA/Austell>.

³⁵ "Austell City Georgia," US Census, accessed January 24, 2018, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/austellcitygeorgia/PST045217>.

Ewing Road Baptist church was well over 90% white in 2010 and still over 85% white in 2017.³⁶ Not only was the church behind the curve regarding demographics, which is a symptom of failed community engagement and connection, but the church was also antiquated and behind the times regarding culture.

Many churches with *root rot* show signs of stunted growth that typically manifest as a church culture that seems to be *stuck in time*. The membership, church culture, and even décor are usually stuck at the last era of growth. The proverbial plant's growth is stunted. A church that was disconnected from its local community in the 1990's typically has not grown much and still has a 1990's church environment and accompanying culture. Multigenerational churches begin to age as they lose the next generation that doesn't share their collective personal preferences on church culture. In some instances, the more traditional generation no longer desires to invest in the community and they would rather be insulated from those beyond the walls of familiarity. Such insulation may erode the church's vision and mission and consumer driven individualistic preferences begin to eat away at the church's roots. However, once a sense of mission is lost, the church's sense of purpose wilts. A vision can foster some momentum regarding future hope of what could be, yet without a strong *why* driving the church's practices and ministry life, the church will lose her unique and attractive reason for being.

ERBC, a church that once seemingly thrived with 300 homogenous members, would later find herself on the brink of disbanding and selling her property with an average weekly attendance of 40 people. As with plants experiencing *root rot*, the potential for life still remains in struggling churches, yet the only means of survival will come through a drastic shift in the approach to care. The potted church needs a drastic shift in leadership.

³⁶ The membership data comes from queries of current members present during these years.

Pruning The Branches & Preserving The Roots | Failed Solutions For Failing Churches

ERBC experienced extremely high pastoral turnover in the few years prior to my arrival as replanter. Including interim pastors, the church boasted 8 leaders in 6 years. What led to so many pastors coming and leaving around the 1 year mark or less? Apparently, they all got to a point where they thought revitalization was out of their hands. Hiring a new pastor was the church's attempt to prune leaves and add water to what seemed to be a dry situation. However, because the root cause was not identified and examined, the church didn't realize that she didn't need more water, rather she needed to poke holes in the pot that separated her from her community. ERBC's pastors shared similar backgrounds, all southern white males trained in Southern Baptist seminaries with similar perspectives on local missions, community, politics, and culture. They were perhaps the perfect fit for the church, but not the right fit for who and what the church needed to become. In other words, in many ways they fit the mold of who ERBC already was, but were not an embodiment of the new identity ERBC so desperately needed. Each added their own gifting and enriched the environment in particular ways, however the roots were still rotting due to a barrier between the church and the community. Many well-meaning white leaders stated that they "didn't see color" as a gesture of welcome to the colorful community. Tracy M. Lewis-Giggetts states, "...after some thought, I realized that there is a real danger in "not seeing color" or being figuratively colorblind. If a person doesn't see my color, if he or she doesn't see my culture, then in essence that person doesn't see me."³⁷ The church continued to hire new leadership as the old guard continued to get frustrated with the lack of fruit and left.

³⁷ Tracy M. Lewis-Giggetts, *The Integrated Church: Authentic Multicultural Ministry* (Kansas City, Mo: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 2011), 19.

Many churches that experience *root rot* (stagnation) believe that hiring a new pastor, typically a consistent type of leader the existing congregation prefers with slight augmentations with each incoming iteration, will resolve the churches issue. However, a surface-level change like a pastoral hire who has no intentionality nor intuition on how to change the longstanding culture of the church and establish new relationships with the community will not address the *root issue*. The church wanted to be protected from the community and the new pastors seemed to address other aspects of the church's culture while leaving the division from the neighborhood intact. There were a few failed "outreach" attempts,³⁸ but once the neighbors came to Sunday Worship, they felt the environment was neither accommodating nor accepting. Many leaders don't realize that offering resources without fostering a lens and culture of affirming dignity can actually heighten racial tension. These ministry practices appear to have good intentions, but end up reinforcing biased cultural structures of value. Fumitaka Matsuoka states:

Devaluation grows out of our images of society and the way those images catalog people. The catalog need not be taught. It is implied by all we see around us: The kinds of people worshiped in advertising and movies, conversations about whether a person of color can be President, and who is noteworthy enough to be included in school curricula, and literary, and musical canons. The ways people are valued and respected create an image of society in which many Americans of color simply do not fare well.³⁹

The community surrounding ERBC, that transitioned to predominantly Black/ African-American, did not want to be patronized by a church offering food as though they were starving, while many were earning similar incomes to parishioners in the congregation. Likewise, a traditional white church that hadn't shifted her worship culture nor historic lens on minorities, was in poor position to welcome and retain the younger people of color that had taken residence

³⁸ "outreach" is in quotes because this task of handing out resources rarely turns into long-term relationship and tends to rob people of dignity and the opportunity for reciprocity. The community was viewed as "the least of these" when most of the neighbors had the same lifestyle, acumen, and education as the members.

