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Assessing the Quality of Proactive Congregational Care for the College Avenue Church of Christ

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**HARDING**
UNIVERSITY

ASSESSING THE QUALITY OF PROACTIVE CONGREGATIONAL CARE FOR THE
COLLEGE AVENUE CHURCH OF CHRIST

A Project Thesis Presented to the Faculty of
Harding School of Theology
Memphis, Tennessee

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Ministry

By
Kent M. Jobe

November 2020

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Chapter One

Introduction and Context

Statement of the Problem

Historically, the College Avenue Church of Christ in El Dorado, Arkansas has been heavily ministry-driven or programmatic. There are currently over forty ministries in place in which members can serve the church, the community, and the world (see appendix 3).¹ While there is always a need to evaluate and eliminate nonessential programs it is difficult to find a ministry that currently exists that does not have a passionate and driven leader who feels led to serve in their respective ministry.

This activity and engagement in numerous ministries has unfortunately come at a cost. In our attempt to be “about the Father’s business” (Luke 2:49), many in our congregation have inadvertently been overlooked and are attending sporadically or have left altogether. On more than one occasion, long-time members have confided to shepherds and staff that they have felt neglected as the focus has shifted to a more outreach-focused approach. We need a refresher course when it comes to solid,

¹ Appendix 3, 159.

proactive, congregational care while still carrying Jesus' mandate to make disciples.

For example, we had a woman whose husband passed away. Due to the busyness of ministry and her handling final arrangements and family disputes, I found myself texting her frequently simply because I knew her schedule was complex. A short time after the funeral, I went to visit her and pray for the legal battle which ensued. In the most Christ-like manner she could muster, she told me, "I appreciated the calls and the texts, but I needed my minister to be in my kitchen with his legs under my table. Texting may work for the younger generation, but I needed human interaction with my minister." Her words were convicting. I humbly apologized, vowing to do better.

On Wednesday, April 20th, 2016 I sat in the living room of a young family and consoled them in the death of the husband's mother. They were relatively new to our congregation. They were slowly acclimating, and their two small children liked the children's programs. His parents did not have a church home and I wanted to make certain they were cared for. Since they hadn't fully immersed into our church culture, I visited with them in their home to ensure that our congregation ministered to them in a powerful and tangible way.

After the cursory pleasantries and condolences, I asked if we could (as a church family) provide meals for their family in the days to come and for the extended family after the funeral service. We also provided the extra chairs the family needed for their meal after the service. They were grateful for the offer and accepted.

After I made my request, the wife while conversing said something I will never forget. With all sincerity and respect, she said, "I just thought we were going to get put on the prayer list or something." Over the next week, our church family ministered to them through cards, food, and prayers.

As I sat in their driveway, I quickly transcribed her statement verbatim and pondered the impact of her words. I thought about James 2:16 which talks about the response of "go in peace, be warm and filled" and how many in churches today experience simply being "put on the prayer list or something" but the follow up is weak or non-existent. In the busyness of our culture it is easier to "put you on the prayer list" than it is to sit in your living room, write the card, make the meal, or nurture a relationship.

This level of neglect has not been done intentionally, but our default is to ignore those who quietly occupy the pews and focus on those outside the church walls. This sounds biblical,

but the apostle Paul would argue otherwise in Galatians 6:10 where he writes, "as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith." The issue is a lack of genuine relationships. The busyness of life has made it easier to neglect congregational care, proactive congregational benevolence, hospitality, and genuine relationships. We must move past the superficial to the more meaningful.

Our response as leadership has been to be more intentional in overseeing the flock, but the reality is that many of the shepherds (and even some of the ministers) are more comfortable with an administrative role than a pastoral role. Furthermore, our leadership has legitimate issues in their own lives that demand much of their time (aging parents, retirement, raising children, job demands, declining health of spouse, etc.) Therefore, I believe a more congregational approach to mutual care will be more beneficial and self-sustaining (see appendix 1).²

While there are other issues that receive more attention in religious books and periodicals, the ramifications of poor congregational care are spiritually tragic. In our attempt to be outreach-oriented and mission-minded our own members can become

² Appendix 1, 154.

collateral damage. This does not have to be the case. Scot McKnight writes, "To the degree that folks are invisible in our church, we don't have the right view of the church and the right view of the Christian life."³ Congregational care is a non-negotiable in both the Old and New Testaments but is often overlooked (and therefore undervalued) while addressing presumably bigger issues.

