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Toward Communal Healing:
Initiating a Collective Vision to Combat Congregational Crises

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Abstract

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Occasions occur where congregations are confronted with moments of crisis. There are many forms that crisis can assume, but all of them have the potential of irreparably injuring the church and those who attend. Crises will often consume a congregation causing it to question its identity, and ultimately fall short of doing the work of ministry. For congregations in this condition, the only solution is to engage in a process of healing. For St. John Missionary Baptist Church in Alcoa, Tennessee, that healing process took the form of constructing a collective vision to redefine our direction and to communally declare the kind of congregation we desired to be. Healing takes time, but the benefits of a collective vision are well worth the wait and will propel the congregation beyond the hurt and shame that crisis has the potential of inflicting.

Toward Communal Healing:
Initiating a Collective Vision to Combat Congregational Crises

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Introduction

History has proved that the church is not immune to crisis. Conceived into persecution and following the death of its architect, Jesus Christ, the church has had to contend with traumatic incidents that have tested the resolve of this body for which He gave His life. Since its inception, the Christian Church has been forced to face an abysmal assortment of crises, controversies, and scandals, all which have tarnished its esteem and weakened its witness. From the early days of Christian persecution, to the corrective trajectory of the Protestant Reformation, to the shifting partisan political sands of American evangelicalism, the church has been confronted with an onslaught of crisis moments. While it may seem inconsequential, this history is crucial for understanding the entity and the institution that is the church and for appreciating the fact that congregational crises are not new.

Crises are not unique to any one religion or to any one denomination. Unfortunately, the ubiquitous nature of crisis is a cohesive connector that breaches doctrinal demarcations. Crisis can assume a multitude of forms: a pastor's death, an active shooter, pastoral indiscretions, embezzled finances, a dwindling membership, natural disasters, theological disagreements, among others. Each of these, while presenting different challenges, has the potential to irreparably impair an otherwise healthy congregation. According to Edwin Friedman, "Living with crisis is a major part of leaders' lives."[1] Because conflict and crisis are inevitable, even within the Christian sphere, a strategy to contend with them is necessary if the church is to function effectively.

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[1] Edwin H. Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix* (New York, NY: Seabury Books, 2007), 27.

What must be understood is that a crisis is not simply an actual event, but is in fact, that event's aftermath. More accurately, crisis is understood as the effect precipitated by a preceding cause. A crisis, as defined by Judith A. Lewis et al., is "a critical phase in a person's life when his or her normal ways of dealing with the world are suddenly interrupted."[2] Traumatic incidents within congregations alter and interrupt engagement with the world and often initiate the plunge into the critical situation. Howard W. Stone in his book *Crisis Counseling* writes, "A crisis occurs as an internal response to an external hazardous event."[3] A specific trauma serves as the catalyst for the crisis that follows. Scott Floyd observes that crisis will *always* follow trauma and that the more extensive the trauma, the greater the crisis will be.[4]

When crises contaminate our congregations, we are rendered incapable of adequately attending to our mission's mandate. Concerns within the congregation complicate the completion of our goals. With crisis comes the incentive to be internally focused; thus, external ministry becomes arduous. If the church is going to live up to its potential, then there must be an intentional shift from focusing internally to practicing ministry externally.

Upon encountering the man at Bethesda pool who had been lame for 38 years, Jesus asks him if he desires to be well (John 5:6). This question is still relevant and ought to be of concern to contemporary congregations. To that end, this

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[2] Judith A. Lewis et al., *Community Counseling: Empowerment Strategies for a Diverse Society*, Third ed. (Pacific Grove, CA: Thompson Brooks/Cole, 2003), 117.

[3] Howard W. Stone, *Crisis Counseling*, 3rd ed, Creative Pastoral Care and Counseling Series (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2009), 10.

[4] Scott Floyd, *Crisis Counseling: A Guide For Pastors and Professionals* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2008), 98.

academic work seeks to evaluate the effect(s) of a collective congregational vision in facilitating healing within St. John Missionary Baptist Church of Alcoa, Tennessee, as a result of traumatic episodes that are etched in the church's consciousness by virtue of traumatic events in its history, and that potentially encumber the church's ultimate quest to be well.

To expound upon the aforementioned objective, this endeavor has been apportioned into eight sections. Section one provides a glimpse of St. John Missionary Baptist Church's congregation context and of the city where this church is situated. Section two states the problem and the rationale for this work. Section three expounds upon the desired goals of this venture. Section four explains the methodology and means of gathering research. Section five addresses the ministry innovation employed. Section six examines the project's outcomes. Section seven explores the theological dimensions and implications of this endeavor. The eighth and final section summarizes this project and its import to the ministry of St. John Missionary Baptist Church.

Section I: Congregational Context

The City of Alcoa

St. John Missionary Baptist Church is nestled in the foothills of the Great Smoky Mountains in the City of Alcoa, Tennessee. Surrounded by the natural beauty and splendor of the mountain peaks in the distance, Alcoa is a quaint and relatively quiet area that has worked intentionally to preserve its inherent small town appeal while simultaneously capitalizing on the desires of companies and manufacturers to

breech its borders. It is in this setting and context that St. John has been situated for the past 102 years and where we have been called to do the work of ministry.

The city was incorporated in 1919, and its name is an acronym for the name of the aluminum factory it was built around. ALCOA Aluminum (now Arconic) was originally known as the Aluminum Company of America and was dubbed ALCOA for short. When the company was looking to establish a factory in the South, the City of Maryville, the county seat, donated land in Blount County to the Aluminum Company. David R. Duggan and Clarence Williams describe Alcoa as "the quintessential company town." They also note, "The company built and owned the homes, streets, utilities, and recreational facilities. Company employees managed the city and controlled its government, and the company even employed the schoolteachers."[5] Although Arconic Aluminum is no longer the largest employer in the area, Alcoa is still very much a company town and still has an intimate appeal for those who call her home.

Located approximately 15 miles south of Tennessee's third-largest city (Knoxville), Alcoa is a hidden gem off the beaten path. Although not directly connected to a major interstate system, the city is experiencing significant financial growth and is in the process of improving its antiquated infrastructure in preparation for greater growth and development. In April of 2017 after many years of preparation and planning, the city broke ground to develop a long-anticipated downtown area on 350 acres of land leading into the heart of the city. This project is expected to bring even more jobs, residents and revenue to the area.

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[5] David R. Duggan and George Williams, *Images of America: ALCOA* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2011), 8.

According to 2016 estimates from the United States Census Bureau, approximately 9,058 residents call Alcoa home. As is the case with East Tennessee as a whole, there is not much racial diversity within the city; the demographics are 74.2% White, 14.9% Black, 8.1% Hispanic or Latino, 1.8% Other, and 1.1% Asian.[6] The lack of diversity is quite noticeable; two communities within the city are predominately Black: the Hall Community and the Oldfield Community. St. John Missionary Baptist Church is located in Oldfield.

St. John Missionary Baptist Church

St. John Missionary Baptist Church is a small congregation consisting of 136 members and, on average, welcomes 75 to 85 worshippers weekly. When Black workers from the Deep South states of Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi were recruited to perform some of the Aluminum Company's less desirable jobs, their need for a place to worship gave birth to First Baptist Church–Colored, which eventually became St. John Missionary Baptist Church. Another Black Baptist church, Bethel Baptist, was also founded around the same time in 1916, reportedly because the new employees from Georgia did not want to commune with those from Alabama and Mississippi.

The original edifice was constructed by the church members between their shifts at the Aluminum Company, and this impeccable work ethic has been sustained through the years. There are sprinkles of young adults and a budding youth ministry; however, with longstanding members aging and slowing down in

[6] United States Census Bureau "American Fact Finder: Community Facts" https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?src=CF (accessed January 7, 2018).

participation, there is a fear that the spirit of dedication will be lost with them. Still a blue-collar congregation, St. John's members compensate in time and talents for what they are unable to contribute financially. Although the city's demographics are changing, albeit slowly, St. John has historically been a predominately Black congregation and takes pride in ministering to those in the margins.