³⁹ Fumitaka Matsuoka, *The Color of Faith: Building Community in a Multiracial Society* (Cleveland, Ohio: United Church Press, 1998), 82.

in the community. The previous pastors attempted to connect with the community, but not by *establishing relationships* with the residents, rather by attempting to *exchange resources* while retaining their preexisting culture. “Us” and “them” language became commonplace both with implicit and explicit meaning. Drew G. I. Hart, author of *Trouble I’ve Seen*, notes:

Our society is structured in hierarchy in such a way that whiteness has mattered most. Though it is common for white people, especially white evangelicals, to talk about being colorblind, there is often no hesitation to speak about black problems. This turns our attention away from the social construction of whiteness. Racial terms are commonly used in white rhetoric. Race isn’t actually avoided, but discussion about racism is. When race is talked about in white dominant culture, naming and discussing the life of people of color (and often their problems) is the extent of racial talk. There isn’t much room for discussing whiteness, whether historically or in its present sociological form.⁴⁰

ERBC inadvertently penned a narrative about the surrounding community that was riddled with stereotypes based on assumptions rather than facts based on personal interactions.

Replanting | *Preserving The Life of Dying Plants*

Again, the Southern Baptist Convention was founded on the affirmation of slavery and split from the Northern Baptists to carry out their desire to support and commission slave masters as missionaries. The affirmation of slavery is the soil bed from which every facet of the SBC sprouted. This means that all aspects of the convention must be examined due to the soil of segregation within which the entity grew.

The Stained Glass Project exists to restore and rebuild the Church along racial lines. We have developed a strategy for dying local churches in ‘transitioning communities’ to once again thrive by *replanting* them with a mission of strategic cross-cultural community engagement and a vision to become a multi-ethnic, multi-generational, and multi-cultural congregation. Allan

⁴⁰ Drew G. I. Hart, *Trouble I’ve Seen: Changing the Way the Church Views Racism* (Harrisonburg: Herald Press, 2016), 115.

Aubrey Boesak and Curtiss Paul DeYoung note, “A definition developed by sociologists studying congregations and race is that a multiracial congregation is one where no single racial or cultural group is more than 80% of the membership. In other words, at least 20% of the members are not part of the dominant group.”⁴¹ Racism and prejudice are certainly the root of the issue, but how can one measure the depth of racism or the degree of prejudice a congregation holds? We must analyze and measure shifts in both the perspectives and practices of individual members as well as the collective congregation. In *Ending Racism in the Church*,

Raymond Blanks notes:

I have... offered evidence of racism’s vitality among Christians not to depress or to cause guilt. It is, rather, more helpful if we see the practice of racism as a need for our continuous conversation as Christians so that we all might become more fully human and more fully Christlike. The Church needs to be healed of the poison of racism if it is to be a source of healing for our society.⁴²

With regard to the church members, we can tangibly measure implicit bias through tests and surveys over a predetermined period of time. Implicit bias affects all humans, however as a result of fear, implicit bias can turn into prejudging as we take our assumptions and hold them as facts without any tangible data to confirm them. Once prejudice has set in, we can begin to assign value to the people and places about whom we have cultivated concrete assumptions (alternative facts). Implicit bias is one of the reasons local churches of a majority ethnicity do not take the steps to reach, engage, and serve their surrounding community and instead settle for targeting a specific ethnicity, age, or income-earning group.

If the communities have diversified, but the local churches have not, perhaps this exposes a deeper theological issue than one of sociological origin. Considering the statistics and

⁴¹ Allan Boesak and Curtiss Paul DeYoung, *Radical Reconciliation: Beyond Political Pietism and Christian Quietism* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2012), 77.

⁴² Susan E. Davies and Paul Teresa Hennessee, eds., *Ending Racism in the Church* (Cleveland, Ohio: United Church Press, 1998), 103.

demographics of the SBC and the communities where these churches are rooted, a comparison of the diversity of community to the diversity of the congregation will serve as a long-term metric. However, this correlation will take years to measure and analyze. Recognizing these trends and issues within the SBC, Ewing Road Baptist Church proved to be a sound representation of the larger challenges and worked perfectly as a case study for our uncanny replanting experiment. We learned quickly that a theological issue was at work in the church's challenges as well as the longstanding practices of the convention.

Theological Thorns | Healthy Scriptural Interpretation For Multicultural Contexts

The foundation of the SBC was a thwarted theology of slavery and white supremacy, so it is critical to unpack a sound biblical theology as a response to the issue of willful segregation.

According to John W. Kinney:

African-American Christians can be uniquely sensitive to the way that the Bible has been used against Native people because it was also used against them. Puritan preachers claimed they were a "European Joshua" people called into this new "American Holy Land" to "utterly destroy" the First Nations Canaanites. Only a few compromising native "Rahabs" who converted to European ways could avoid the wrath of God's chosen saints."

