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Recognizing Difference:
New Roles for Churches Amid Dramatic Change

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Abstract

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Change is inevitable for the church. Congregations must transcend the complex cycles of change in today's turbulent world by discovering their new roles in a more diverse society. How does a congregation transcend the complex cycles of change, especially when change begins outside of its walls in a world beyond its control? What is the role of the church which exists in a community and culture vastly different from when it was first established? This project seeks to answer these and other questions by reflecting on the new roles for Cambridge United Methodist Church in Ninety Six, SC. A textile mill built the church and the mill village surrounding the church. The mill has moved on to other markets worldwide, and the church has chosen to remain in the changing community. Churches, amid dramatic change, must learn to recognize difference and create a future distinct from its past. Paramount to success is learning new habits of listening to those within the community, each other, and God.

This project focuses on disability within the congregation, which is a good place to recognize difference. The methods used can help identify other needs and trends within the community. The last part of the thesis is a reflection on the theology of disability that asserts a fundamental equality among all persons regardless of difference. A congregation that recognizes that difference does not mean less can become a more genuine community of faith. The Church can be known as a place that welcomes all people, including those with disabilities.

Recognizing Difference:
New Roles for Churches Amid Dramatic Change

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Introduction

How a church chooses to adapt to change is a significant indicator of its future ministry. Throughout the life of its ministry, every church encounters change within the community, the culture, and even in its congregation. What existed just a few years ago is gone today, and what exists today will be gone in only a few years. Sociologist Nancy Ammerman affirms that community change is inevitable for the church. The significance for a congregation, Ammerman argues, is "how they will respond."[1] How does a congregation transcend the complex cycles of change, especially when change begins outside of its walls in a world beyond its control? What is the role of the church which exists in a community and culture vastly different from when it was first established?

This project seeks to answer these and other questions by reflecting on the new roles for the church. In particular, I focus on the environment of Cambridge United Methodist Church in Ninety Six, South Carolina. The church and its surrounding community have experienced dramatic change since a textile mill built the church near the beginning of the twentieth century.[2] Today the mill is gone, and congregational membership is declining. What is more, the surrounding community is experiencing rapid change. Will the church rise to the occasion and welcome learning new roles? Amid a changed communal landscape, will Cambridge United Methodist strategically pursue a forward-facing journey? What will it take for the congregation to embrace a new vision, mission, and identity apart from the mill? Will the congregation

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[1] Carl S. Dudley and Nancy T. Ammerman, *Congregations in Transition: A Guide for Analyzing, Assessing, and Adapting in Changing Communities* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2002), 189, Kindle.

[2] George O. Robinson, *Character of Quality: The Story of Greenwood Mills, A Distinguished Name in Textiles* (Columbia, SC: R.L. Bryan, 1964), 64.

embrace risk and mystery? In other words, will the church be able to wade into the unchartered territory, or will it falter at the unknown and heed to what is familiar and most comfortable? Will the congregants, as a faith community, be willing to step outside of their walls without the guarantee of success or even safety? Will they embrace the habits of listening and discovering new opportunities for ministry? Ammerman reminds the church of its calling:

> People of faith are called to continue to listen for God's voice summoning them forward, challenging them to recognize new conditions, and rewarding them with a fresh awareness of God's continuing presence. Along the way, you will need the habits of listening to your community, to one another, and to God.[3]

Where will the Cambridge congregation discover "new conditions" for ministry during this time of transition? By engaging in pastoral ethnography and allowing people to articulate their own stories and experiences, particular about their faith tradition, the pastor and the people are weaving a new story. Through this project, they will grow and change together.

Rather than speaking for them, ethnographers help people find their voice. Moschella explains, "Pastoral ethnographers strive to co-author the future *with* the community and with God."[4] The retrieved data reveals the complexity of human life through interviews and discussions with the church and the community. Through this process, the project tells the compelling story of the church. The framework utilizes practical theology, assesses the narrative, and identifies resources within the church and community. Theologian H. Richard Niebuhr writes that people have a way of freeing themselves from the past by reinterpreting it. For Niebuhr, reinterpreting it "recalls, accepts, understands, and reorganizes the past instead of

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[3] Dudley and Ammerman, *Congregations in Transition*, 1548.

[4] Mary Clark Moschella, *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice: An Introduction* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2008), 255.

abandoning it."[5] Moschella agrees, stating, "Through listening and interpersonal connection, leaders and groups together find the new words to say and new ways to live with clarity, faithfulness, and purpose."[6]

Additionally, the ministry project provides a template for future church projects. The discovery of this template came during an unexpected encounter with a young woman who had a genuine need that was still not readily apparent. The church can choose to identify and address so many needs in ministry. This project focuses on disability within the congregation, which is a good place to recognize difference. The last part of the thesis is reflection on the theology of disability that asserts a fundamental equality among all persons regardless of difference. A congregation that recognizes that difference does not mean less can become a more genuine community of faith.

Background

One of the issues facing Cambridge United Methodist Church is that change has been a constant since its inception. In a complex and continuously changing community, a single straightforward response from the church can be difficult. In light of its history and prior experiences, adaptation to change is embedded in the congregation's DNA. Today the historical legacy of the church hangs on display in its hallways. Black and white photos depict the changing life and times of the church since it was first established.

In the 1890s, the New England textile industry relocated to the Southern States following the Industrial Revolution. The company built many homes and churches clustered in restricted

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[5] H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self: An Essay in Christian Moral Philosophy* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), 102.

[6] Moschella, *Ethnography as A Pastoral Practice*, 242.

mill villages solely for the textile mill workforce.[7] Three years before the beginning of the 2009 recession, the American textile industry once again employed a key strategy for economic survival. They relocated from the South to other low-wage labor markets worldwide. The towns and communities they left behind were gutted. As mill workers searched for employment in other areas, a more diverse population moved into former textile towns in the South. Due to this industrial shift, the community of Ninety Six and the church at its center are once again experiencing dramatic economic and social change.