Section II: Statement of the Problem

Twelve pastors have served at St. John Missionary Baptist Church since its establishment in 1916. Inadequate preservation of the church's history prohibits knowledge of early pastoral tenures' durations. Since 1944, however, four different individuals, including myself, have occupied the position. Those who have served in the position previously laid the foundation for what has become the largest Black church in the city, and their efforts have influenced countless lives in the community and the region. Their contributions while serving were considerable; however, circumstances prompting the departures of at least the last three pastors were traumatic, leaving the church in a continual state of crisis.

The church is often perceived as a place of care and concern, solace and refuge. Jesus nourishes this notion with the invitation for all who labor and are weary to come to Him (Matthew 11:28). People find it assuring that they can turn to the church when they stand in need of help and hope. Broken individuals entrust their burdens to the church when they are discouraged and wounded; in turn, they anticipate a fellowship of believers who will sojourn with them through their situation. Many people possess this desire, but regrettably the church is not always capable of maintaining its measure of responsibility.

Individuals rely upon the church; but when the church itself is in a state of brokenness, those who are seeking help often do not find what they need. Their testimony becomes that of the father who laments at the foot of Mount Tabor after the transfiguration of Jesus, "I brought him to your disciples, but they could not cure him."[7] When an entire congregation has experienced woundedness, its capacity to execute meaningful ministry is stymied. Charles B. Bugg writes, "When the institution is conflicted and filled with seething resentment, it is impossible to move outside ourselves and make a difference in the world"[8] Crisis diverts our attention from the places that it should be, and causes opportunities to do the work of the church to be missed.

Wounded congregations often meander about with no clear objective or vision other than gathering on Sunday morning for service. There is incongruence between what is said and what is done. Our websites and bulletins advertise one thing, but we are guilty of marketing a product that we are incapable of producing. A congregation's theology is revealed not in what the members say, but in what they do and in how their faith is practiced.[9] St. John's woundedness, as we shall see, has left the congregation in this condition on more than one occasion.

Pastoral Profiles

St. John's ninth pastor was called to the church in 1944. He presided over the congregation during the tumultuous years of the Jim Crow era and the Civil Rights

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[7] Matthew 17:16 NRSV

[8] Charles B. Bugg, *Transformational Leadership: Leading With Integrity* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 2010), 62.

[9] Mary Clark Moschella, *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice: An Introduction* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2008), 40.

Movement. Well-loved both in the church and in the community, he broke many racial barriers that helped usher in a new era within the City of Alcoa. The slim framed, soft-spoken pastor, known for his serious nature and love of children, served St. John for 30 years. His sudden passing left the church devastated and in a state of mourning. In traditional Black church fashion, his empty chair was draped in a black mourning cloth, and the church grieved his untimely absence. By no fault of anyone, he was gone. His death left the church in a state of crisis.

St. John's tenth pastor was a scholarly academician, who also served as a professor in the Religion Department at the University of Tennessee. His tenure at St. John was brief, but he had a lasting impact on the church and the ecclesial community in Blount County. The tall, pipe-toting pastor was known for his distinct voice and contemplative preaching. Disagreements in leadership style, mismanaged finances, and an accusation of adultery were the concerns that led to his departure in 1979, at which point the church split. After a bitter departure and a lawsuit between him and the church, he founded Mother Love Baptist Church, which he named for St. John's Church Mother, Sister Molly Love. Families and friends were divided with some choosing to attend the new startup, which is operational to this day, while others remained at St. John. His departure left the church in a state of crisis.

St. John's eleventh pastor, my immediate predecessor, also served the church and the community for 30 years. Known for his passionate preaching and teaching, he oversaw significant congregational growth and the construction of St. John's existing edifice, which many criticized as an impossible task to accomplish. His

departure from the pastorate was the result of a familial crisis that resulted in a congregational crisis, involving public shaming, the dismissal of members, gunplay, and orders of protection.

This episode extended for months, with news of the church's happenings advertised through the local newspapers and television stations. The incident even garnered national attention by being publicized on a few renowned gossip blogs with circulations into the millions. As these events were unfolding, members left the church and continued leaving after his retirement from the church some months later. His leaving left the church in a state of crisis.

Upon each pastor's traumatic departure, it became the responsibility of the succeeding pastor to regain momentum and to lead the congregation back to the place of prominence it previously held. Very little external work was being done because all the attention and resources were inwardly focused on healing. While they may be engaging in ministry work, those congregations who are inwardly focused are not fully participating in the missional work of the church. This cycle, reminiscent of a generational curse, has haunted this congregation for at least 70 years. These unfortunate episodes have become anchors tied to the rising potential of a congregation desiring to move forward. Although St. John is still standing, and by some standards improving, these experiences have not occurred without consequence.

Traumatic moments that extend the invitation to crises are the looming issues, but from crises spring the possibility of an alternative reality. Scott Floyd suggests that crisis might be better understood as a turning point: "Crisis can also

mean a critical time period or turning point at which things may go one direction or another."[10] Our response to conflict often involves an adaptive characteristic that can reshape our congregational identity and how we respond as the people of God.[11]

Section III: Project Goals

This project is powered by a pair of principal objectives. The first objective is the framing of a collective congregational vision that will establish the direction of the church's agenda. The second objective, connected to the first, is communal healing by implementing the collective vision. Secondary objectives accompany each of the main ones as outlined below. These goals being met will determine the outcome of this project and its ultimate success in guiding St. John Missionary Baptist Church toward an alternative future.

For decades, churches and parachurch organizations around the world have been concerned with crafting a cohesive vision to offer focus to their congregations and those who partner with them in the work they strive to do. As chic as vision statements have become, vision is not an innovation of modernistic thought but is as old as creation itself. Linda L. Clader in her book *Voicing the Vision* emphasizes that although the biblical text does not consistently and explicitly use the language of vision, that vision has its origins in the stories of the patriarchs.[12] Abram in Genesis 15; Jacob in Genesis 28; and the great prophets including Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel were all recipients of visions. Clader also notes that Biblical visions were

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[10] Floyd, *Crisis Counseling,* 25.

[11] Deborah van Deusen Hunsinger, *Transforming Church Conflict: Compassionate Leadership in Action* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), 150.

[12] Linda L Clader, *Voicing the Vision: Imagination and Prophetic Preaching* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 2004), 27.

experiences of sight and sound.[13] Visions are as important now as they were then, and visions are a vital part of capturing the imaginations and the hopes of those who are the recipients and benefactors of the vision.

Many have offered their perspectives as to what vision is and what it does. Aubrey Malphurs defines *vision* as "a clear, exciting picture of the future of a ministry, such as a church, that God uses to motivate that ministry to accomplish its mission."[14] Malphurs and Gordon E. Penfold note that vision "is a clear, exciting picture of God's future for your ministry as you believe it can and must be."[15] Andy Stanley posits, "Vision is a clear mental picture of what could be, fueled by the conviction that it should be."[16] Lovett H. Weems, Jr., states, "It is a dream. It is a picture of what is possible. Perhaps the best way to think of it is a *picture of a preferred future*."[17] The common thread among these perspectives is that vision is discernible and looks ahead.

Malphurs argues that every church needs to contemplate the directional question, "Where does God want us to go?"[18] Discernment of vision is critical because it gives congregations the confidence and the authority to move in the direction God desires for them. He and Penfold claim, "Ministry without a clear, God-

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[13] Ibid., 28.

[14] Aubrey Malphurs, *Developing a Vision for Ministry*, Third ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, a division of Baker Publishing Group, 2015), 34.

[15] Aubrey Malphurs and Gordon E. Penfold, *Re:Vision: The Key to Transforming Your Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, a division of Baker Publishing Group, 2014), 154.