One final component of this issue is the rising number in a group Carlus Gupton refers to as the "overdones." He defines the "overdones" as "those who have been a part of the church for a long time, have become so deeply entrenched in their religious culture that they feel entitled to having things their way and lose both concern for and relevance to the lost."⁴ This group's apathy extends far beyond the scope of evangelism; it can affect the way in which a church family interacts and cares for one another. The tendency can be to become so encapsulated in a private relationship with God that the needs of others no longer register when we are among fellow believers.

My project focused on assessing and looking for ways to improve the climate of congregational care at College Avenue by

³ Scot McKnight, *A Fellowship of Differents: Showing the World God's Design for Life Together* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), 24.

⁴ Carlus Gupton, course notes, "Spiritual and Theological Formation" Harding School of Theology, Memphis, TN, Fall 2019.

raising awareness, praising the areas where it currently exists, and addressing areas where we can do better. Congregants tend to stay where they are loved and cared for and are more likely to love and care for others if they feel loved and cared for. By strengthening our level of proactive congregational care, we will be stronger as a spiritual family and ultimately more appealing to the community. We will not only reclaim the importance of congregational care but will more effectively model the spirit and mission of the early church and the will of God.

Ministry Context

The College Avenue Church of Christ is in the city of El Dorado, Arkansas, which was founded in 1843. Experiencing an oil boom between 1920 and 1930, the population jumped from 3,887 in 1920 to 16,421 in 1930, a 322% increase. Since 1970, the community has been in a steady decline despite numerous attempts to better the quality of life, retain current residents, and draw new residents. This affects the church in that it is more difficult, but not impossible, to grow in a community that is not growing. Our church family has over 510 individuals (this number includes young children and family members who attend regularly but have not been baptized).

"El Dorado is 48.9% Black alone, 43.2% White alone, 4.5% Hispanic and the remaining population is made up of those of multiple races, American Indian, and Asian."⁵ Our congregation does not reflect the demographic of our community. College Avenue is predominantly Caucasian, with three black families (including one shepherd), and three mixed-race couples.

College Avenue is blessed to have a balanced age demographic. We have an even distribution of young families and older couples with most age groups well-represented, except for the college age/young singles. Currently we have 32 children ages birth-pre-K, 71 students Kindergarten-6th grade and 75 students in the youth group (7th-12th grade).

Barna Research reported in August 2017, "Respondents who identify as Christian, say their faith is very important in their life and have attended a religious service or gathering in the past month are what Barna considers a 'practicing Christian.'"⁶ According to their definition, "The city with the highest percentage of practicing Christians is the region around Monroe, Louisiana/El Dorado, Arkansas (65%), at almost double

⁵ "Races in El Dorado, Arkansas", Accessed August 25, 2020, www.city-data.com/city/El-Dorado-Arkansas.html. The website uses both delineations of "black" and "black alone" and "white" and "white alone"

⁶ Barna Group, "10 Facts About Faith in American Cities." Last modified August 8, 2017. <https://www.barna.com/research/10-facts-faith-american-cities/>.

the U.S. average (36%).”⁷ While this is good, it provides its own unique set of challenges. Most people in our community are affiliated with a church; however, this does not automatically translate into devoted disciples of Christ.

There are over 230 churches in Union County, 104 churches in El Dorado with eight different churches on College Avenue alone. Over the past 65 years, this church family has accomplished many things for the Kingdom locally and globally. We have prided ourselves on being an active congregation, and one that meets the needs of the community as they arise.

College Avenue, which has been at the same location since August 1955, is a financially stable congregation that carries no debt on facilities or vehicles, and currently owns six houses that are adjacent to the property that can be used for ministry purposes as the congregation expands.

Another strength is the tenure of preaching ministers and leadership. In the last sixty-five years College Avenue has had ten preachers, three of those in the past forty-four years.