In 1926, Greenwood Mills, the local textile mill, built Cambridge United Methodist Church in the historic, Ninety Six Mill Village in Ninety Six, South Carolina, located in the southeastern part of Greenwood County. It was a beautiful sanctuary with an attached two-story educational building, both with a brick veneer that matched the distinctive architectural style of the textile mill. The company built the church campus for the Methodist group after they reached seventy-five members attending weekly in a nearby community building. Attendance grew to over two hundred and fifty mill workers each Sunday. It was the greatest number in attendance in the history of Cambridge. Birthed with the heart of the mill community, its location shaped the identity of the church.[8] For nearly a century, the faith community at Cambridge was faithful to its calling of caring for its surrounding neighbors. The role of the church was to provide Christian worship and education in the Methodist tradition for the workers in the mill. Membership and attendance were top priorities for the church. They awarded perfect attendance pins which were worn with pride by the congregation.[9]

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[7] Robinson, *Character of Quality*, 78.

[8] Ibid., 93.

[9] Interviewee #2, interviewed by author, February 15, 2017, Ninety Six, South Carolina.

Influence of the Mill

Cambridge United Methodist was founded in a time in the South when everyone was expected to know their place and follow the rules, whether they were written or the hidden unwritten ones everyone knew. Greenwood Mills weaved expertly its profound impact upon the community of Ninety Six, its culture, and even the church, demanding sameness, segregation, and separation.[10] Privilege made its mark, as discrimination stained the social fabric of both community and church, creating inequality based on race, class, creed, and ability. The institution of the mill sheltered the church throughout its history. In many ways, recent changes have brought visible progress for the historic mill village of Ninety Six and the Methodist church in its heart. Now, both church and community must continue the quest of discovering new identities amid the progressive change.

The founder of Greenwood Mills, James C. Self, had the most substantial economic impact upon Greenwood County. James Self was a visionary, turned philanthropist who also directed the building of Cambridge United Methodist Church. He was committed to conducting business under the banner "The Character of Quality," for the growth of the enterprise and the welfare of the community.[11] After successfully expanding the Greenwood Textile Mills throughout the area, James Self built a state-of-the-art hospital for the community following the original hospital's destruction from a tornado in the 1950s. Today, the award-winning medical center is the county's largest employer. Several families at Cambridge found employment there after the mill in Ninety Six burned down in 2005.

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[10] Robinson, *Character of Quality*, 87.

[11] Ibid., 82.

The textile mill and its leadership were a dominant influence upon the church for more than eighty-five years. The company had a direct effect on attendance, giving and service, as was the pattern with many other textile companies. A policy book reveals one example:

> The company will not employ anyone who is habitually absent from public worship on the Sabbath or known to be guilty of immorality.

The mill possessed autocratic power within the community it had built. Initially, the mill constructed three hundred homes surrounding the factory, along with a Baptist and a Methodist church, both exclusively for white mill workers. The company built a smaller African American community in another area for those working in construction of the mill and the surrounding homes. It was not until the Civil Rights Act of 1964 that the mill allowed African Americans to work in the white-only mill enterprise.[12] When the Baptist church burned down in the 1940s, they congregation rebuilt it outside the mill village. Today, there are also four other churches on the edge of the mill village: a Church of God congregation, a Pentecostal Holiness church, and two African American churches. Cambridge United Methodist Church remains in the center of the mill community.

Sharing a New Church Vision and Mission

Exploring the environment of the church through the lens of its past is helpful to understand the ways in which the mill continues to influence how the church chooses to be the church in today's world. The original call of the church is no longer operative. The mill is gone. The church must now ask itself, should it move as well? A decision to move or stay reflects the identity of its current membership. The membership is free to move. By choosing to stay, the congregation would be revealing their commitment to the new makeup of the community and

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[12] Edward H. Beardsley, *A History of Neglect: Health Care for Blacks and Mill Workers in the Twentieth-Century South* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1990), 7.

their willingness to be intentional in welcoming strangers into their fellowship. This choice would be a radical departure from the influence of the mill which kept strict limits on the community as to who was in and who was out.

Anyone who received a pink slip at work from the mill was also evicted from mill housing. Thus, when a mill worker was no longer employed by the mill for whatever reason, it meant the family would have to leave the community and the church.[13] Today, the mill is gone in Ninety Six, but its influence lingers on. The authority of the mill had a long reach over its employees. Often, the mill employed both husbands and wives, and their children would come to work when they came of age. Former mill workers shared stories of how the mill would exercise its authority over the employees even after working hours, saying the mill's influence extended to "twenty-four, seven."[14] This tradition continues to impact Cambridge United Methodist congregants in the present day.

One extended influence by the textile mill was mandatory church attendance. If a mill employee was absent from Sunday Services, the mill brought up his or her absence on Monday. Firsthand accounts reveal that the inquiry was not just about church attendance. A former worker reported how the absent member's missing "tithe," or a tenth of one's paycheck, was collected for the church that day. Most of the members who give a tithe to the church today are a part of the older generation for whom giving a tenth was mandatory.[15]

There continues to be a widespread belief within the church that tithing brings God's blessing to those who commit to the discipline. Giving patterns are different among younger

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[13] Interviewee #3, March 22, 2017, interview by author, Ninety Six, South Carolina.

[14] Interviewee #1, May 12, 2015, interview by author, Ninety Six, South Carolina.

[15] Interviewee #2, February 15, 2017, interview by author, Ninety Six, South Carolina.

generations who were not brought up required to pay a tenth of their salary to the church. No one is asked for their tithe if they miss a Sunday service these days, yet many members are faithful to make up for their giving if they are away for a week or two. A core group within Cambridge United Methodist gives faithfully to the ministry, as well as to the maintenance of the church. The church campus is aging, and repairing the old buildings becomes a more significant challenge every year. As the older generation passes away, will the younger generation take up the task of funding the historic church? How will the church moving forward engage in Christian formation concerning giving?

Theologian Henri J. M. Nouwen calls the church into a new relationship with its needs and resources. For Nouwen, giving is not about collection; it is a sharing of vision and mission. Fund-raising in the church is to be a form of ministry. It is a call, Nouwen argues, "to experience a deep shift in how we see and think and act." Nouwen teaches that there is a need for a spiritual relationship between clergy and laity. He reasons that the relationship is not simply a financial transaction. Instead, it is a partnership, by invitation from clergy to laity, in the vision and mission of the church. Nouwen calls the spiritual connection a place of belonging:

> We belong together in our work because Jesus has brought us together, and our fruitfulness depends on staying connected with him. Jesus tells us: "I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:5). With him, we can do anything because we know that God surrounds us with an abundance of blessings. Therefore, *those who need money and those who can give money meet on the common ground of God's love.* "And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work" (2 Cor. 9:8).[16]

[16] Emphasis mine. Henri J.M. Nouwen and John S. Mogabgab, *A Spirituality of Fundraising* (Estate of Henri Nouwen, 2004), 6.