[16] Andy Stanley, *Visioneering: God's Blueprint for Developing and Maintaining Vision* (Colorado Springs, CO: Multnomah Books, 1999), 18.

[17] Lovett H. Weems Jr., *Church Leadership: Vision, Team, Culture, and Integrity*, Revised ed. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2010), 23.

[18] Malphurs, *Developing a Vision for Ministry*, 18.

inspired vision is futile, because it fails to articulate what God has called it to do."[19] The value of an authenticated and compelling vision is that it is an instrument tailored to rejuvenate the entity for which it is prescribed.

Collective Vision

The uniqueness of this work is that it is not simply focused on vision in and of itself, but is concerned with a collective vision birthed of the congregation as a whole. Traditional perceptions of vision are rooted in a leader-follower format, where by a lone leader sets the organizational trajectory, and everyone falls in line with that vision. This paper's position is that this model is flawed and does not extend opportunity for others to contribute meaningfully to the conversation. Gary Paul Green and Anna Hines advocate for broad public participation rather than for the desire of a solitary individual.[20] Broad participation not only makes room for more meaningful dialogue and an abundance of perspectives, but also embraces the idea that God is capable of disseminating revelation beyond a singular individual.

In conjunction with Green and Hines, Weems also advocates for a collective visioning process:

> An effective vision is a vision shared by many persons. A vision is not a collection of individual visions with the leader simply collecting ideas and putting them together; nor is an imposed vision in which the leader comes with a personal dream and seeks to make it become a reality. The vision needs to ring true for most of the people.[21]

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[19] Malphurs and Penfold, *Re:Vision,* 147.

[20] Gary Paul Green and Anna Haines, *Asset Building and Community Development*, 3rd ed. (Los Angeles, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2012), 70.

[21] Weems Jr., *Church Leadership,* 28.

In his book *Community: The Structure of Belonging,* Peter Block invites readers to reevaluate preconceived notions of leadership, those who occupy its positions, and the overall effectiveness of how business is conducted with this model. Our captivation with leadership limits our capacity for growth because all the attention is given to the top rather than to those who comprise the community. Block concludes that there must be an evolution in how we convene because "the way we gather has no transformational power."[22] Ownership and accountability will never be realities if the majority continues to wait for a leader to swoop in and save the day.

In crafting a collective vision, recognizing ownership is imperative. A sense of identity and belonging must be embedded so that all who are concerned with the church's plight would be encouraged and emboldened to participate in the process. For this to happen, some advancement in our understanding of collective transformation must occur.[23] A sense of belonging must be created, and a sense of identity must be redefined.

Judith Herman in her book *Trauma and Recovery* suggests, "Recovery…is based upon the empowerment of the survivor."[24] When survivors are empowered, a collective vision seems possible and a crisis can be contained. A collective vision offers the hope of a substantive future; but the congregation must first recognize

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[22] Peter Block, *Community: The Structure of Belonging* (San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2009), 41.

[23] Ibid., 4.

[24] Judith Lewis Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, Revised ed. (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1997), 133.

they have the authority to contribute to the vision, and they must be willing to reshape their identity to accomplish their desired aims.

Healing

The second principal objective is the healing of the congregation. Admittedly, healing is subjective; however, for the purpose of this project, it is being treated as progression from paralysis provoked by the crisis. The events of St. John's past have had demoralizing and debilitating effects on the membership and the church's ministry. The church has suffered spiritually, numerically, and financially. Some even voiced that the church would not survive. This project, with its findings, is proof that St. John is in fact still alive, but that survival often necessitates a restorative routine.

Though the congregation did not play a substantial role in precipitating the crisis, they can play a pivotal role in the recovery. In his classic, *The Wounded Healer*, Henry Nouwen raises the question "How does healing take place?" He answers that question with one word: *hospitality*[25] Healing, I believe, can be found in community, where there is the potential for problems to become possibilities. Nouwen writes, "A Christian community is therefore a healing community not because wounds are cured but because wounds and pains become openings or occasions for a new vision."[26] Wounds confer credibility to crises, but they also possess the capacity to initiate vision. New vision is the prescription for communal healing; but before the

[25] Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer: Ministry in Contemporary Society* (New York, NY: Image Books, 1990), 89–90.
[26] Ibid., 94.

hospitality that Nouwen references can be achieved, some preliminary phases must first be accomplished.

Many within the congregation attempted to carry on with a business-as-usual attitude as though nothing had transpired. While courageous in some regard, this attitude also proved problematic because the church never took time to grieve in the wake of the previous crisis. Grief is the first phase of the healing process. The ability to grieve acknowledges that the situation is unacceptable and extends the opportunity for criticism to commence.[27] The verbalization and publication of hurt permits new and greater possibilities to develop. If the pretense that everything is satisfactory is allowed to exist, no real change will come about and the problem will persist, even if under the surface. Grief legitimizes our laments, and permits passage to the second phase of the healing process.

The second phase is forgiving. According to K. Brynolf Lyon and Dan P. Moseley, "Forgiving is being freed from the power of the pain of the past for the sake of the future."[28] When that pain is shed, strength and vitality are renewed. As those who were present during the crisis begin to acknowledge their feelings of guilt and shame, a common sense of vulnerability and humanity are discovered that have a bonding capacity.[29] Forgiveness frees both the violator and the victims and allows the victims to coalesce around their commonalities. The realization of grief and

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[27] Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, Second edition (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2001), 11.

[28] K. Brynolf Lyon and Dan P. Moseley, *How to Lead in Church Conflct: Healing Ungrieved Loss* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2012), 114.

[29] Ibid., 115.

forgiveness makes possible genuine hospitality, thus advancing the final phase of healing.

The final phase is increased fellowship -i.e., hospitality- among St. John's members and attendees. The future is not fashioned in grandiose habitude. Instead, a mutually beneficial future is the result of exertion and intentionality. As Block states, "The future is created one room at a time, one gathering at a time."[30] The moments in which we convene carry the greatest possibility. Applauding the influence of other's presence in our lives, Stone observes that we are emotionally supported and that our faith is anchored by the friendships and generosity of those around us.[31] According to Block, "care and accountability create a healthy community."[32] Hospitality and fellowship are the final components of healing and of embracing a collective vision.

Section IV: Methodology

Prior to my arrival as pastor of St. John, I was aware that the church had been in crisis, but I was oblivious to the specific details of the trauma. Even after serving in the position for approximately one year, I was unable to provide a definitive description of what had transpired because I had only been given selective pieces of the narrative. A segment of the congregation would only speak to the incident in part; the other segment would not speak to it at all, as though it never happened. In *The Creative Encounter*, Howard Thurman argues that acknowledging suffering is

[30] Block, *Community: The Structure of Belonging,* 93.
[31] Stone, *Crisis Counseling*, 88.
[32] Block, *Community: The Structure of Belonging*, 30.

essential because suffering erects roadblocks to religious experience.[33] Aspiring to know more, I began exercising the practice of pastoral ethnography and listening to the heart of the congregation. As outlined in the previous section, I quickly realized that the church was not unfamiliar with crisis.

The intricate nature of this project's aims necessitated a multifaceted stream of data collection. This work used one-on-one interviews, focus groups, and a survey to acquire both qualitative and quantitative data. From the information collected, foundational elements were acquired to begin implementing the collective vision for St. John's future. Additionally, these sessions also provided an occasion to engage in the practice of pastoral care. The sharing and telling of stories is a critical component to recovery and restoration. Herman argues that the reconstruction brought about by sharing one's story transforms the traumatic memory in such a way that it becomes part of the survivor's life story.[34] The interviews and focus groups opened the door for those stories to be shared.