⁷ Barna

Researcher's Role

I have been a part of the College Avenue Church of Christ since June 2001. I interviewed for the youth and family minister position in February of 2001 and officially started in June 2001. In January 2008, I transitioned from youth ministry into the role of Discipleship Minister. My duties entailed overseeing adult education, promoting evangelism, and equipping members for ministry. I held this role until my predecessor vacated the pulpit ministry position in July 2013. Three years prior to his departure, we served as co-pulpit ministers. I have been blessed with an extremely healthy working relationship with the congregation, shepherds, and staff.

Review of Literature

The countercultural nature of Christianity calls believers to lead by example and care for one another by donning the servant's towel rather than striving for the brass ring. When it comes to proactive congregational care there is almost an assumption among many that this is something that everyone naturally understands and implements into their daily walk with Christ. While this may have been the case in previous generations, the present climate in many churches does not model this approach organically.

One resource vital to achieving a greater understanding of congregational care is James Thompson's book, *The Church According to Paul: Rediscovering the Community Conformed to Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2014). His book delivers an in-depth look at the biblical text and brings the reader to a greater understanding of scripture while portraying how the church should function today. Thompson writes, "I am convinced that Paul's task of forming churches in the pre-Christian culture can inform our attempts to shape churches in a post-Christian culture."⁸ He also stresses the need to look to Paul for insight to the early church when he writes:

Because we know more about Paul's churches than we know about any other community in the New Testament, the apostle is the indispensable guide for anyone who looks for scriptural resources for reimagining the church.⁹

One of the themes that Thompson addresses is the reality that many in our culture are not opposed to Jesus or his teachings; however, they are critical of the church and how it has carried out the mission of Christ. Thompson writes:

Evangelicals, capitalists, socialists, feminists, the socially liberal, and the socially conservative have all expressed either loyalty or admiration of Jesus while criticizing the church.¹⁰

⁸ James W Thompson, *The Church According to Paul: Rediscovering the Community Conformed to Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2014), ix.

⁹ Ibid., 17.

¹⁰ Ibid., 4.

This harsh reality reinforces the need for the church to embody the example of Christ and the teachings regarding congregational care found in the New Testament.

Another point that Thompson highlights is the social trend towards individualization and a loss of what Robert Putnam would label as "social capital."¹¹ As Robert Putnam astutely observes, "The internet has replaced many institutions today as vehicles for bringing people together for a common purpose."¹² As a nation, we have misplaced our sense of community and have relegated most of our daily communication to texts, e-mails, and social media. Thompson suggests, pure congregational care engages members on a personal level that can reclaim a lost sense of genuine community.

Finally, Thompson has a powerful section on Paul's treatment of "koinonia." I will address this aspect more in my theological reflection.

The Lonely Pew: Creating Community in the Local Church by Douglas L. Fagerstrom and James W. Carlson offers numerous insights that allow for a greater understanding of congregational care in a specific ministry. The book begins by

¹¹ Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2011), 111-113.

¹² Thompson, *The Church According to Paul*, 9.

stressing the importance of small groups to facilitate care among members. Fagerstrom and Carlson write:

I do not personally know all the people who attend our church. This is why we work hard to connect people to smaller groups where they can develop meaningful, long-term relationships of mutual accountability and love.¹³

One of the main themes of their book is being interconnected. They contend that scripture describes community as much more than time and space. Fagerstrom and Carlson suggest that "God's desire is that the people in the community *interact* with one another, that the participants *share*, that members sense *togetherness*, and that people in the community *belong*."¹⁴ (emphasis theirs) It is this prominence that enables the local church to build strong relationships with one another and thereby strengthen their bond as a church.

One final resource is *Paul's Idea of Community: The Early House Churches in Their Cultural Setting* by Robert J. Banks (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1994). This book categorizes the church community as a wide range of things including a household gathering, a heavenly reality, a loving family, and a functional body. Each of these descriptions compose an image of

¹³ Douglas L. Fagerstrom & James W. Carlson, *The Lonely Pew: Creating Community in the Local Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1993), 7.

¹⁴ Douglas L. Fagerstrom & James W. Carlson, 17.

the operational local church in its original context and how it can be embodied in the world today.

Theological Framework

There are few concepts more central to the gospel message than the importance of relationships. Throughout the Old Testament, God longed for a relationship with his covenant people and sought repeatedly to restore his chosen even though they were frequently disobedient, obstinate, and stiff-necked. From disobedience in the garden, to grumblers in the wilderness, to the period of the judges, to the powerful message of the book of Hosea, God was willing to work with and through the community for the sake of having a relationship with his chosen people.