Kinney illustrates an example of the thwarted theology that many white "Christians"⁴³ created to justify acts of genocide, oppression, and social practices like segregation. The Colonialism mindset remained as a motive for urban church planting. The theological lens of superiority positioned many white church planters as the chosen savior and the dilapidated urban community as the sinners in need of saving. Churches that harbor such theology interact with the neighboring citizens as those that need to be avoided and ones whose culture must be sanctified.

⁴³ "Christian" is used in quotes because the teachings of Jesus, and Paul for that matter, are the antithesis of racism, elitism, and supremacy.

Superiority theology produces little need of getting to know one's neighbor because, as spiritually inferior, they have little to offer "God's chosen people."

Brian Bantum unpacks the New Testament account of the Samaritan Women and notes:

This woman finds herself alone in the community because of the story that was told about her body. The brokenness of the fall is embodied not only in individual decisions, but also in the geography of a community. She is without the resources of friendship and neighbors. Her community is cut off from the benefits of the Jewish community because of the way Israel imagined faithfulness as spiritual purity rather than an embodied life with the other.⁴⁴

When *cultural separation* from a broad stroke of deeply held implicit bias cannot be maintained due to proximity, *cultural assimilation* is the next line of defense as the proverbial pot begins to break. These roots of supremacy have remained in subtle, more palatable forms like the expectation of cultural assimilation. Unfortunately, the expectation for assimilation of the minority culture, or "the sin of assimilation" in *The Stained Glass Project* language, is a symptom of White Supremacy. In fact, minority culture people are socially required to understand and even undertake components of majority culture while the inverse is rarely executed.

Although common in the American context over the course of history, the expectation of assimilation is not exclusive to whites, but proves to be a consistent sociological norm and expectation in environments where people of color are the homogenous or dominant group in a particular context. For decades the Southern Baptist Convention led church planting and missions for the Nation through The North American Mission Board (NAMB) while remaining predominantly white. However, Jesus commissioned his 1st Century Palestinian Jewish followers to make disciples of every nation.⁴⁵ One must ask, with such a heart for the great commission, why did it take so long for the convention to publicly repent, renounce her past, and

⁴⁴ Bantum, *The Death of Race*, 93.

⁴⁵ Jesus commanded His disciples to make disciples of all Nations as captured in The Gospel of Matthew 28:19.

place non-whites in roles of prominence? Unfortunately, Martin Luther King Jr.'s words in his April 17, 1960 interview regarding *11 o'clock on Sunday morning as the most segregated hour in the Nation* are still true today. *The Stained Glass Project* seeks to be a critical component of disrupting that reality. Theologically we must understand that the biblical word for segregation is *division* and the theological foundation for racism is *hubris*. Both division and pride are warned against and condemned by both Jesus and Paul throughout the New Testament.

The miracle of Pentecost was to diversify the New Covenant Church by allowing Jews from every nation to hear the gospel in their own native language, birthing a multi-national church. The miraculous gift of tongues came to equip the church to reach people across language barriers with God's grace and truth, thus fulfilling Jesus' great commission. Post Pentecost, the 1st century church became a diverse and united collective.⁴⁶ Galatians 3:28 shows the New Covenant Church that ethnicity and cultural identity are simply *tools of discipleship* and no longer *titles of division*. Paul writes to the church at Galatia, "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." Colossians 3:11 echoes the same sentiment of Galatians 3:28. Colossians 3:11 reads, "In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all!" If these foundational New Covenant principles are not enough, John the Revelator gives us a picture of Christ's Church in Revelation 7. John writes:

After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. ¹⁰They cried out in a loud voice,

⁴⁶ As noted in Paul's writing in Galatians 3:28, emphasizing no distinction between Jew nor Greek, Male nor Female, Slave nor Free.

saying, “Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!
Revelation 7:9-10 NRSV⁴⁷

The church John described is not racially, generationally, linguistically, nationally, nor ethnically homogenous, rather it is a church from every nation, tribe, and tongue all giving praise to the Lamb of God. Many skeptics read this text as purely eschatological, arguing that this multicultural reality will only occur after Christ’s return. However, Jesus and Paul admonished the church to be unified and that division is a threat to the integrity of the Church as a preferential plight of human hubris. These foundational tenets, namely The Great Commission, unity, diversity, and equality define what the New Covenant Church ought to be and this remains true from the 1st century until today. The Revelation 7 Church is not an eschatological vision, rather a post-resurrection reality. The gospel quickly reached the known world through North Africa, the southern tip of Europe, and Paul took it throughout Asia Minor. The Church was intended to be both ethnically diverse and multicultural.

Cultural assimilation was present and resisted as early as the 1st century. Paul argued with and corrected Peter about his attempts to assimilate Gentile believers into Jewish culture. The first century church thrived as a multiethnic and multicultural body that quickly spread across three continents. The multicultural vision of the Church was only blurred when a manipulative form of “Christianity” was used as a means of power and global dominance supporting such atrocities as Colonialism, chattel slavery, and the Transatlantic Slave Trade. The effects of this misuse and misappropriation of Biblical texts and abuse of the faith still has long-lasting effects on the Western Church.