Interviews

The first phase of data collection involved one-on-one interviews. These interviews were conducted to gain an understanding of the most recent crisis, as well as those that had occurred with the previous pastors' departures since a clear understanding of those crises had never been developed. Based on the interviews' purposes, long-standing members were selected to participate. Ten participants sat

[33] Howard Thurman, *The Creative Encounter: An Interpretation of Religion and the Social Witness.* (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1997), 48.
[34] Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 175.

for interviews. The respondents' average length of membership at St. John was 41.1 years with the shortest being 14 years and the longest being 70 years.

Eight primary questions shaped the interviews that sought to extract both facts and feelings. Some answers prompted impromptu follow-up questions, but the sessions ultimately revolved around the eight predetermined inquiries. In her book *The Practice of Pastoral Care*, Carrie Doehring notes, "Well-placed, open-ended questions at the beginning of a conversation invite care seekers to tell their stories."[35] Using the open-ended questions that Doehring identified allowed interviewees to share their thoughts in their own unique way, which initiated the process of understanding the traumatic events that produced the crisis.

The questions posed to participants were the following:

1. How long have you been a member of St. John Missionary Baptist Church?
2. What led you to be a member of this church?
3. Prior to my arrival, the church underwent what could be defined as a crisis moment. In your words, what transpired?
4. What was it like being at the church while everything was unfolding?
5. A number of members left. Why did you stay?
6. Did the church attempt to intervene in the crisis situation?
7. How would you describe St. John Missionary Baptist Church then versus now?
8. Do you believe that the church has fully recovered from the crisis?

[35] Carrie Doehring, *The Practice of Pastoral Care: A Postmodern Approach*, Revised and expanded ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015), 63.

The bulk of each interview focused on the third, fourth and fifth questions. Discussing ten separate perspectives of the same incident afforded the opportunity for a timeline of events to be established and for the shattered pieces of the puzzle to be reconstructed into a holistic picture. Recounting the events, interviewees described the ordeal as "traumatic,"[36] "horrible,"[37] and "nerve wrecking."[38] According to one member, the church was seen as a "mockery" within the community.[39] Another person even went so far as to describe the crisis as "a whole lot of bull****."[40]

A grid was used to arrange the collected data.[41] This grid simplified the tasks of comparing and contrasting responses and of determining the sequence in which events transpired. With the participants' permission, the interviews were recorded to ensure that nothing was omitted or overlooked. To further assist with organization, common themes across the ten interviewees' responses were underlined while divergences were bolded. Perhaps the most interesting discovery came from the responses to the eighth and final question: "Do you believe the church has fully recovered from the crisis?" Out of the ten respondents, five replied "yes" and five replied "no."

Focus Groups

After historical information was gathered, focus groups were convened to ascertain the congregation's passion and desires. All members were given the

[36] Interview with Finch, October 5, 2017. See Appendix 1.
[37] Interview with Eagle, October 12, 2017. See Appendix 1.
[38] Interview with Robin, October 13, 2017. See Appendix 1.
[39] Interview with Sparrow, October 19, 2017. See Appendix 1.
[40] Interview with Falcon, October 19, 2017. See Appendix 1.
[41] Moschella, *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice,* 176.

opportunity and encouraged to participate in the focus groups as verbal invitations were extended from the pulpit every Sunday during October for members to sign up for the sessions which would take place in November. Four focus groups were organized for the first, second, third, and fifth weeks of November. Each focus group met two consecutive days for an hour and a half each day, totaling three hours. Although only 32 individuals participated in the focus group process, the groups were a healthy representation of the congregation with a mixture of males and females of varying ages.

Much attention was given to room's setup because most of the gatherings at the church unintentionally identify a leader. That individual either stands behind a podium in front of everyone in the sanctuary or a classroom or they sit at the head of the table in the conference room. For this reason, the focus groups were held in the church's fellowship hall, and the participants sat in a circle. Block observes, "Community is built when we sit in circles…when every voice can be equally heard and amplified, when we are all on one level."[42] With the goal of the focus groups being a communal solution, it seemed necessary for the community to be present on equal ground.

At the beginning of each gathering, prayer was offered followed by an attentive practice created to remind those assembled of our congregational identity as well as the legacy being preserved for future generations. Joshua 4:1-9 was the meditative scripture and the practice centered on the stones around the main entrance of the otherwise all-brick church. When the current edifice was

[42] Block, *Community: The Structure of Belonging,* 151.

constructed in 1992, the stones that made up the original structure were brought over to be a part of the new building. When people walk into the church, they are led through elements unique to the original church. These stones serve as a reminder of where the church had been as the congregants gathered to determine where the church would go from there.

The focus groups were designed to contemplate seven questions daily, totaling fourteen questions for the two days. The questions were not simply intended to be answered individually but were designed to generate conversation and spark debate among those present. The questions fell into categories with the first day's questions focusing on the participants' understanding of the church and the community, and the second day's focusing on thoughts about congregational potential and their anticipations for what the church could be. Participants discussed their perceptions of the church's purpose, what they saw as being special about St. John, the unique needs of the immediate community, and their excitement about and hopes for the church's future.

Conversation was lively, but a few participants tended to dominate the conversation. Mary Clark Moschella reminds the researcher to take note of those who are quiet and "at the periphery of power and influence."[43] Those who were not as vocal as others were recognized and given the opportunity to share their thoughts and concerns when it appeared they might not otherwise speak. Their voices were valuable to the conversation, which was key in establishing the participants' collective desires.

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[43] Moschella, *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice,* 152.

Block speaks of restoration and of its being tied to our conversation. He writes, "The future of a community then becomes a choice between retributive conversation (a problem to be solved) and a restorative conversation (a possibility to be lived into.)"[44] Possibilities were at the root of the focus groups, and those possibilities give life to the collective vision being sought. Historically, the conversations were retributive, focusing on problems and how to solve them. These conversations were meaningful and appreciated because they were restorative, looking at what has the potential of becoming.

Unlike the interviews, these focus groups were not recorded; however, an additional note taker attended all four sessions to assist in compiling data. At the conclusion of the group sessions, the notes were compiled along with my notes for an accurate representation of the conversations and were documented in a data grid for the sake of reference. The focus groups provided a vast amount of qualitative data and were instrumental in highlighting areas of concern and interest among those who participated.

Survey

As a follow-up to the focus groups, a survey was distributed on the first Sunday in February of 2018 to refine and enhance the qualitative data collected during the concentrated clusters. The rationale behind the survey was to categorize the importance of what had previously been shared in the focus groups to add a quantitative component to the research. The survey did not deviate from the focus groups, but rather was used to subcategorize the larger themes addressed during

[44] Block, *Community: The Structure of Belonging,* 53.

the month long focus group process. This survey amalgamated the thoughts of the individual focus groups into a single space that provided a launching pad for the entire congregation to address relevant issues.

Congregants age 16 and above were invited to fill out the survey. Sixty-six respondents completed and returned the survey. Although containing only six questions, the survey afforded respondents the opportunity to select multiple boxes to answer certain questions. Charts outlining this survey's findings are available in this paper's appendix. These results were beneficial in helping discover our congregation's major concerns and ministry passions. As the data highlights, respondents believe the church should be most involved in job mentoring and training. The data also indicated that congregants are most concerned about drugs in the community and are most excited about receiving God's Word through sermonic form.

Section V: Innovation

The preaching of the Gospel has always occupied a centralized position in the Black church. Revolutions that began from Black pulpits have poured into the hearts of hearers and have altered the course of history. Those charged with the distribution of God's Word have borne great responsibility as they have given shape to the ethos and culture of our communities. Preaching and the preacher are indivisible from the Black religious experience. W.E.B. Du Bois wrote, "The Preacher is the most unique personality developed by the Negro on American soil."[45] Because of its import to the Black community and the esteem in which the members of St.

[45] W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, Centennial (New York, NY: The Modern Library, 2003), 191.

John hold its practice, homiletics was used as the innovation to disseminate an understanding of vision, as well as the components of vision that the congregation deemed valuable.