Likewise, the inspired authors of the New Testament assumed the centrality of community in the life of God's people. Douglas Fagerstrom writes:

A rather impressive list of New Testament terms suggests community-type factors: *brothers, sisters, fellow laborers, fellow prisoners, the called, fellowships, yoke fellows, partners, the body, and the church*. Varied roles, but all indicate relationship.¹⁵

The common experiences of sharing possessions (Acts 4), warm exchange of greetings (Romans 16:16; 1 Cor. 16:20), and the

¹⁵ Fagerstrom & Carlson, 12.

Lord's Supper (1 Cor. 11) are New Testament illustrations of how community worked in the real world.

There are several major theological themes connected to community that support this project. First, there is the nature of the mutuality commands in the New Testament. From Jesus, to Paul, to James, to the author of Hebrews, each writer knew the importance of not only loving God but loving one another and carrying out the commands in tangible ways.

Scripture makes it clear that as disciples we are to love one another (John 13:34-35), welcome one another (Romans 15:1-7), be subject to one another (Ephesians 5:1-21), forbear one another (Ephesians 4:1-7), serve one another (Galatians 5:13-26; Luke 10), forgive one another (Colossians 3:1-17; Genesis 45), confess sin and pray for one another (James 5:13-16), encourage one another (1 Thessalonians 5:1-11), bear one another's burdens (Galatians 6:1-10), and stir up one another to love and good works (Hebrews 10:19-25). Each of these speaks to the communal approach that early believers were to take towards the faith community (and outsiders) and exemplify a powerful way to live out the Kingdom principles laid out in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7). It would be difficult to practice congregational care without these principles as a strong foundation.

Another major theme of this project is *proactive* care for those in the church. When Paul completes his letter to the Galatians, he reminds his recipients that, “as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone and especially to those who are of the household of faith” (Galatians 6:10). This takes place when church members are engaged and are attentive to the needs of those in the congregation while still taking the great commission seriously. This is where we must step out of our comfort zone and live a countercultural life. Vanable H. Moody suggests:

To avoid allowing comfort and convenience to destroy our relationships, we must develop habits of continually respecting and valuing others, meeting their needs, and sacrificing for people immediately when their needs arise.¹⁶

This project will heighten the church’s ability to sense needs based on healthy relationships with their brothers and sisters in Christ.

Furthermore, while my focus is primarily on congregational care and not pastoral care, it is impossible for this project to succeed if it is not modeled by the leadership in the church.

James Thompson advocates:

His [Paul’s] call for a communal and countercultural ethic provides a missing dimension in the contemporary understanding of ministry. For Paul, all of the

¹⁶ Vanable H. Moody, *The People Factor: How Building Great Relationships and Ending Bad Ones Unlocks Your God-Given Purpose* (Nashville, TN: Nelson, 2014), 101.

functions and skills of the minister fit within a pastoral theology of transformation.¹⁷

When the congregation witnesses the shepherds and staff practicing intentional, proactive congregational care it will be easier to visualize the desired results on the part of the members.

Methodology

My methodology incorporated effective interview methods to engage church members to share their experiences regarding congregational care and aided in assessing and improving care moving forward. Hopefully an eventual outgrowth of this project will be members who are equipped with the tools needed to better minister to those with whom they work, worship, and live alongside.

The project methodology was as follows:

1. I identified those who had placed membership since 2010 and are active members at College Avenue (there are 76 individuals and family units). (see appendix 2)¹⁸ I chose this group for two reasons. First, I have worked with this church family for the past 19 years, but I have served as the senior minister for the past seven. Most of these candidates represent those who have

¹⁷ James W. Thompson, *Pastoral Ministry According to Paul: A Biblical Vision* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2006), 29.

¹⁸ Appendix 2, 158.

placed membership at College Avenue since I assumed the role of Senior/pulpit minister and have been under my teaching and ministry.