As Cambridge focuses on a new vision and mission, the necessary separation of the church from the counterproductive influences of the mill begins. The church must establish a new identity by participating together in discovering a new vision and mission of the church for the Kingdom of God. By identifying current needs and trends within the community, the church can begin to find new opportunities for ministry. Churches must engage their communities, especially when the context is a mill community that has experienced such dramatic change. What does such engagement look like? Will the church cling to the authoritative way of the mill or will the church become known as a place of belonging for everyone in the new community? Cambridge and its new community belong together.

Another lingering influence of the textile mill within Cambridge today is an active moral code that no doubt, in part, is a result of the mill's firm ethical standards. The mill's authority did not stop with mandatory church attendance. Elderly members of Cambridge share stories of how the mill forbad what they called any "hanky-panky" going on. Extramarital affairs, when discovered, led to immediate dismissal for those involved, which led to the whole family having to move from the mill village.[17] Demanding high ethical standards within the community could be problematic in reaching present-day individuals. The culture surrounding the church displays more ethical diversity and acceptance than was demanded by the institution of the mill. The modern family was not a part of the church or community in the days when the church began. What will it take for Cambridge, a church which was established by an autocratic institution, to become a place of belonging for an increasingly diverse and changing community?

A New Strategy Forward

[17] Interviewee #3, May 12, 2015, interview by author, Ninety Six, South Carolina.

The church must step forward and shift away from the influence of the patriarchal standards of the mill. This was a culture in which judgment determined who was acceptable and who was not. Peter Block calls this reorientation creating "a future distinct from the past."[18] Cambridge United Methodist Church must be intentional about creating new strategies that enable a more inclusive loving language of welcome and acceptance towards the community. This mindset should guide future ministries of the church. This project provides Cambridge with one new strategy that can be used as a catalyst for creating additional future projects. A changing community presents the church with diverse ministry opportunities. The church could focus on the well-being of the community by addressing the essentials of literacy, health, or nutrition. It could facilitate conversations among residents by offering its facilities for community groups and meetings. The list of opportunities is almost endless. The church must choose how it will be involved in the community.

The new strategy presented in this project emerged from discussions among members of Cambridge seeking to understand their community and offer themselves as a place of belonging. These congregants wanted to share their acceptance, compassion, and friendship with Ninety Six. Such a way forward is reflective of the way God works. God's way of relating offers all individuals relationship and hospitality over and against the direction of demands, control, and condemnation. No matter who a person is or where that person is in relationship to God, God's welcome extends to everyone through grace. God takes the initiative through love and reaches out with open arms, extending an invitation of friendship with God. The congregation must

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[18] Peter Block, *Community: The Structure of Belonging* (Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2009), 177, Kindle.

follow God into the community in which God's grace is already active, answering God's call to mission. As the church steps in that direction, a new vision for the community will arise.

The mission statement of the United Methodist Church is "to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world." Disciple-making begins by sharing God's love. Cambridge became a member of the United Methodist Church on April 23, 1968, when the Methodist Church joined hands with the Evangelical United Brethren Church. The Book of Discipline of the UMC contains the official Statement of Faith, which describes the church's view of the sacred worth of all persons within the community:

> The United Methodist Church acknowledges that all persons are of sacred worth. All persons without regard to race, color, national origin, status, or economic condition, shall be eligible to attend its worship services, participate in its programs, receive the sacraments, upon baptism be admitted as baptized members, and upon taking vows declaring the Christian faith, become professing members in any local church in the connection.

The Discipline continues by declaring the words of Jesus to be the mission to the church;

> Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you (28:19-20), and You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind…And you shall love your neighbor as yourself (22:37, 39).[19]

Inclusiveness versus Discrimination

Change can lead to entirely different outcomes. Its effect can bring death and decay, as when the season of winter arrives, or it can bloom new life and beauty into existence, as occurs during spring. The church, like the season of spring, must bring new life and growth into the community. To do so, it must cling to what is changeless amid change. What remains changeless is our human value before God. God created human

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[19] United Methodist Church, *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church, 2016* (Nashville, TN: United Methodist Publishing House, 2016), 22.

persons for a reciprocal relationship. Because God is a relational God whose faithful love cares for the world, the relationship of God to human persons remains constant.[20] Our identity reflects our relationship to God. Out of the dominance of the mill institution there comes a temptation for the church to embrace a false identity. When a church adopts power and control and equates it with the will of God, such idolatry leads to separation, alienation, division, and disunity. Inclusiveness is God's way of relationship. The Book of Discipline says that the church is called to inclusiveness from the beginning. Cambridge must recognize difference and embrace diversity. God made a diverse people and saw it was good. All people are blessed with unique gifts and God's grace within both the church and society. The Book of Discipline affirms:

> Inclusiveness means openness, acceptance, and support that enables all persons to participate in the life of the Church, the community, and the world; therefore, inclusiveness denies every semblance of discrimination.[21]

A new role for Cambridge is to embrace the practice of inclusiveness and reject any lingering influence of discrimination from the mill. When discrimination dominates, whether inside the church or within the community, the season of winter begins its work and distorts the gospel message. The Christian church is called to exemplify Jesus' command to love God and neighbor. Neighbors of different faiths are to be respected, and their right to religious freedom is to be protected. Persons with disabilities are to be included as well. Inclusiveness means freedom for all people to have access to God. It is to be the framework of the church's mission. The civil rights laws enforced much-needed

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[20] John Swinton, *Resurrecting the Person: Friendship and the Care of People with Mental Health Problems* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2000), 36-47.