⁴⁷ NRSV stands for the New Revised Standard Version.

Gauges of Growth | How To Measure Multicultural Ministry Health

The metrics for the efficacy of cross-cultural community engagement for the entire Southern Baptist Convention must be measured over time and are too provisional for the scope of my final doctoral project. Though the depth of impact is ongoing measurement, the breadth of *The Stained Glass Project* will be national. Due to strategic partnerships, *The Stained Glass Project* is positioned to have a national implementation within the first 2 years of my 2019 graduation. As the founder of The Stained Glass Project, I have already traveled to 3 states giving presentations at national conferences, was interviewed by an international blog and TED talk speaker, hosted discussions with groups of pastors and staff, and spoke on panels about the fruit produced and efficacy regarding *The Stained Glass Project's* impact on what once was Ewing Road Baptist Church.⁴⁸

The experiment at Ewing Road Baptist Church that birthed Refuge Community Church is bearing transferable and scalable fruit that will help churches across the country. The experiment was rooted in the question, “Can a dying SBC church on the brink of turning over their property, be revitalized through strategic cross-cultural community engagement?” *The experiment is rare not only because it took a married couple preparing to plant a new church and partnered them with a dying church, but that a majority white Southern Baptist church gained her first African-American pastor in her history.* Though *The Stained Glass Project* focuses primarily on dying or stagnant homogenous churches in diverse communities, our framework to *rethink, repent, reconcile, and replicate* as well as our best practices for worship gatherings, staffing, and community engagement will work for nearly any church seeking to regain influence and have community impact.

⁴⁸ Ewing Road Baptist Church (ERBC) is the original name of the church we replanted as Refuge Community Church.

Over the last year our church went from an average attendance in the 40's to averaging over 100 weekly and peaking at 198 for Refuge's first Resurrection Sunday just 7 months later. The church went from a composition of roughly 87% white to 70% people of color with only 15% attrition of the existing membership from ERBC. We must constantly assess the different cultural expressions represented within the worship gathering such as a Haitian member singing the chorus of a hymn in Creole, to hosting a bilingual multi-cultural wedding. We want to measure more than just racial diversity and ethnic composition because many majority culture believers accept a multi-color church as long as it is uni-cultural through assimilation. The burden of cultural conformity is consistently on the minority group within society. To this end, many white Christians struggle with the need to adapt to minority culture because the multi-cultural church is the only space where they are required to do so. As a result, most churches that have multiple ethnicities still struggle to produce a truly multi-cultural environment that equally values and reflects all groups represented. Diversity shows incremental progress and growth in the church, but *unity* is the ultimate goal of the Church. In the 9th chapter of Paul's first letter to the Church at Corinth, he details the lengths to which he goes to share the Gospel with people of other cultures. He does not expect the other to assimilate, rather he assimilates in order to establish rapport and "win" the other. Paul is able to adapt his diet, dress, vocabulary, and other cultural customs to enter the world of the other he wishes to engage. The Stained Glass Project seeks to raise one's cultural awareness to better equip them for the work of relational bridge building.

The Stained Glass Project trains and develops pastors of color to replant predominantly white dying congregations. Therefore, we measure the implicit bias of our congregants and the plurality of cultures in our worship practices and social life. We can measure the implicit bias

through questionnaires and surveys and also gauge the amount of cross-cultural relationships within one's social circle over time. In measuring progress in perspective, one must consider one's family of origin and the community context of their upbringing as a baseline. We have tangible growth, tangible shifts in our demographics, tangible representation across our leadership and volunteer base, as well as intentional conversations happening in healthy environments around our church throughout the year.

If the Great Commission of Matthew 28 is about diversity, then the Commission in Matthew 10 is about equality. Jesus sends out the twelve disciples in Matthew 10 and tells them to change the physical sufferings and circumstances of their neighbors. Jesus tells them to heal the sick, raise the dead, cast out demons, and restore the lepers. All of these tasks were risky in that they put the disciples next to people and in circumstances that would render them unclean in the eyes of both their peers and elders. This means that the local church should not substitute foreign missions (community-service projects) for local discipleship (people development), nor theological discourse for loving thy neighbor. Jesus calls us to make a difference in our local community through relationship, proximity, and collaborative service. The local church must have sound theology, make a community impact, *and* should chiefly be a picture of unity in a divided world.