Preaching, according to William H. Willimon, not only shapes our Christian identity, but also provides opportunity for community to gather and find purpose. He insists that the preaching moment centers the congregation and gives general direction, which is critical for handling crisis.[46] Sunday mornings provide a captive audience and the greatest opportunity to address relevant issues en masse. With the weight that it carries, preaching is arguably the most important event in the life of the church and in the lives of the people.[47]

L. Susan Bond declares, "We preach so that souls will be saved, so that hearts will be changed, so that behaviors will improve, so that social structures will be challenged, so that congregations will be instructed, so that communities will be formed, and so on."[48] The church looks to the pulpit, and when crises transpire people are looking for answers and assurance. Crises should be and must be addressed from the pulpit. A timely response from the pulpit to the people's questions and concerns is crucial if crises are to be contained.[49] During such moments, pastoral care can be rendered in the form of sermons and prayers, and can dismantle the anxieties that crises construct.

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[46] William H. Willimon, *Preaching About Conflict in the Local Church* (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1987), 27.

[47] Olin P. Moyd, *The Sacred Art: Preaching and Theology in the African American Tradition* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1995), 10.

[48] L. Susan Bond, *Contemporary African American Preaching: Diversity in Theory and Style* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2003), 8.

[49] Larry E. Webb, *Crisis Counseling in the Congregation* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2011), 135.

Prior to the implementation of the interviews, focus groups, and survey as described in Section IV of this document, this project was initiated with preaching a sermon series entitled *VisionWorks* was used to acquaint the congregation with vision, its function, and its benefits. The series contained sermons based on Mark 10:51-52, Proverbs 29:18, Habakkuk 2:2-3, and Isaiah 6:1. Upon this sermon series' completion, another series was designed to prepare the congregation to pursue the vision that would be collectively generated. Entitled *Progressing Toward the Promise* and spanning six weeks, this series explored the first chapter of the Book of Joshua.

Both sermon series were well received and generated conversation as we began to commune in the focus groups. The second sermon series, *Progressing Toward the Promise,* was preached concurrently with the focus groups; thus much of what was shared in the groups were addressed in sermonic form. Willimon writes, "Listening is important for any sermon, but particularly important for a sermon that presumes to speak to a congregational problem."[50] The conversations among those in the groups and the topics discussed became inspiration for the sermons to be preached. These sermons simultaneously expounded on vision while addressing topics important to the congregation, such as care of the needy and investing in youth.

Another unique facet of preaching as innovation is the sermonic moment's communal nature in the Black Baptist church. This project is structured around the collaborative objectives of vision and healing; therefore, it is logical that the innovation would also have a collaborative tie in. In her book *Delivering the Sermon,*

[50] Willimon, *Preaching About Conflict in the Local Church,* 91.

Teresa Fry Brown discusses the cultural practice of call and response distinctive to Black preaching. She notes the back and forth between the pulpit and the pew, observing that it is a communication cycle in which "one speaks and another listens and responds."[51] The back and forth exchange between the preacher and the hearers often evolves into what Frank Thomas describes as celebration. He notes, "Within the African American celebrative sermon people are motivated by the positive and healing power of the gospel."[52]

Preaching has the power to heal; thus, it will continue to play an essential role until this work accomplishes a desired end. Preaching assists in spreading the message of collective vision and the specific goals the congregation desires to embrace. Currently, a sermon series based on Nehemiah is being developed and will address rebuilding what has been dismantled. As conversations continue to be held, and the vision continues to be crafted, that message will also be dispersed through the innovation of preaching.

Section VI: Assessment

In my estimation, the project's initial components have been very successful. The principal objectives as outlined in Section II are being passionately pursued, and there is an enthusiasm within the congregation that was absent six years ago when I assumed the position of pastor. The work is far from done, but tremendous strides, some of which are noted below, have been made as we have attempted to turn the page from an unpleasant chapter in the church's history.

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[51] Teresa L. Fry Brown, *Delivering the Sermon*, Elements of Preaching Series (Minneapolis, MI: Fortress Press, 2008), 19.

[52] Frank A. Thomas, *They Like To Never Quit Praisin' God: The Role of Celebration in Preaching*, Revised and updated. (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2013), 65.

Undergirding my optimistic assessment of this project's success, first and foremost, is the fact that the congregation appreciates what communal vision is and how it functions in the midst of the church. When asked in the survey whether they felt they could contribute to St. John Missionary Baptist Church's vision, none of the respondents answered "no." Out of those questioned, 22 percent replied "Not Sure." However, an overwhelming 78 percent affirmed their capability to contribute to the church's overall vision.

Additionally, our congregational identity is being reshaped. We have decided both to engage the surrounding community and to make the church the nucleus for a neighborhood that is evolving. According to Dave Daubert, "A vision cannot settle for capturing the imagination if it does not, even more, capture the hands and feet of those from whom it exists and do so in such a way as to change the behaviors to be consistent with it."[53] During the focus group sessions, our assets and possibilities were highlighted and weighed against what we are known for in the community. Based on that information, the members identified the community's needs and how we could meet those needs. Some of the matters addressed are long-term issues that will take time, strategy and resources to implement; others were immediately launched.

Partnering with the local United Way and the Boy Scouts of America, St. John launched Troop 342 to benefit the young men in our community and provide them the opportunity to gain the principles and discipline that scouting offers. Because

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[53] Dave Daubert, "Vision-Discerning vs Vision-Casting: How Shared Vision Can Raise Up Communities of Leaders Rather Than Mere Leaders of Communities," in *Missional Church & Leadership Formation: Helping Congregations Develop Leadership Capacity*, ed. Craig Van Gelder (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 159.

our church is in an economically depressed community, our partnership allows eligible boys who are interested to participate free of charge, including free uniforms, materials and camping trips. This summer, we will also be hosting a Freedom School Program, a summer reading enrichment program designed to help children be literate, confident and empowered, sponsored by the Children's Defense Fund.

Marvin A. McMickle in his book *Preaching to the Black Middle Class* notes that the congregation must be challenged "to see and seize the vision of service right in its own backyard."[54] Sixty-six percent of the survey respondents acknowledged that the consumption and sale of illegal drugs is among the major burdens in our backyard. To that end, St. John has endeavored to become a host for a Celebrate Recovery group, in which we can minister to that population and any who need recovery. Hopelessness and hunger were also recognized needs in our community. Another partnership has opened the door for some of our unused land to be used as a community garden where middle-school children can learn how to garden, while a stipend is placed in a savings account for each child and the community is fed simultaneously. According to McMickle, "quality ministry does not occur when the pastor stays in the church office, sitting behind the desk, waiting for the phone to ring."[55] We recognize that in isolation, these undertakings cannot be accomplished; thus the church has been busy cultivating the necessary relationships to ensure that the community's needs are being met.

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[54] Marvin Andrew McMickle, *Preaching to the Black Middle Class: Words of Challenge, Words of Hope* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2000), 61.

[55] Ibid., 24.

Moreover, success is being realized because we as a congregation have taken the initial steps in the healing process. The interviews and the focus groups provided occasions for participants to voice their thoughts, joys, and fears in an environment conducive for celebration and criticism to coexist. We have begun to grieve, we have begun to forgive, and we have begun to fellowship. There were times when after service everyone would run to be first out of the door; people now linger and engage in conversation. These simple moments of fellowship are evidence that relationships are being strengthened and that hospitality is helping to heal.

The short-term impact has been phenomenal, and contingencies are being implemented to evaluate this work's long-term effectiveness. Eight members, representing our congregation's diversity, have been selected to be apart of a newly established vision team. In the book *Leading in Times of Crisis*, David L. Dotlich et al. observe, "getting the right people in the right room talking about the right issues in the right way is the most important responsibility of a leader."[56] I have done the work of assembling the right people; now they must do the work of visioning.