[21] United Methodist Church, *Book of Discipline*, 93.

change within America's society. The church must applaud the laws but also go beyond them by offering relationship to all persons, including those with intellectual disabilities.[22]

The decline of Cambridge is not just a result of the absence of the mill. Change within Western culture has also impacted the church's membership and attendance patterns. Theologian Dianna Butler Bass writes that "Christianity in the United States has undergone tectonic shifts that have altered the nation's religious landscape." Bass analyzed the erosion of organized Christianity and made several discoveries:

> The rising seas of Western unbelief and the high tides of cultural change are leaving traditional religion adrift. All sorts of people—even mature, faithful Christians—are finding conventional religion increasingly less satisfying, are attending church less regularly, and are longing for new expressions of spiritual community.[23]

Bass goes on to point out that the traditional denominations are not the only ones experiencing a changed religious landscape. Even nondenominational faith groups are experiencing a downward change in church attendance, a trend she dates back to 2009.[24] Professor Lovett Weems, who is known for his research on the United Methodist Church, calls the cultural effect on the present-day church a "wilderness" excursion. Weems labels a church like Cambridge with an attendance of fifty members on Sundays as "an average United Methodist Church."[25] That is a loss of over two hundred in attendance from when the church was established. The loss of the mill, the change of the community,

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[22] Hans S. Reinders. *Receiving the Gift of Friendship: Profound Disability, Theological Anthropology and Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2008), 125, Kindle.

[23]Dianna Butler Bass. *Christianity after Religion: The End of Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening* (New York: Harper One, 2013), 15.

[24] Ibid., 11.

[25] Lovett H. Weems: "It Is Not Enough to Be Right," *Faith & Leadership*, October 10, 2011, https://www.faithandleadership.com/lovett-h-weems-it-not-enough-be-right/.

and Western cultural change have all contributed to the church's decline. In order for Cambridge to address this decline head on, the church must look and listen for what God is doing in this turbulent world and follow God's direction.

Belonging to Ancestors and Story Telling

It is important to note that most members of Cambridge United Methodist remember their mill experience with affection. The mill brought prosperity to the region and positively impacted the community in several ways. When the textile mill was fully operational, it was the largest employer in the immediate area. The town supported five grocery stores and many other retail businesses. Now that the mill is gone, the community can barely sustain one grocery store. Residents within the community are much more mobile, traveling into nearby areas for work and picking up their groceries before they head home. The fact that the town and community endure at all is a testament to the positive economic influence of the mill. Many mill workers moved to the town of Ninety Six from local farms nearby. Before that, the town was a smaller rural community. Employment in the mill increased not only the population but also the number of housing units available for families.

Life on the family farm was hard work. According to one senior woman interviewed, "her family was never hungry," she said, "we always had plenty of fresh vegetables and meat to eat. We just had no money." She continued after her laughter:

> Working at the mill was good money to those of us coming from a family farm. They provided everything in walking distance from your home. You could walk to work, to church, to the grocery store, the clothing store—everything you needed was in the mill community. You also got to pick which church you liked to attend. Wherever you fit in is where you went to church. Plus, the mill provided a semi-pro baseball league—that's all the entertainment you ever needed.[26]

[26] Interviewee #3, March 22, 2017, interview by author. Ninety Six, South Carolina.

Many others also shared stories reflecting the bright side of the benefits of the mill. The institution provided everything for its workers and their families. The mill subtracted housing costs and utility expenses from weekly pay, and the rate was low and affordable. Workers had no need to carry any cash around the town, since the mill provided grocery items through a credit system that was settled through payroll deductions. Each house constructed by the mill had one telephone provided, which connected families to one another as well as providing supervisors a way to call a worker back to work, if needed. The mill designed the layout of the homes and the churches to be within walking distance. There was no excuse for "not having a ride." Many families continue to walk to church on Sundays today. Families had everything they needed—as long as it served the purposes of the mill.

The size of the family and the worker's position in the mill determined the size of the house the mill provided. In the early days, the mill supplied community barnyards with chickens and a milk cow and assigned each worker daily tasks in the barn and chores to look after the animals. People in the community were expected to share the workload, as well as the milk and eggs. The community kept an eye out for one another. The residents I interviewed shared stories about this togetherness they experienced while growing up on the mill. They told tales of how their parents already knew of what they termed their "misbehaving" before they arrived home from their exploits. Several church members said it was a close-knit community in which neighbors shared everything with one another. Now that the mill is gone, one person opined:

> You could trust people to do the right thing back then. If not, it was taken care of right away, either by the mill or almost any family. Why you could correct a neighbor's child if you saw them do something wrong, and their parents would thank you for it. It's just not that way anymore, now that the community has changed. You just can't trust people anymore. Our whole society has changed. It's different now than it was.[27]

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[27] Interviewee #1, May 12, 2015, interviewed by author, Ninety Six, South Carolina.

For some, there is a wistful longing for what they refer to as “the good old days.” It may be a result of romanticizing memories as a way to cope with the stress of change and today’s fast-paced living. For some people, change is difficult. New ways have a way of digging up the nostalgia for one’s youth. The old pictures of the mill workers hanging in the hallways of Cambridge are a visual reminder of the belonging many members felt among their ancestors. Cambridge must take that sense of belonging and create new connections within the surrounding community. The church needs to become a place where everyone is welcome.

In the Kingdom of God, everyone is welcome, and everyone matters. Christians are called to humble acts of kindness meant to create places where all God’s children feel welcome, know their lives matter, and that God loves them. The church is to bring hope to this world. How does the church practice such optimism? It does so by becoming the resources for reflection and confidence within the community. God did not come into the world to take us out of it. Responsible Christian living includes keeping oneself accountable to the ups and downs of life by continually looking to the cross and resurrection. Responsible hope remains connected to this world by caring for those in it. New relationships between different groups of people are vital in turning around the decline of the church and building strategic and essential connections for ministry. It takes seeing others in a new light—not as objects for ministry, but as persons of great value, regardless of health, faith, status, lifestyle, gender, skin color, or education. Our calling, as followers of Christ, compels us to move beyond our differences toward the commonality we share as humans and children of God.[28]

Church and Community

[28] Swinton, *Resurrecting the Person*, 43.