Preserving the Roots | Why Solely Planting More Churches Is Not Enough

The final gasp of a dying church is much louder than the first gasp of a newborn church. After all, many church plants will not survive beyond 5 years and even for the SBC, as the largest protestant denomination in North America, church planting is essentially a zero sum

initiative when factoring in the dying churches that meet their demise.⁴⁹ Anglican Bishop George Berkeley is the philosopher credited with penning the question, “If a tree falls in the forest and no one hears it, does it make a sound?” The foundation of the question rests upon the notion that perception is our reality, and therefore if no one is around to perceive something then, in a sense, it never took place. For Berkeley, our mind, our memory, and our perception are all that truly exist. I would re-present the question in this way, “if a church’s doors close within a community she never connected to, will the doors make a sound?” I do believe that these doors make a sound that is far louder and more memorable than the ribbon cutting of a new church building or kickoff service for a brand new church plant in an elementary school gym. The neighborhood may not notice the church’s demise due to minimal cars in the parking lot on Sunday morning or nominal activity around the church grounds due to a dwindling membership. However, perhaps when the property is sold, and a new entity takes its place, the collective memory of the neighborhood will be restored and they will recognize that the church that once occupied that space died (failed). Something must be done to replant dying churches in order to preserve the local church’s witness to her surrounding community. Replanting is the solution to address the *root issue*. The Stained Glass Project facilitates a particular type of replanting for homogenous churches that have struggled due to cultural shifts in their surrounding neighborhood.

According to the Mark Clifton, church replanting is the revitalization process of taking a dying church and bringing it back to a state of functioning and prayerfully thriving.⁵⁰ However, to address the issue of cultural tension and historic segregation I propose a specific method for

⁴⁹ “The Need For Church Replanting- Featuring Mark Clifton,” accessed May 16, 2017, <https://thomrainer.com/2017/04/need-church-replanting-featuring-mark-clifton-rainer-leadership-320/>.

⁵⁰ “The Need For Church Replanting- Featuring Mark Clifton,” accessed May 16, 2017, <https://thomrainer.com/2017/04/need-church-replanting-featuring-mark-clifton-rainer-leadership-320/>.

replanting churches that no longer reflect their surrounding community. Atlanta SEND City Missionary Jim Haskell created the revitalization plan for Ewing Road Baptist Church knew that ERBC needed a pastor of color to lead the church in a direction that would connect her to her neighbors in healthy and symbiotic ways. As a person of color, I recognized the unique challenges and opportunities in connecting church planters of color with dying predominantly white congregations for the purpose of planting (birthing) healthy multicultural churches. After coming into the environment, I recognized the gaps in leadership training, congregational discipleship, faulty biblical lenses, community engagement strategy, and deep-rooted politicized perspective that needed to be uprooted. Through my struggles and gained insights The Stained Glass Project was born. If my conviction is that the local church should be as diverse, united, and servant-minded as possible, how can struggling predominantly white churches gain an authentic community witness and relationship with communities of color? We must train church planters of color to enter the SBC as cultural missionaries for the purpose of broadening the historical perspective and the homogenous state of the convention.

Revelation 7 presents Jesus' church as multiethnic and multicultural which means in order to reflect this divine image the church must integrate and unite. The prime opportunity for this is struggling majority white churches in predominantly Black and Latino neighborhoods. The Stained Glass Project has plans to adapt this model for majority black churches in predominantly white neighborhoods as well and eventually scale into the LatinX community with tools and training to breach the language barrier.

The Stained Glass Project presents cross-cultural ministry appointments of church-planters in declining homogenous congregations as a means of birthing healthy multicultural churches. This study explores the viability of cross-cultural church "replanting" as a means of church

revitalization and community engagement. Many Mainline, as well as Non-Denominational churches are suffering decline and death due to consistent cultural tensions and corresponding ministry challenges. Many of the 900+ Southern Baptist Churches that close annually have declined due to homogenous congregations refusing to shift their ministry strategy for their newly diverse community. We will scale The Stained Glass Project model through the largest denomination in North America via the North American Mission Board and the SEND Church Planting Network. There is a strong potential to do so within the multicultural church planting network, Mosaix.

Save the Soil | Retaining The Existing Congregation As a Core Group

As a church is replanted in the framework of The Stained Glass Project it is critical to explicitly communicate the church's need to be *restarted* and the value of as many of the existing congregants remaining as possible. If a critical mass of the existing church is not retained, then a new church plant was inadvertently launched with people that were likely misled into the process. Another unhealthy outcome is when an old church simply believes they have only received a new pastor and not begun anew. The church must be relaunched from scratch, but there must be a critical mass of people that remain for the sake of the integrity of the replant.

While replanting Ewing Road I knew that a name change would be critical. This step was even noted in Jim Haskell's plan for ERBC prior to the hiring process that brought me on as pastor. Douglas J. Bouwer, author of *How to Become a Multicultural Church*, states, "People who drove the heavily traveled street alongside our church buildings, (and who saw our tasteful "First Presbyterian Church" sign) would have assumed that we were a typical, suburban, homogenous congregation in the western suburbs of Chicago. And they would have been right in

their assumption.”⁵¹ Brouwer emphasizes the importance of branding, storytelling, and messaging in the process of intentionally planting and cultivating a multicultural church. First Presbyterian Church has since become *International Protestant Church*. I quickly recognized that the 1970’s practice of naming a church after a location or street name, though it subtly resembles Paul’s notion of the Church at Ephesus, Corinth, and Rome does little, if anything, to reveal the mission or unique personality of the particular church.