Next, ten years was an adequate timeframe for sampling to get a healthy reading on the climate of congregational care from those who have been here the least amount of time. It is easy to become unaware of certain trends if you grow overly familiar with a group of people. For example, we have recently worked to improve the signage in and around the church. Those who have worshipped at this location for 20+ years know where the restrooms and classes are located and logically assume anyone else would as well. Looking at the facility through the eyes of a guest or a new member enables us to address issues we may not have realized were issues. Identifying those who have placed membership in the past ten years and getting them to share their experiences and their thoughts on how we can improve allowed me (and the leadership) to see this situation with a fresh perspective.

From that list I enlisted the help of the ministry staff (discipleship minister, youth & family minister, children's minister). I asked them to identify the 30 individuals who would be best suited and willing to aid in the project and would be willing to participate in the interview process. Sakshi Shetty

observes that "Based on research conducted on this very issue, 30 seems to be a good number for the most comprehensive assessment."¹⁹ Our congregation is also comfortable with the sample size of 30 because of our engagement with Christian Schwartz's *Natural Church Development* material. In his book, *Natural Church Development*, Schwartz recommends a sample size of 30 willing volunteers in each congregation (regardless of the size) who represent an accurate cross-section of those who are engaged in the church and are committed to seeing growth (see appendix 3 for a complete list of the ministries at College Avenue and how they fit in the NCD model).^{20 21} This is an integral part of his research methodology. Finally, Mark Mason's findings in a study of qualitative reports found that "the most common sample sizes were 20 and 30 (followed by 40, 10 and 25)."²² Mason concedes that while the majority of his findings utilized multiples of 10, "there is no logical (or theory driven) reason why samples ending in any one integer would be

¹⁹Sakshi Shetty, "Determining Sample Size for Qualitative Research: What is the Magical Number?" *InterQ: Transformative Customer Insights*, February 15, 2020, <https://interq-research.com/determining-sample-size-for-qualitative-research-what-is-the-magical-number/>

²⁰ Appendix 3, 159.

²¹ Christian Schwartz, *Natural Church Development: A Guide to Eight Essential Qualities of Healthy Churches* (St. Charles, Illinois; ChurchSmart, 2006).

²² Ibid.

any more prevalent than any other in qualitative PhD studies using interviews.”²³

I reserved the right to look at the list compiled by the staff and further refine the list if necessary. Having already spent a great deal of time on this project, I knew what I was looking for, and wanted to identify those who have joined in the past ten years who have had good experiences and those who have not had good experiences. I know not everyone who has placed membership in the last decade has felt (or feels) like they are an important part of the church family. I wanted their stories to be told. For this project to be a success I needed to delve into the positive and the negative, and I made sure both sides were accurately portrayed. Of the 32 people interviewed, twenty were female and twelve were male.

2. I generated an interview guide to administer to the individuals selected (see appendix 7).²⁴ The interview guide kept with the best practices of active listening. The questions were specific to their experience regarding congregational care (good and bad) and their input on how we can create a culture that is more proactive in meeting needs and building meaningful relationships.

²³ Mark Mason, “Sample Size and Saturation in PhD Studies Using Qualitative Interviews”, *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 11(3), Art. 8, <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs100387>. Revised September 2010.

²⁴ Appendix 7, 172.

3. I personally conducted these interviews with each of these identified and gleaned a better understanding of their context and appreciation for their role in our church family.

4. After the completion of the interviews, I presented the findings to those who were interviewed, the shepherds and staff, and our ministry leaders.

5. After presenting my findings to these groups and getting their feedback, I processed and reported on my results.

6. I used my findings to suggest ways to generate a climate of healthier congregational care at College Avenue.

The aim of this project was not to create another ministry or program, but rather to cultivate a healthy community of believers with an enhanced emphasis on proactive congregational care. The end goal was for members to be increasingly attentive to the needs of others and proactively satisfy those needs before they are published in the bulletin.

Another interesting "challenge" of this project was that many in the congregation who practice proactive congregational care do so anonymously and with little fanfare. Even in the preliminary stage of this project, I learned about people and ministries that have quietly been caring for members and meeting needs for years with little or no recognition from the church.

Limitations/Delimitations

This project was delimited to a sampling of those who placed membership at College Avenue in the last decade and were members in good standing (as defined by regular attendance during the Sunday morning gathering and actively engaged in at least one ministry of the church). This project was limited in that it did not involve everyone else in the congregation. Also, while pastoral care played a role in the overall project, I narrowed my focus to the role of congregational care. In other words, the project was more focused on members taking care of members rather than strengthening the role of paid staff or appointed shepherds. This distinction was important in retraining the misconception that often exists in churches that member care and ministries are solely the responsibility of the paid staff.