The community surrounding Cambridge today is different from what it was when the church began. The mill bricked every home in the mill village and sold it to the workers for a discounted amount. The payment for home ownership was even deducted from payroll. That generation of workers is passing away and the homes, now much higher in value, are being passed down as an inheritance. Family members are either living in them, renting them for the profit, or selling them. A new diverse group of people is moving into the community. How can Cambridge be the gathering place for people who are different from each other? Will the church be a safe place where people feel accepted, welcomed, and honored? Will the congregation embrace a new vision to become a place that moves away from the guilt-ridden motivations of the past towards a more authentic, compassionate position of invitation to all people, even those living on the margins? Will the church work within the community as a partner with other associations? Embracing the complexity of human needs in order to reach solutions requires cooperation among multiple associations. One group cannot do it on its own. It is essential for Cambridge to find ways of becoming a community partner with other associations. The church does not have to help meet every need. The calling of the church to bring to the community the redemptive work of God.[29]

One of the new roles of the church is to be a neighbor within the community.[30] Good neighbors begin conversations with new neighbors moving into the community. The church should not go into the community merely searching for demographic data. Being neighborly is not becoming a problem solver or even looking to grow a church. Disciples follow Christ into

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[29]Thomas E. Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion: A Theology of Disability and Hospitality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2008), 200.

[30] Reinders, *Receiving the Gift of Friendship*, 1864.

the neighborhood and step out in faith into the unknown without a guarantee of success. They must heed the call of God and begin walking by faith. Faith pleases God and is the mark of a disciple. The future of the church is uncertain as it is for all persons. A new faithful ministry does not dispel the uncertainties. Only God holds the future. The call to be the church within the community begins by listening and following what God reveals, then stepping out in faith. How does God reveal what God wants for a church? The church must find an answer to this and other questions together. The answers come from listening to the community, each other, and God.

In today's diverse, fast-paced, and transitional culture, congregations are essential for the well-being of the community. The church has a job to do—providing care, support, and relationships built on trust. Cambridge can play a crucial role in the social capital of the community by becoming a visible hand that connects people.[31] Can we as a faith-based group become known as a place of hope and redemption for all people within the community? Will Cambridge join individuals together who do not know one another? The first step is moving away from the traditional mindset that has dominated the community for so long.

Cambridge's membership started to decline long before the mill shut down its operation and left the area. From the 1950s to the 1970s, during the post-World War II economic boom, the congregation grew in membership and added new facilities onto the property. Since that time of growth ended, the core membership has had to reshape its focus within the community. New leadership became evident within the church. A woman's ministry began working with multiple churches in different faith traditions, including multiracial churches and ministries. The women led weekly work with a local women's prison and spearheaded various mission projects for youth and children in the community. Male congregants also reached out to multiple associations, even

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[31] Block, *Community*, 17.

helping to start a weekly prayer group across racial and denominational lines. The prayer group is now in its tenth year. The group is the largest financial contributor to local families in need in the Ninety Six area.

New leaders have taken the first step to inspire others within the community to work together for positive change. For the leaders to be real leaders, other lines need to be crossed. In particular, the leadership needs to reach the new diverse residents of today. Will leaders continue to step up and move beyond traditional ways of outreach and work to connect those who are different from them? Will the gifts of new residents in the community be embraced and nurtured?[32] Will Cambridge remain an isolated group with starry-eyed memories of the past yet still controlled by fear of "strangers" moving into the former mill village? Are they willing to invest the time it takes to shift the mindset within both the church and the community away from a segregated past? Instead, will they find a way to use each person's gifts within the broader community? What about those who are not in the same faith tradition? Is there a place for them? Can we focus on shared interests within a community of constant change, rather than focusing on past goals which have not led to sustainable change but rather created places of privilege?[33]

In order to create a faithful way forward, a church in decline has four options: do nothing, cluster with other churches, close, or choose to grow. The option of continuing to do nothing will last for as long as the church's financial resources will allow. Clustering with other churches is a viable option that is often resisted by small churches with a long history of tradition and pride. Usually, it takes the membership declining to such a level that the congregation can no longer

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[32] Ibid., 47.

[33] John McKnight and Peter Block, *The Abundant Community: Awakening the Power of Families and Neighborhoods* (Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2010), 132-140.

sustain itself for them to choose merging. Closing before being forced to close is a dignified way of saying the church has faithfully accomplished its ministry. After closing, the church can be rebranded and opened with a new mission. Rebranding a church, however, can be a hard decision for many who have given so much to the church. The last option—to choose to grow—can be the most challenging for a congregation because it requires more effort by the laity. They must take the time to learn and implement new and expanded ministries.[34] Cambridge United Methodist has chosen the fourth option of growing, and the new work has already begun.

New Encounters and New Initiatives

Cambridge United Methodist is now the only church in the heart of the historic mill village of Ninety Six. The property of the old mill site is not far from the church and can be seen from the front lawn. Members stand outside the church and often share stories about working in the mill when they look toward the vacant property. There is a "No Trespassing Sign" on the old mill site warning visitors to keep out. This sign is in stark contrast to the welcoming spirit of the church. Cambridge announces "whoever you are or wherever you are on your spiritual journey, you are welcome here!" Even though the door is open to everyone, will the congregation choose to go beyond its doors into the community?

Of the new opportunities for ministry within the community, some are evident, but many are hidden. One unknown possibility became evident during a brief encounter with a young female cashier in the grocery store. This woman had a small tattoo of a blue puzzle piece on her hand that became evident as she scanned items. Awareness of this little thing uncovered a hidden communal need. The puzzle piece inked between her thumb and first finger was small enough to

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[34] Dudley and Ammerman, *Congregations in Transition,* 152.

go unnoticed, yet it was clear the young woman wanted someone to notice. She wanted to draw attention to her own personal struggle. The blue puzzle piece is a symbol for autism. During conversation, the woman revealed that her son had been diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). He is non-verbal, and they communicate together through sign language. Since the congregation at Cambridge has a direct link to families with autism, a new project to support autism caregivers and their loved ones with autism would be a good fit for the small church community.

During a church meeting, the pastor and members began discussing ways Cambridge could minister in the community. Literacy, health and wellness, and bullying were the topics listed for discussion. Gradually, bullying became the focus of discussion. Bullying has become a growing challenge within the Ninety Six community and is affecting younger children each year. Children both at the elementary school as well as the middle school have been victims of bullying. During this discussion, the congregants discovered that what connected Cambridge to the problem of bullying was autism.