Like any brand, a church’s name should speak to the unique attributes of the entity; her vision and purpose for being. ERBC sat on a corner lot of 30 acres with 3 churches of differing denominations literally across the street. How was Ewing Road Baptist Church supposed to communicate anything to the community other than the street on which the church was situated, the era when the church was founded, or the presumed legalism of a denomination that had a longstanding affair with fundamentalism during the 1980’s and 90’s? As church planters, my wife and I already had our church named, core values listed, culture defined, and goals set prior to coming to ERBC. The name I offered was prayed over by the leadership team at the time of the proposed name change and one of the leaders made a minor adjustment. The Lord used a particular leader’s rapport with older members to get a name change passed within 3 months of my arrival that would have taken years considering the state of the congregation. That leader would later leave, but I am forever grateful for their role in launching Refuge Community Church in January of 2018.

I have learned that older members or longstanding members with great rapport with the larger congregation are critical to the replanting process. They will either be a replanter’s greatest assets and partner, or their greatest liability and source of dissention. The pastor is the

⁵¹ Douglas J. Brouwer, *How to Become a Multicultural Church* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2017), 34.

leader ‘on paper,’ however there are unspoken leaders in every church that have the ear and often hold the hearts of the congregation. If the replanter can get these unofficial leaders on board, they can save the church years of stagnation and make quick progress concerning change.

A *replanter* in The Stained Glass Project framework is a church planter who is willing to leverage their gifts, skill set, entrepreneurialism, cultural awareness, and lens of innovation to revitalize a stagnant church in need of a new identity. A word of caution to the replanter: know that regardless of the church’s excitement for your arrival the church needed you due to varying levels of sickness of the culture, theological perspectives, and relationships within the church. There will be incredible pain, some attrition, and resentment as you begin to knock down the unspoken sacred cows of the church. Know that the resentment is not personal, but you are likely experiencing the knee-jerk reaction as the members discover their affinity to the very things that caused the church’s death in the first place. Many members will prefer that you prune these wilting branches in order to preserve them. However, remember that you have a *root problem* that must be excavated and potentially cut-off depending on the level of decay. One of the most jarring revelations I received was that many of the members did not want to plant a new church, rather they wanted their church not to die. By ‘their church’ I mean that every preexisting member had an idea of what they wanted the church to become that may or may not reflect the vision my wife and I had. I needed to recognize that there were moments that required compromise and moments that required contending for what we knew was the only healthy solution.

The replanter must come to the church with a vision, but the existing members have only seen, known, and experienced an antiquated form of church built on the idiosyncrasies of longstanding members and prominent personalities. Many of the members won’t know nor

understand what church planting is nor requires. You will be hired for a job that most will not be able to define and one that will cause pain for everyone involved as the inevitable changes cause a sense of loss and grief that no one could accurately foresee. Families will be broken up as differing generations come and go. Friendship circles will experience pain and loss as they reform with new components. It is much more difficult to save a dying plant than to pull a new one off the shelf. It is much easier to throw away a dying church, and the greatest pains of the revitalization process will make this option the greatest of temptations.

The Roots Die Before the Pot Breaks | Reconciliation as Replanting

Many of us are looking for obvious signs of systemic failure in order to change course in the local church. Proverbially speaking, we are waiting for the pots to break to recognize that we have *root rot* issues. However, with *root rot* the plant has already ceased to grow and once extracted will lose portions of its root system. What is counterintuitive regarding *root rot* care is that the plant requires a smaller pot to recover. Yes, the church must downsize and scale back ministry to the essentials (roots) in order to grow and thrive again. We must avoid what caused the *root rot* in the first place knowing that this *root rot* effects plants of all sizes and types. Regardless of the condition of varying local churches we recognize that segregation is still a preference among the faithful.⁵² After leaving a black megachurch in Smyrna, GA my wife and I were called to a white megachurch in Dallas, GA. Smyrna and Dallas are extremely differing contexts. Smyrna is just outside the northern perimeter of the City of Atlanta and Dallas is four suburban towns west of the city limit of Atlanta. In order for a leader to lead a healthy multicultural church, that

⁵² Thumma, Scott, "Racial Diversity Increasing In U.S. Congregations," accessed February 1, 2018, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/scott-thumma-phd/racial-diversity-increasing-in-us-congregations_b_2944470.html. According to Scott Thumma, Ph. D., professor of Sociology of Religion at Hartford University, "[less than] 14% of churches in the U.S. are considered multicultural" (having more than 20% of a differing ethnic group).

leader must have been culturally immersed in a diverse array of contexts. My wife and I have certainly been in our share of diverse environments.