Ethical Considerations

I asked sixteen questions in an oral interview with willing volunteers who placed membership at College Avenue within the last decade.

Participation in this study was completely voluntary and there were no known risks associated with this interview (see

appendix 6).²⁵ Volunteer's names were kept confidential in all the reporting and/or writing related to this study. I was the only person present for the interviews and the only person who listened to the recordings. When I authored the report, I used pseudonyms for all participants, unless otherwise specified.

Outline of the Project

This thesis includes an introductory chapter followed by three others. Chapter two contains theological reflections on 1 Corinthians 12:12-27, Acts 2:42-47, Acts 4:32-35, and a section addressing the concept of *Koinonia* in the College Avenue context. Chapter three addresses the results of the interviews with the group as individuals as well as their response as a group. From there I address the response of the results when presented to the shepherds, the staff, and the ministry leaders. Chapter four analyzes the data and addressed limitations, my conclusions, future implications and how the process will be used moving forward to improve congregational care on a congregational level.

²⁵ Appendix 6, 170.

Chapter Two

Theological Reflections

This project seeks to demonstrate the primacy of congregational care to the essence of the local church and the need to reclaim this importance among members. In that respect, this section expounds upon the witness of scripture relative to the role congregational care plays in Paul's first letter to the church in Corinth as well as Luke's account of the early church in the book of Acts.

The church was created by God to carry out the mission of Christ. Though divine in nature, the church is composed of fallible people who, despite their best efforts, prove inadequate repeatedly. A closer examination of scripture demonstrates there is not a perfect congregation mentioned in the text. Mark Love, Douglas A. Foster, and Randall J. Harris state "No single community in the New Testament fully embodies everything it means to be a congregation of God's people."¹ Yet these fallible congregants had instructions that are beneficial to believers today.

To appreciate the biblical model for the early church, Luke's writings in the book of Acts and Paul's writing to the

¹ Mark Love, Douglas A. Foster, and Randall J. Harris, *Heart of the Restoration Series. Vol 4, Seeking a Lasting City: The Church's Story in the Journey of God* (Abilene, Texas: ACU Press, 2005), 92.

church in Corinth provide a template for a greater awareness of the makeup of the church's earliest members. These accounts provide a theological framework and practical lessons to be applied to our ministry context.

The analogy of the church as a body, laid out by Paul in 1 Corinthians 12 provides a glimpse of what the bride of Christ can look like at her best. James Thompson notes, "as an apostle who preaches where Christ has not been named, he [Paul] does not speak of individual conversions but speaks of the establishment of churches."² Our spirituality is experienced in community. Paul understood affiliation with a community of faith was non-negotiable in our walk with Christ.

Likewise, the glimpse of the early church in Acts 2 and 4 encapsulates what the ideal church community can become when God is at the center, and we sacrifice our opinions and traditions to the Word and the Will of God. The early church is marked by selfless living and total devotion to Christ. In Frank Viola's book, *Reimagining Church*, he summarizes the six aspects of what it means for the church to be family based on the church found in the New Testament. His list includes: the members take care of one another, they spend time together, they show one another affection, the family grows, the members share responsibility,

² James W. Thompson, *The Church According to Paul*, 17.

and they reflect the Triune God in their relationships.³ Each of these can easily be categorized as components of proactive congregational care. These passages offer a primer for those who seek to do the hard work of recasting a vision for the local church in their ministry context. The early church did not operate from a checklist but functioned organically and created a culture of meeting needs and initiating friendships.

By spending time in the New Testament writings of Paul and Luke, this project points to the numerous ways in which today's church members can return to a more biblical idea of church as both a body and as a community. As mentioned earlier, none of the congregations addressed in the following passages are perfect, but each provides useful information that is essential for the overall health and success of the local church.

I Corinthians 12:12-27

Isolation and Interdependence

In Paul's first letter to the church in Corinth (1 Corinthians 12:12-27), he depicts essential principles for Christian community and mutual care by using the human body as a powerful metaphor. First, Paul highlights the importance of the body over the human default of isolationism and independence.