One leader said, “I can name more than several families in our community, without including the families within our church, whose child has been bullied because they have been diagnosed with autism.” After much deliberation, our small group agreed on a mandate: Cambridge UMC must generate a new approach that would better assist the families and caregivers of those who are protecting young children from being bullied because of autism. The group embraced the new initiative and organized an outreach program to provide family support and raise awareness of autism. The effort will flow from the church’s mission statement, “To Touch the Lives of Others with the Love of Christ.” This new initiative will begin by recognizing the gifts God has given the congregation. But it does not stop there. It will then seek

to develop a support system to help families through the puzzling journey of autism. This starts with creating a network of caring and sharing within the community.[35]

Families navigating the grief process after a diagnosis of autism do not have sufficient support. They are hesitant to express their needs and often remain hidden within the community. Additionally, they long for a place of belonging where they can be seen and heard. In short, they need to know someone cares. This project became the new strategy Cambridge was looking for to ignite the commitment of its congregants to offer genuine support to neighbors in need.

The power of collective imagination can spark new energy for an active outreach ministry. The congregation at Cambridge is learning to share the transforming power of compassion to individuals outside of their own family and their own church. These individuals are often hidden in plain sight within the community and suffer because of harmful acts, stigmatization, and despair. Cambridge must offer families dealing with autism genuine hope and change for their lives. They are our sisters and brothers traveling an arduous journey, and Cambridge UMC has the will and the resources to bring the necessary care and support to assist them on their way.

Excursus: Understanding Autism

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimates that one in every 68 children born today is affected by autism. The growing number of children diagnosed with ASD is expected to have almost doubled in the last ten-year period of data collection by the CDC.[36]

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[35] Jean Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery of Jesus Through the Gospel of John (*Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2004), 32.

[36] Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "Autism and Developmental Disabilities Monitoring (ADDM) Network," last modified December 5, 2016, assessed February 10, 2018, https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/autism/addm.html/.

These statistics suggest that a significant number of families in Cambridge likely have children with special needs. Like all families, they desire to belong. The human longing to belong is contingent upon friendships inspired by the Spirit of Christ. Such love and friendship can be found within the church among the followers of Jesus.

ASD is a complex neurodevelopmental disorder characterized by communication and social interaction challenges. When a child is diagnosed as being on the autism spectrum, it reflects a condition that has a range of severity of symptoms. The individual is viewed from average to superior in their intellectual capacity. Also evident in individuals with autism is a considerable interest in the physical world and a corresponding disinterest in the social world. The disorder includes a range of behavioral patterns, sensory dysfunction, along with limited and narrow interests.

One puzzle of autism is the lack of one cause. The complexity of the disorder makes it hard for parents and other caregivers to make sense of the child's behavior. Comprehending the effect that systemizing has on an autistic individual offers clarity:

> The world outside the autistic individual is like a series of still photographs swirling by one by one that is never fused together into a "motion picture;" the autistic person is interested in the details but not in the whole, complete configuration.[37]

For the child with autism, interest in "the details," means she or he likes to discover the rules. The built-in rules of a system are reliable, consistent, and predictable. The more predictable a system is, the more attractive it can become to the autistic child. Researchers have discovered a toy train that runs on a track is a good example. The train goes forward and backward, never sideways. Children with autism tend to spend more time engaging with such a toy. They watch it travel backwards and forwards over and over again. Toys with less predictability are not as

[37] Robert H. Albers, William H. Meller, and Steven D. Thurber, *Ministry with Persons with Mental Illness and Their Families* (Minneapolis: MN: Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 2012), https://muse.jhu.edu/chapter/925205/.

engaging for the autistic child. Unlike social interactions, a system has regularities that come from mandatory or built-in rules. They are reliable, consistent, and hence predictable. A ten-year-old autistic child who is watching a toy electric train running on a track will likely spend more time spontaneously engaging in such activity than most any other.

With that in mind, a child with autism placed in a social environment with less predictability—like a church function—can become stressful, uncertain, or fearful. Interactions within social group settings are often not governed by a set of rules, thereby producing little predictability. Without an organized, systematic structure, the social world of an autistic individual can become a very frightening place. Therefore, a church will have more success in reaching the autistic community by designing family-friendly programming like the Cub Scouts, which has consistent organization and "built-in rules."

Although there is an identifiable range of common symptoms of those on the autism spectrum, each diagnosed individual is unique. Autistic individuals oftentimes react differently to the same social situations. Though no two children are exactly alike, each individual is a child of God who deserves to be loved, accepted, cared for, and protected. The same is true for every family and caregiver. Each will be at a different point in dealing with the disorder. Because of that, Ellen Notbohm explains that "child or adult, each will have a unique set of needs."[38] For this reason, the church must offer the local autistic community a flexible plan of care and support. Additionally, for every year they are in school, a child diagnosed with autism experiences an increase in being bullied. This sad reality adds to the growing challenges of their caretakers. Recent studies describe feelings of exhaustion, caregiver burnout, as well as elevated

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[38] Ellen Notbohm. *Ten Things Every Child with Autism Wishes You Knew: Updated and Expanded Edition*, ed. Veronica Zysk (Arlington, TX: Future Horizons, 2012), 10.

stress levels, among parents with children on the autism spectrum. Divorce rates are high, as are the number of parents who struggle with chronic grief, worry, and an overload of guilt. Parental fatigue, ineffective coping skills, and bad judgments from the community are par for the course. With an efficient support program in place, the church would be able to identify and begin helping those in need.

Response: Creating an Autism Task Force

Churches face the challenge of choosing between many strategies to pursue their mission. Cahalan instructs, "Each option must be considered in relationship to the congregation's mission, the context of its ministry, the congregation's expertise in executing the project, and their ability to pay for it."[39] Therefore, when creating this new initiative at Cambridge, it is essential to create a plan of assessment and evaluation that will guide the church's capacity for success. Such a process will be handled through the Autism Task Force (ATF) under the leadership of the pastor.