Andy Stanley suggests, "If you aren't able to articulate the vision, then no one will be able to act on it."[57] The vision team will be responsible for amalgamating the data collected in an effort to lead St. John's members in not only discerning God's vision for the church but also articulating it in such a way that the members remain focused on it, and are motivated to pursue it. They will consider both processes and

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[56] David L. Dotlich, Peter C. Cairo, and Stephen H. Rhinesmith, *Leading In Times Of Crisis: Navigating Through Complexity, Diversity, and Uncertainty to Save Your Business* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2009), 181.

[57] Stanley, *Visioneering,* 161.

outcomes to determine success or whether improvement is needed. The team will convene until such vision is prayerfully established, strategically implemented, and systematically evaluated. Once the team has accomplished the objectives charged to their care, they will be furloughed until the vision needs to be renewed.

Section VII: Theological Dimensions

At the core of this project are the theological principles of community and vision. Vision is the primary focus, but a collective vision conceived and experienced in the presence of community is the ultimate enterprise. In addition to possessing theological underpinnings, both have backing in biblical text and are intricately tied to each other.

During his explanation to those who were in doubt regarding the events on the Day of Pentecost, the Apostle Peter, in Acts 2, recited the words of the Prophet Joel quoting Joel 2:28-32. Through the prophet's words, his soliloquy makes clear that all flesh, to some degree, will be included in the realization of God's vision. Young and old, male and female, free and enslaved are to be the recipients of God's Holy Spirit, and therefore contributors to God's plan and purpose (Acts 2:14-21). Vision is not for one; vision is for the collective. Vision is to be a collaborative effort because vision apart from community is nothing more than a dream drenched in optimism.

The words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer in *Life Together* are still poignant and relevant. He pens, "He who loves his dream of a community more than the Christian community itself becomes a destroyer of the latter, even though his personal

intentions may be ever so honest and earnest and sacrificial."[58] Bonhoeffer is suggesting that when vision is conceived in isolation, it is hazardous to the wellbeing of the many. Vision should be divinely disseminated and customized in collaboration with community. Bonhoeffer finalizes this line of thinking:

> God hates visionary dreaming; it makes the dreamer proud and pretentious. The man who fashions a visionary ideal of community demands that it be realized by God, by others, and by himself. He enters the community of Christians with his demands, sets up his own law, and judges the brethren and God Himself accordingly…When things do not go his way, he calls the effort a failure.[59]

When God's vision is efficiently and effectively executed, the community will thrive and life together will be harmonious. That is not to suggest that crisis will not be present, but even with crisis looming as with the persecuted church in the latter portion of Acts 2, the church will press forward. The writer describes a community that "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers."[60] Referring to such a community, Bonhoeffer states, "Where Christians live together the time will inevitably come when in some crisis one person will have to declare God's Word and will to another."[61] The early church made such declarations and multiplied daily.

The Hebrews' writer suggests that Jesus is to be the ultimate vision for the Christian and the church. Hebrews 12:1-2 instructs readers to fix their eyes on Christ as the race is being run with perseverance. In our endeavors to be Christ-like,

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[58] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together: The Classic Exploration of Christian Community* (New York: HarperOne, 2009), 27.
[59] Ibid., 27-28.
[60] Acts 2:42 NRSV
[61] Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 105.

keeping Him in sight is nonnegotiable. The vision is but a conduit to St. John Missionary Baptist Church's communal healing, which comes from Christ. Jesus declared that God's Spirit was upon Him enabling him to preach, heal, and liberate (Luke 4:18). Vision is God's revelation. In his book *A Black Theology of Liberation,* James Cone couples the revelation and liberation stating, "Revelation is God's self-disclosure to humankind *in the context of liberation*."[62] Vision is revelation, and that revelation also liberates.

Thinking theologically, I would be remiss not to contribute a denominational consideration as well. Baptist Church polity further undergirds the notion of a collective vision. The Baptist Church is an autonomous body and congregationally led. While the pastor operates as servant leader and provides spiritual leadership for the church, the governing power and authority lies with the members of the congregation. As such, it is not out of the scope of possibility for the congregation to contribute significantly to the vision and direction of the church. Being autonomous, each Baptist church conducts business in its own fashion; but nothing prohibits the congregation from assuming a larger responsibility in the arena of vision development. Each church is congregationally led, and the vision could be as well.

Section VIII: Summary

Communal healing through the development of a collective vision is no easy undertaking. As Stanley has noted, "Vision requires courage and confidence."[63] This journey has commenced for St. John Missionary Baptist Church, but the conclusion is

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[62] James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 40th anniversary edition.. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010), 45.

[63] Stanley, *Visioneering,* 126.

yet to be seen. Judith Herman acknowledges that the impact of trauma is something that remains, even long after the event. According to Herman, "Resolution of the trauma is never final; recovery is never complete."[64] Though the wounds may heal, scars often remain and remind us of what we once endured. Herman continues, "Though resolution is never complete, it is often sufficient for the survivor to turn her attention from the tasks of recovery to the tasks of ordinary life."[65] Our visioning process has been such that we are endeavoring to pivot from recovery to meeting our mission's mandates: Exalting the Savior, Evangelizing the Sinner, Equipping the Saint, and Elevating Society.[66]

As I began to dissect collective vision and its relationship to communal healing, a plethora of conversational possibilities were presented that I simply did not have the ability or space to address in this work; one such area was the perception that the local church plays on the Church universal. While this project was designed to modify the congregation's trajectory, I was taken aback by its impact on me personally. A number of preconceived assumptions were exposed, and some even confirmed as I went about the work of vanquishing the vision of the one to make way for the vision of the many. Brought to the surface was my confidence in the power of the populace. Brought to the surface was my assurance in the supremacy of preaching, and the work of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. Also brought to the surface was my skepticism that a traditional Black Baptist church would be amenable to some of the conversations held; I was pleasantly surprised.

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[64] Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 211.

[65] Ibid., 212.

[66] A portion St. John Missionary Baptist Church's Mission Statement that is recited every worship service.

The task that remains is the ongoing endeavor to reshape hearts and attitudes. Edwin H. Friedman concedes, "Most crises cannot by their very nature be resolved (that is, fixed); they must simply be managed until they work their way through."[67] Vision is only valid if the hearts of those guiding the vision are attuned to God and open to the direction in which God is leading. In his book *On Pastoring,* H.B. Charles states, "At the end of the day, true spiritual change does not happen by 'casting vision.' It happens by faithfully teaching doctrinal truth. This is an essential but neglected key to faithful and effective pastoral ministry."[68] Teaching and preaching, and the collective visioning process like the one described in this paper, must remain central to helping the congregation understand the vision's significance.

As previously quoted, Charles B. Bugg writes, "When the institution is conflicted and filled with seething resentment, it is impossible to move outside ourselves and make a difference in the world. All our energy is consumed with trying to maintain our equilibrium and to keep the church alive and afloat."[69] This cannot be the case for St. John. Alcoa needs St. John Missionary Baptist Church. The world cannot afford for our churches to be lost within themselves. We must, with exuberance, be able to declare the church's mission and vision as we proceed into unchartered territory. The lives of people are at stake, and those people are waiting on us.

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[67] Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve*, 27.

[68] H.B. Charles, *On Pastoring: A Short Guide to Loving, Leading, and Ministering as a Pastor* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2016), 90.

[69] Bugg, *Transformational Leadership,* 62.

Appendix 1: One-on-One Interview Schedules and Aliases

All interviews were recorded and are confidential. The names of interviewees were withheld by mutual agreement and an alias was assigned to each participant.