³ Frank Viola, *Reimagining Church: Pursuing the Dream of Organic Christianity* (Colorado Spring, CO: David C Cook Publishing, 2008), 100-109.

Stephen Um explains "For the most part, people enjoy and take pride in autonomy. They might want community, but the only thing they are unwilling to pay for it is their autonomy."⁴ Thankfully we do not have to live with this constant sense of self-composition; we can be retrained. This line of reasoning can be eliminated by recognizing the power of God and our placement in His body.

If church members are organically interdependent on each other, they experience joys and pains of the body as a unit. Witherington points out that "differences or divisions (*schisma*) in the body are avoided by making the body of multiple interdependent parts."⁵ When we see ourselves as a unified body, we cannot help but serve and protect the other parts. As with any family (or any physical body) there are times to celebrate and there are times to give attention to the ones who are struggling. Over the years I have had church members say in some form, "I do not know how people go through hard times without a community of faith." Congregational care at its best embodies the image that Paul is communicating in this chapter.

⁴ Stephen T. Um, *1 Corinthians: The Word of the Cross. Preaching the Word*. Ed. R. Kent Hughes (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015), 221.

⁵ Ben Witherington, *Conflict & Community in Corinth: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1995), 259.

Social Hierarchies

Next, Paul highlights the need to remove the social hierarchy that was prevalent in the original context of the passage. Paul encourages his readers to embrace the upside-down nature of the Kingdom and focus on how they could minister to one another rather than being ashamed of or boasting in their God-given talents. Witherington relates,

To think otherwise is to criticize God, because, as v. 18 indicates, it is God who has placed the various members in the body. It is believers who are enabled and used by God; God is not used by them.⁶

This often-overlooked phrase highlights the sovereignty and foreknowledge of God to arrange certain people in certain places to be community and accomplish His Will in each ministry context.

To further explicate his stance, Paul uses a teaching technique that he does not frequently use. Charles Campbell points out that while Paul uses multiple rhetorical strategies, here he employs humor, a technique that is unusual to him.⁷ Paul parodies those in his context who may use the image of the body to reinforce social hierarchies.

⁶ Witherington, 258-259.

⁷ Charles Campbell, *1 Corinthians. Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018), 206.

Um claims "The people of Corinth had essentially imported the entirety of their culture into the life of the church (hierarchy, classism, sexual deviance, etc.)"⁸ Paul exposed this fallacy and changed the direction of the local church to correct the damage. The church needed to be vigilant to not allow the trappings of this life and the pervasive culture to diminish the model of interdependence laid out in the text. Gerald Hawthorne summarizes this passage by saying,

Within this one body, there is by God's design, a multiplicity of members and functions which is necessary not only for the body as a whole but for the members themselves, all of whom are involved in a solidarity of experience or unity of destiny. Hence, resentment born of a sense of inferiority and arrogance arising from a sense of superiority are alike out of place. Indeed, the so-called weaker members of the human body are actually indispensable, and there is at work in the human body, again by God's design, a certain principle of compensation or complementarity which, Paul implies, provides a pattern for Christian conduct.⁹

Paul advocated for unity that acknowledged and appreciated the diversity in the local church. As Anthony Thiselton writes,

From the fourth and fifth centuries B.C. through the first century up to the second, Plato, Plutarch, and Epictetus (contemporary with Paul) used the image of the body to promote the need for harmony where there was diversity of status(12b).¹⁰

⁸ Um, 221.

⁹ Gerald F. Hawthorne and Ralph P. Martin, eds. *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993) 79.

¹⁰ Anthony C. Thiselton, *First Corinthians: A Shorter Exegetical and Pastoral Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006) 209.

Value of Talents/Gifts

Finally, after describing the interdependent nature of the local church and the removal of social hierarchies, he expounds on the reality that there is value in the diversity in the gifts and talents present in the local church. Stephen Um writes, "God has designed his church to be a community of *complementary interdependence*."¹¹ My project and interview process highlighted the connectedness and interdependency that exists in the body. Like many Christians today, there were Corinthians who felt individualistic about their gifts and thought higher of themselves because of their God-given abilities. Paul does his best to dismantle this line of reasoning and address the main issue. Um continues "The beauty of interdependence is grounded in each member's indispensability."¹²

God intentionally created people with a wide variety of gifts and talents. Robert Banks writes "The community contains a diversity of ministries, and it is precisely in the differences of function that the wholeness and unity of the body resides."¹³

Most impressive is how this stewardship of talent takes place naturally. As diverse parts of the same body, members

¹¹ Um, 221.