I grew up classified by what my mentor Dr. Gregory Ellison II would call a *bridge figure*. A *bridge figure* is one that finds no home at the polar extremes of false dichotomies in society, rather they create a home between both parties in the space on *the bridge*. As I put it, *bridge figures* are curators of *the life in the middle*. I believe Jesus was one such figure. Jesus created space *between* the Jews and the Samaritans, the wealthy and the wanting, the religious elite and the morally abased, the divine and the common, and the invisible realm and creation. My wife, Veronica Gravely and I have always been *bridge figures* and we have been on a perpetual exchange program our entire lives. We have created space between so-called nerds and jocks, wealthy “Jack and Jill”⁵³ kids and students receiving free-lunch, popular students and the least remembered, and those at the top of grade-school social order and the most marginalized. Our entire lives had prepared us for the work of replanting. We needed the cultural immersion of Dallas, GA to understand the culture and criticisms of the white SBC church we would be leading into rebirth.

While serving in Dallas we received the experience and education of a lifetime. We recognized the power of radical friendship and the required cost of vulnerability and vigor to serve as someone’s first black friend, even well into adulthood. The same is true for the Black Church. Because the North American Church has been historically segregated there are grey haired members right now who have never ventured outside of their neighborhood nor church, and thus have never made had a friend of another ethnicity. The church and community will only connect through the bravery of *bridge figures* that are willing to leave the familiarity of

⁵³ Jack and Jill refers to a social club for typically affluent African-American children.

their comfort zones and serve as cultural ambassadors for the sake of building authentic and healthy community. This is the heart of cross-cultural community engagement and

The Stained Glass Project.

The ideal candidate for The Stained Glass Project is someone that has ventured outside of their own ethnicity, culture, and denomination and lives what we call a *Stained Glass Life*. We recognize that God's Kingdom includes *all people* and thus a *Stained Glass Life* is one lived outside the framework of false dichotomies. The *Stained Glass Life* takes seriously, as an ethos, the Great Command and Great Commission.⁵⁴ One would not simply jump into horticulture and expect to have thriving plants as a result, and one should not jump into replanting, nor multicultural ministry without rigorous study and assessment of the implicit and explicit cost of such work.

Society is in desperate need of a model of reconciliation as division, bigotry, and implicit bias seem to be at a high not seen in 50 years. Reconciliation has theological connotation of a broken relationship being brought into right standing. Some critics of my work claim that *reconciliation*, paying attention to the prefix, can only take place in relationships that were once healthy. This argument holds weight sociologically, but not theologically. The theological concept of justification is the foundation of reconciliation. We receive grace and favor we don't deserve in order to be reconciled with our creator that we have never intimately known. Theological reconciliation is not bringing a relationship back to a former healthy state, rather perpetually bringing a relationship into a state of health it has never previously seen, but ought to

⁵⁴ The Commands from the Gospel(s) to *Love the Lord Your God with all of your heart, mind, soul, and strength* and to *love one's neighbor as themselves*. The great commission includes making disciples (followers/ partners/ students) of *all nations* and not just those that think, live, speak, and vote like you. See Matthew 22:35–40 and Mark 12:28–34 NRSV.

have.⁵⁵ The Church was diverse ever since the first century, but if we minimize The Church Universal to the American Church we will have a tainted picture from far too brief a history. If one looks at the theological connotation of reconciliation and even the multiethnic nature of the 1st century church, one would recognize the fitting nature of the *racial reconciliation* terminology. What is more unfortunate than the debate over semantics regarding conciliatory compassion and community cultivation is that the church has become apathetic to the notion of integration because we have spent so many seasons in our own *pots*.

We have seemingly forgotten our true home in the forest and fields and are content on shelves and in stores with a commercialized version of what was once about community and collective identity. The Black Church was planted by necessity, yet it has remained isolated by preference, held hostage by past and present pain. The goal of *The Stained Glass Project* is to make Martin Luther King Jr.'s words ring untrue for the 11 o'clock hour of Sunday morning. This will only happen by living out our faith in community, with the surrounding community, throughout the week through intentional practices of cross-cultural community engagement that *The Stained Glass Project* provides.

Conclusion

Environmentally Conscious VS Eco-Systemically Aware | Rebirthing The Community Church

Healthy house plants will continue to grow until they require a larger pot to facilitate further growth. Proverbially speaking, plants desire to be in nature and must eventually return to their natural environment. Therefore, pots are insufficient for the life of a plant and only function as facilitators of that growth for a season. We must recognize that churches will grow until their

⁵⁵ See 2 Corinthians 5:11-21 NRSV

pots of personality, preferences, or practices can no longer provide enough space for the healthy root system. The Church Universal was planted to connect and thrive as a part of society's larger ecosystem.⁵⁶ The nutrients we have should not be kept in our pot, but intentionally shared with the surrounding environment. To take notice of dying churches and their potential *root rot* is to be environmentally conscious. The Stained Glass Project framework of replanting requires leaders and churches to become environmentally conscious with regard to their neighbors and surrounding community.