1. Interview conducted: 10/5/17 at 12:00pm
   Alias given: *Crow*

2. Interview conducted: 10/5/17 at 2:00pm
   Alias given: *Owl*

3. Interview conducted: 10/5/17 at 4:00pm
   Alias given: *Finch*

4. Interview conducted: 10/5/17 at 6:00pm
   Alias given: *Cardinal*

5. Interview conducted: 10/12/17 at 12:00pm
   Alias given: *Eagle*

6. Interview conducted: 10/13/17 at 5:00pm
   Alias given: *Robin*

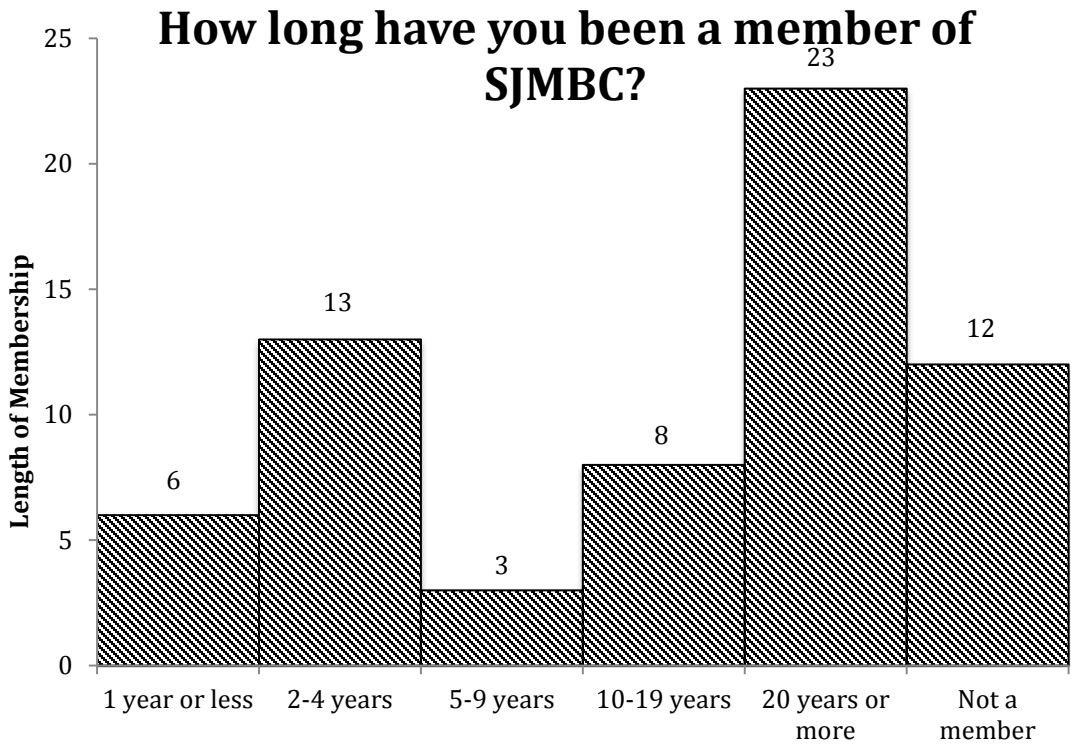
7. Interview conducted: 10/19/17 at 10:00am
   Alias given: *Stork*

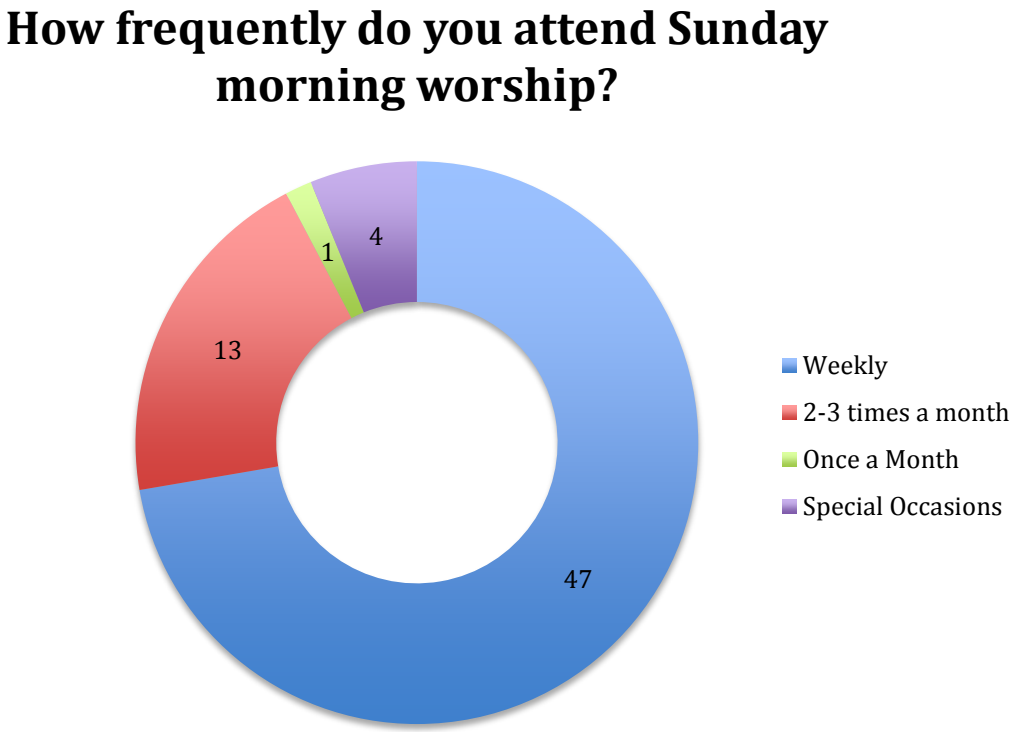
8. Interview conducted: 10/19/17 at 12:00pm
   Alias given: *Falcon*

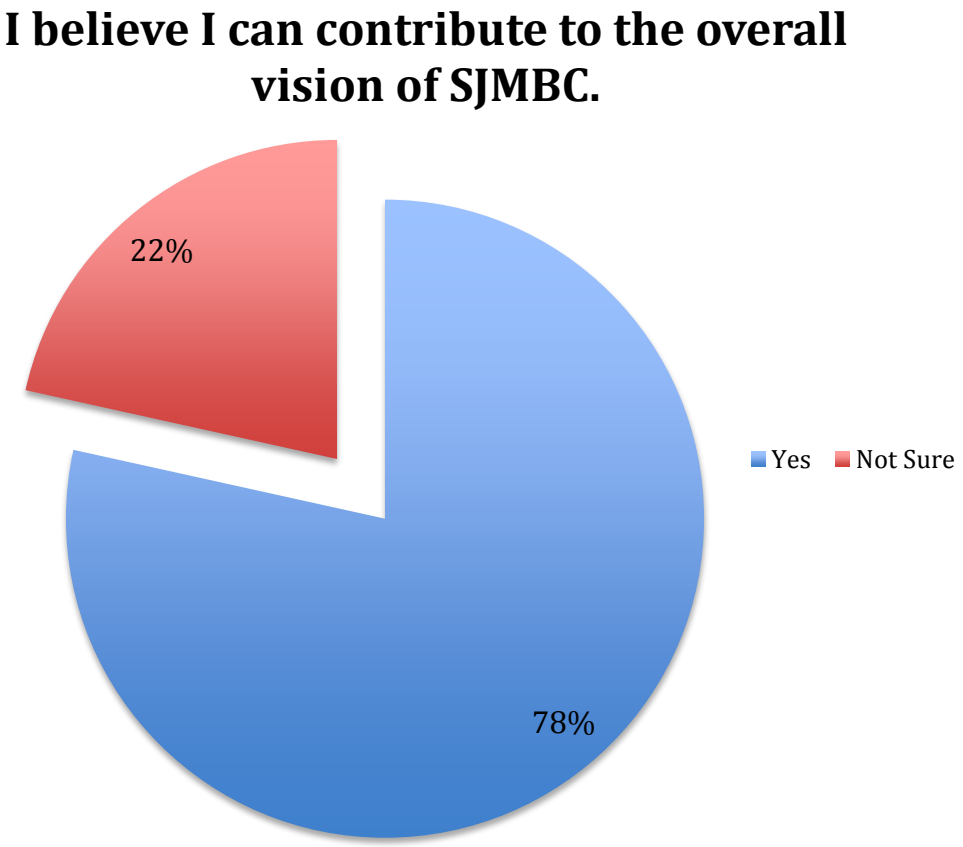
9. Interview conducted: 10/19/17 at 2:00pm
   Alias given: *Sparrow*