Creating an Autism Task Force at Cambridge will raise awareness within the community, as well as guide the congregation in becoming a community partner. The ATF is to be a recruiting group within the church which identifies member's gifts and talents. The success of this effort depends significantly on it being a collaborative effort. Along with the pastor, the team members will directly connect to family members dealing with autism, including grandparents, parents, or caretakers. The team needs to be small enough for an intimate discussion yet large enough for planning the work efficiently. The purpose of the team is to support other members, so that they can use their gifts and talents to show compassion, love, and friendship to families dealing with an autism diagnosis. To move the process forward, the ATF must be more than a

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[39]Kathleen A. Cahalan. *Projects That Matter: Successful Planning and Evaluation for Religious Organizations* (Bethesda, MD: The Alban Institute, 2003), 5.

planning committee; it must also be an action group. To generate interest in the church, the group must meet together often and be willing to spend time working with families and civic organizations.

A good plan requires evaluation. The team has the responsibility to report back to the church on the progress of the program. They are to evaluate the project and take necessary actions if changes are required. Also, they are to create a follow-up plan that takes into account the results of surveys and other information gathered. The ATF at Cambridge seeks to raise awareness within the community of the growing number of families facing autism and the need for a genuine response of compassion, love, and friendship.

Autism awareness is a growing rapidly in America today. Many more associations, especially those with an online presence, are dedicated to providing political advocacy. Additionally, the month of April has been declared Autism Awareness Month, and citizens are encouraged to wear blue to display their support. In an era of elevated awareness, the church can join in and seek to amplify awareness even more. They can move beyond inclusion and offer a compassionate response that stresses belonging, love, and friendship. Raising awareness can be done through both church and community events. Some ideas for church activities in April are:

- Participate in an April Autism Awareness campaign
- Hand out blue glow sticks and share with children in worship services
- Create display tables with brochures, flyers, and handouts
- Have choir members dedicate a song to families dealing with autism
- Share a PowerPoint presentation on autism
- Invite a guest speaker to present on autism
- Create a sensory room or area for children to experience what a child with autism experiences

This project is being designed as an outreach ministry. Since much is already being done through other churches, schools, government, and businesses, the ATF team members can become community outreach partners that assist existing programs.

Cambridge has already formed their autism task force with the slogan; “Moving beyond inclusion—offering compassion, belonging, friendship and love.” The planning process led to the creation of an Autism Awareness Sunday, an Autism Family Fun Day, and a Cub Scout program designed for families with autism. The congregation has embraced the new initiatives and begun implementation.

Beyond Inclusion: A Theology of Belonging

Wading into the area of supporting families dealing with mental health issues can be a daunting challenge. It is understandable for those in the church to be hesitant, nervous, or even fearful when faced with this health issue. A church could see the amount of work already done by the health care industry and think: what difference can the church possibly make? Walking among giants is unquestionably an intimidating endeavor. Jean Vanier’s insight offers a reality check:

> We are all called to do, not extraordinary things, but very ordinary things, with an extraordinary love that flows from the heart of God.[40]

We do not walk alone. We are all called to go beyond inclusion toward a place of belonging and provide compassion, love, and friendship to those in need. The church must rediscover the heart of God.

We are all called to do ordinary things. What makes the work of the church extraordinary is God's love. Caring for the caretakers of those on the autism spectrum in very ordinary ways is the embodiment of the Spirit of God’s love. Again, Vanier writes:

> Power and cleverness call forth admiration but also a certain separation, a sense of distance; we are reminded of who we are not, of what we cannot do. On the other hand, sharing weaknesses and needs calls us together into “oneness.” We welcome into our heart those who love us. In this communion, we discover the deepest part of our being: *the need to be loved and to have someone who trusts and appreciates us* and who cares

[40] Jean Vanier, *Community and Growth,* 2nd ed. (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), 298.

> least of all about our capacity to work or to be clever and interesting. *When we discover we are loved in this way, the masks or barriers behind which we hide are dropped; new life flows.* We no longer have to prove our worth; we are free to be ourselves. We find a new wholeness, a new inner unity.[41]

God's love must be at the center of this project. Showing compassion puts love into action and is how the church can build a support system. The project will begin with one family at a time. The impact may not be massive, but it will grow and eventually become a force within the community. It is the church that brings the hope of belonging, and it begins with showing compassion.

Sharing compassion is ordinary work—it is showing God's love. The discovery of its impact on another human being is life-changing, both for the one who gives and the one who receives. The Apostle Paul implores,

> In all this I have given you an example that by such work we must support the weak, remembering the words of the Lord Jesus, for he said, “It is more blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 20:35).

In this project, “belonging” is the primary relational practice of sharing God’s love in ordinary ways to those who are caring for individuals with autism. The church must follow God’s way of welcoming others with open arms. Caretakers, families, and autistic individuals do not have to “prove their worth.” They are already accepted, welcomed, and free to be themselves.

The church belongs in the community. Every congregation is to be a place of belonging for the community. When the community changes, the roles of the church change accordingly. God is ahead of the church already at work within the community. God is the one who invites the congregation to participate in that work. Partnering with God is answering the call of God to

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[41] Ibid., 13.

discover new vision and mission for a church in transition. As God calls the church into being, so God calls the church into the community. The church is essential for the community bringing God's redemptive work of healing, grace, and love. Belonging occurs in relationship to one another; humans belong to one another, created in the Imago Dei.[42]

As a church, our practices must move beyond political ideas of inclusion toward creating actual practices of belonging. Can the ideal place of belonging begin within the church? Will practical theology find expression beyond merely including persons of need? It can if it builds upon the following plan expressed by Jean Vanier:

> My vision is that belonging should be at the heart of a fundamental discovery: that we all belong to a common humanity, the human race. We may be rooted in a specific family and culture, but we come to this earth to open up to others, to serve them and receive the gifts they bring to us, as well as to all of humanity.[43]

The theology of belonging includes the pursuit of justice, equality, and fairness, but its primary focus is to enable all people to love God, neighbor, and self. Vanier came to discover this love when he co-founded the L'Arche communities 40 years ago. Relational connections are what sustain a community. Longing to be a part of a community in which we are fully accepted is part of our inner being. Dependency and vulnerability are often portrayed as signs of weakness, yet Vanier teaches growth begins when we see and share our weaknesses with others. Vanier calls it our "oneness." In this sense, a relational connection is at the heart of the theology of belonging.