The local church should be aware of the needs of their community's citizens, schools, and local organizations. However, the church should also be aware of her own needs that citizens and organizations within the community meet. The relationship between church and community is not parasitic, but is rather symbiotic. The church needs the community as much as the community needs the church. Different ethnicities and cultures need one another. It is the only way we get a picture of what the human race, *the only race*, is all about.

If a church is planted in an ethnically diverse community, the influence and impact of that church on its surrounding community should be reflected in the diversity, both ethnically and generationally, of its congregation. If a church is planted in an ethnically homogenous community, then the impact of that church should be measured based upon its generational and socio-economic diversity. This is the tangible measure of the symbiotic relationship. This is how the church becomes *eco-systemically aware*. We must ask: In what ways is the church impacting the community and in what ways is the community impacting the church? The Stained Glass approach to eco-systemic awareness occurs in the following sequence.

- ***Train Leaders*** through culturally immersive internships and experiences

⁵⁶ In Matthew 28:19 Jesus doesn't condemn the faithful to homogenous solitude, rather He commissions the faithful to diverse discipleship.

- **Prepare Congregations** through *pulpit swaps* of pastors of differing ethnicities as well as the cultivation of cross cultural worship
- **Engage Communities** through contextual analysis and creative community connections with neighbors, local schools, and community organizations
- **Cultivate Collaboration** through strategic partnerships on community initiatives
- **Community Building** by extending the invitation to relationship (making space for more churches, businesses, and community organizations) and expanding the network (enlarging the ecosystem of a healthy, self-sustaining community)

Will The Stained Glass Project process work for any church? To some degree yes, but our target is dying or stagnant churches. Dying churches in need of revitalization have a unique asset. Dying churches are desperate enough to make the tough decisions and changes in direction that most churches in either denial or manageable illness resist or ignore. Unfortunately, many churches that are thriving today are headed down the same path of *root rot* due to the shared soil of segregation. The American Church as a whole has suffered from *root rot* for centuries in this sinful soil. Our individual pots, both denominational or cultural, have been flooded with the waters of preference and idiosyncrasies and we have withheld our service to communities. Instead, we have served ourselves by appeasing our consumeristic desires of church. We have collective *root rot* because the pots of color, culture, class, and denominational clique, have rendered the church's growth all but nil. Churches are dying. Church Plants cannot outpace church plateaus, and many churches are perceived as exclusive social clubs, rather than community-connected agents of social change. To date, society has done a better job at breaking the pots and planting gardens than the church.

The Stained Glass Project is already making progress in saving dying churches by replanting them with well educated, experienced, and equipped leaders. The Church cannot carry out the ministry of reconciliation that Christ left us if we stay fractured and disjointed. We know that pruning is not enough to bring life back to these wilting branches. We must do whatever it takes to save these dying plants, and that solution requires addressing the *root issue(s)*. Our process goes far beyond placing a newer more vibrant plant next to the dying one as a distraction from the degrading demise. The Stained Glass Project will not only extend the life of dying churches, but in a very real sense create a new life and identity for the surrounding community as the local church returns to her call of service and takes her place as a contributor to the larger ecosystem. Refuge Community Church recognizes that she is called to be a *refuge* to all people, and not a clubhouse for people of a certain income or skin tone.

The local church is a small and yet critical part of a larger eco-system. If we are willing to put in the effort to examine our roots, prune and uproot that which is unhealthy, and practice the vulnerability of welcoming the strange plants around us, then we might recognize that potted plants are not the center of attention. However within nature, our true habitat, our true nature is recognized as a small part of a larger whole. We as local churches and local practitioners are potted and yet replanted as we seek to serve one another, connected and rooted in the same soil. With the roots of our past exposed and restored, our branches pruned and growing, and our soil blended and refreshed, the fruit we can produce from the local community church, could have a tangible impact on the entire world.

Stained Glass

Colorful hues shine on buried roots
 As color collides with black and white fruit
 For light is invisible until its pursuit
 Arrives and aligns with the window of Truth

What once was pain, now shines through panes
 What once was blind, now colorful window shades
 There are no blinds, we welcome the Son's rays
 This Georgia song, no simpler phrase.

For southern trees bear a strange fruit
 Colored light on the leaves, colored light on the root
 Once a dying plant, condemned and doomed
 Now thrives and shines in crystal bloom.

We went from a pained past...to stained glass panes
 From broken perspectives, to a hope-filled gaze
 From rich dark soil...to the brightest rays
 From chains and segregation... to liberation and change

Broken pots and broken panes...to vast diversity of shades
 Much multicolored light shines on the broken pot's remains
 These windows fully restored provide the light the plants had craved
 From full tomb, to full bloom...resurrection is at play
 Christ's body was clearly broken, but now the glass is clearly stained
 Christ's body reunified, the church restored to wholesome frame

William K. Gravely

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