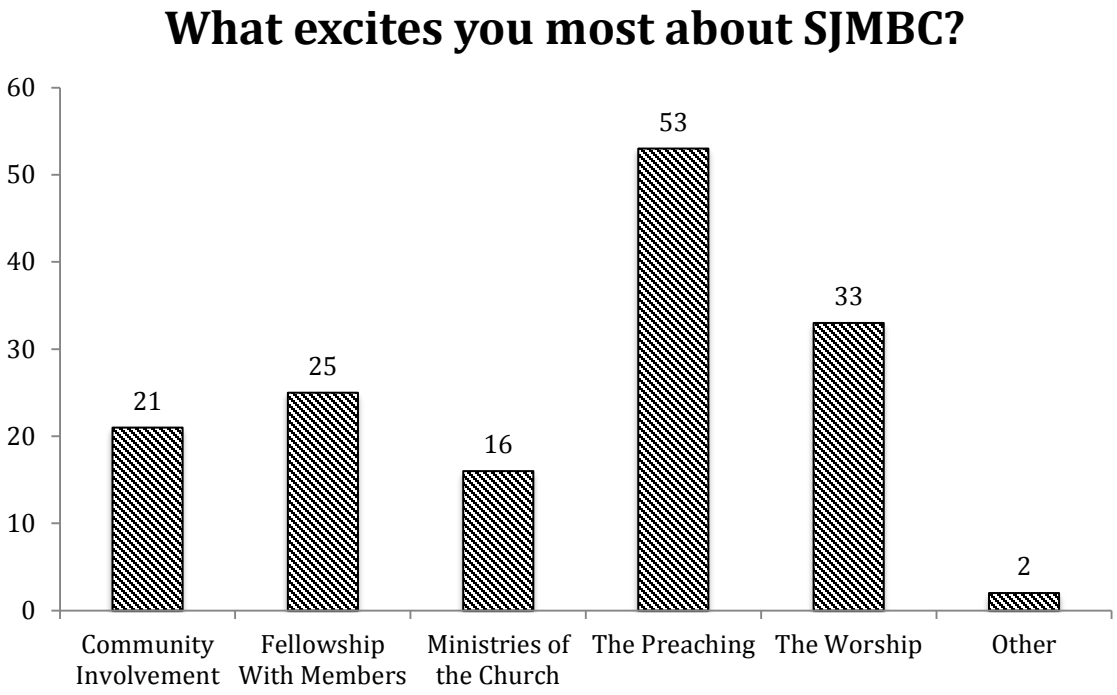
10. Interview conducted: 10/19/17 at 4:00pm
    Alias given: *Hawk*

Appendix 2: Survey Results

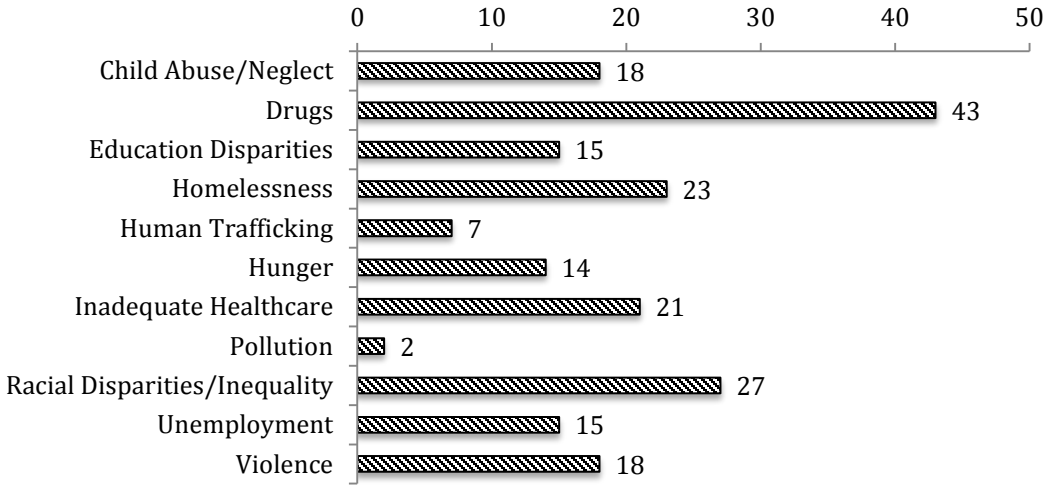




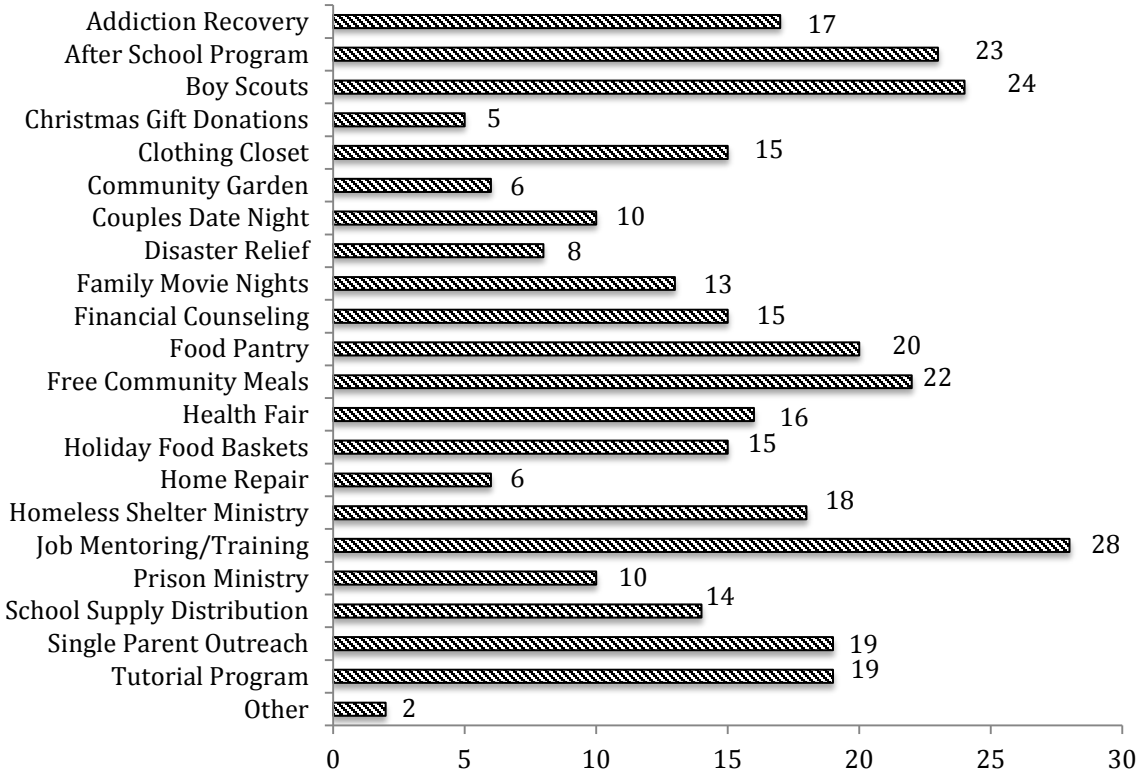

I believe I can contribute to the overall vision of SJMBC.
22%
78%
Yes
Not Sure


What excites you most about SJMBC?
60
50
40
30
20
10
0
21
25
16
53
33
2
Community Involvement
Fellowship With Members
Ministries of the Church
The Preaching
The Worship
Other

Which of the following community concerns do you believe need the most attention?



Which of the following outreach ministries would you like to see SJMBC implement or continue practicing?



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