All through Scripture we see our connectedness. A relational connection begins in creation. Human beings are made for relationships. As John Swinton says,

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[42] Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion*, 185.

[43] Jean Vanier, *Becoming Human* (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 2008), 36.

> A relational view of the *imago Dei* understands our likeness to God in our ability to have a relationship with others, just as the Trinity is relational within itself. We are like God in our dependence upon a relationship.[44]

American history reflects our rejection of dependence. We are a people who stand up for independence, liberty, and individuality. It is in the fabric of our social DNA. Dependency, however, does not drive in a single lane. In one lane, dependency is subordination. It is allowing someone or something else to control, going even as far as the way of addiction. In another lane, however, dependency implies connection, unity, or the way of togetherness. It rests upon a relationship with one another. It is a way of wholeness or completeness. As Swinton says, it is "our ability to have a relationship with others." We are dependent—or completed—in relationship with God and others. There is no individual faith separate from others. Persons of faith are the body of Christ; each part is dependent upon the whole. Bonhoeffer teaches that only in relationship are we free,

> Freedom is not something man has for himself but something he has for others. No man is free "as such" . . . Why? Because freedom is not a quality which can be revealed—it is not a possession, a presence, an object, nor is it a form for existence—but a relationship and nothing else. Being free means "being free for the other," because the other has bound me to him. Only in relationship with the other am I free.[45]

Belonging is not only a relational connection but also involves friendship. To be a friend, you must be missed if you are not around. If you are not missed, you do not belong. Friends miss each other when they are not together. Building a support system for caretakers in the autism community will also involve creating friendships with others. It will involve getting to know them and spending time with them. If you do not see the individual with special needs, you cannot get to know them, and a friendship cannot develop. A theology of belonging prescribes a

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[44] Swinton, *Resurrecting the Person*, 39.

[45] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall: A Theological Exposition of Genesis 1-3*, ed. John W. de Gruchy, trans. Douglas Steven Bax (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2007), 37.

support system that is welcoming, affirming, and relational. This is a place where friendships can grow and where individuals feel seen, heard, and missed when they are not there. Belonging means that when individuals return, they are embraced and accepted again.[46]

For a Christian, friendship is a gift to be received. It begins with God offering the gift of friendship to all, able-bodied or disabled. But it is the intellectually disabled who most provide a witness to how one receives and trusts God's friendship. Lorraine Cuddeback argues that because our primary relationship with God comes as a gift, "the act of receiving should have priority, not the act of giving." For Cuddeback, differences shape the way we both experience and respond to the offer of God's grace. She points out that there is a tendency to "gloss over difference in a way that obscures the risks and vulnerabilities of friendship." It is through friendship, that all of us (regardless of disability) will be able to see ourselves as God sees us.[47]

A theology of belonging will both guide and enable an effective praxis for the church to faithfully participate in God's mission to liberate disabled persons and those who care for them. Clearly within Western society, persons dealing with intellectual disability experience exclusion, oppression, and even hostility. Modern sensibilities often see disability as a problem to be solved. This project shifts the focus away from caring for those who have "problems" towards building relationships and affirming the fundamental equality among all persons, regardless of disability. The role of the church is to voice its rejection of the very notion of inadequate humanity. The work of Christ incorporates the vast diversity of our shared humanity. Those who are considered "other" and unworthy of attention are human beings worthy of respect and

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[46] Swinton, *Resurrecting the Person*, 37.

[47] Miguel J. Romero, Mary Jo Iozzio, and Lorraine Cuddeback. *Journal of Moral Theology, Volume 6, Special Issue 2: Engaging Disability* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2017), 168-169.

meaningful relationships. Thomas E. Reynolds, a theologian with a disabled child, calls out any Christian teaching that says otherwise:

> Disability does not simply mark a personal tragedy that calls for healing. Neither does it indicate a diminishment of the image of God imprinted upon human beings. Neither does it suggest that people with disabilities are "children of a lesser God," an ineffective or non-loving God. Rather, it calls into question the Christian community and its understanding of human wholeness, normalcy, impairment, redemption, and God's love and power.[48]

The church must be intentional, engaging disability in constructive, hopeful, and affirming ways. It will happen when people commit themselves to love in solidarity of those who are the least among us. Such love embraces the autistic child and those who care for her or him as individuals in relationship who are made in the image of divine love. Friendship with them is the actualization of such love.

Conclusion

Change is inevitable for the church. Congregations must transcend the complex cycles of change in today's turbulent world by discovering their new roles in a more diverse society. The community and culture which surrounds Cambridge United Methodist Church in Ninety Six, South Carolina, is vastly different than when it was first established. The church must choose to embrace a new identity and discover a renewed vision and mission of the church. Pursuing a strategic journey forward amid a changed landscape is challenging. The church must plan and proceed with confidence knowing God's presence goes with them on their journey. Churches, amid dramatic change, must learn to recognize difference and create a future distinct from its past. Paramount to success is learning new habits of listening to those within the community, each other, and God. God is already at work in the community and calls the church to embrace

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[48] Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion*, 23.

risk and mystery and take the first step forward. The church must learn to embrace what is changeless: human value before God. God created humans for a relationship. Inclusiveness is God's way of connection. The Christian church is called to exemplify Jesus' command to love God and neighbor.

Cambridge United Methodist Church sits in a community that has experienced dramatic change. The surrounding community is more diverse than when the church was first established. The textile mill which built the church has moved away. The church has chosen to stay and discover a new vision and mission. The goal of practical theology is action. Belief and practice must go hand in hand. The theology of belonging includes the pursuit for justice, equality, and fairness, but its primary focus is to enable all people to love God, neighbor, and self. The congregation must shift their thinking from identifying problems within the community to spotlighting possibilities of supporting families in need. Families navigating the puzzling journey of autism face enormous struggle and long for a place of belonging. They want to be seen, to be heard, and to know someone cares. This new initiative as a collaborative effort will offer genuine support to such neighbors in need.

This project can also be a model for future church projects. The methods used can help identify other needs and trends within the community. They can help the church discover a new identity within the community. Cambridge United Methodist Church can be known as a place that accepts all people, including those with disabilities. The project can be reviewed, successes can be celebrated, and new strategies can be created, in order "To Touch the Lives of Others with the Love of Christ."

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