¹² Ibid., 222.

¹³ Robert J. Banks, *Paul's Idea of Community: The Early House Churches in Their Cultural Setting* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1994), 59-60.

respond in their own, God-given way. Um explains "The body exhibits great diversity. Toes are not like ears; ears are unlike elbows. Their diversity is not a hindrance to its unity, but absolutely necessary for it."¹⁴ As part of the body analogy, when an ear is asked to be an ear, they do not mind serving as an ear...it comes quite naturally.

To highlight the importance that Paul (and God) put on the analogy between the community and the body of Christ Anthony Thiselton writes,

Entry into the communal reality of being 'in Christ' through the agency of the Holy Spirit (cf. 12:3) is what makes Christians Christian, and all stand on the same footing as 'members' incorporated in Christ.¹⁵

The design enables all to find both value and support.

Fagerstrom adds,

Paul's intention is that community members share a relationship characterized by feeling, emotion, and personal care, not simply by occupation of the same space at the same time. Note the words *happiness, care, suffer, honor, and gladness*. (vv. 25-26)¹⁶

Part of my project was to help those interviewed realize that whatever gift, talent, or contribution they possess, these can be used to care for others. The Body of Christ is an organism designed to grow and develop as people minister to

¹⁴ Um, 222.

¹⁵ Thiselton, 209.

¹⁶ Fagerstrom & Carlson, 16.

people. Even when we deem ourselves as unimportant, the head of the body has determined otherwise. While there is something to be said for working on deficiencies, this in no way disqualifies or diminishes the specific role God has called each Christian to play in the body. Robert Scott Nash observes "If the body consisted of only certain members, it would be dysfunctional, which is not God's design. God arranged (*etheto*) the parts, each in the body as God willed."¹⁷

According to Jurgen Moltmann,

Paul expects that the congregations will include the strong and the weak, wise people and foolish ones, the handicapped and the non-handicapped. No one is useless and of no value. God gives weak and handicapped members the most 'honour and glory.' Why? Surely because the body of Christ is the body of the one exalted and *humiliated*, the risen and the *crucified* Christ. In pains, slights, and disablements, and 'the sufferings in the spirit', God's *suffering* power is revealed.¹⁸

The church should be the place where differences are celebrated and not singled out. Regardless of our gifts, God has given us a way in which to serve the body. Um explains "In valuing the intellect, has there been an undervaluing of the heart? Have the

¹⁷ Robert Scott Nash, *1 Corinthians. Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 2009), 363.

¹⁸ Jurgen Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life: A Universal Affirmation* (Minneapolis, MN: First Fortress Press, 2001), 192-193.

grace gifts of some members been overlooked because we overvalue the grace gifts of others?"¹⁹

There is power in the two-way interpretation of Paul's analogy of the body. Leadership must value all areas of giftedness and be intentional in their praise and appreciation of everyone. We must also be on guard against elevating one gift over another.

The picture Paul paints is ideal. However, the vision of congregational care exemplified by every part of the body embracing its function and selflessly serving others is not what we often see practiced today. Um concludes "If we did, our churches would be packed; our communities would be so compelling, so refreshingly countercultural that we would not be able to keep people away."²⁰ My project will continue to help our congregation reclaim the model Paul lays out in this text. Our identity in Christ enables us to use our gifts with freedom that can only be found in Him and is not dependent solely on our performance, but rather the completed salvific work of Christ.

In summary, 1 Corinthians 12 highlights to the church then (and now) God's intent for the church to be an interdependent family. This spiritual family disregards the social hierarchies

¹⁹ Um, 226.

²⁰ Ibid., 224.

of the day and embraces and welcomes the diverse gifts and talents that each member possesses. Our next passage portrays what this model looks like in a tangible way.

Acts 2:42-47

Just as Paul's first letter to Corinth provided insight as to the attitudes of the early believers, Luke's account of the early church provides a case study of what the early church is capable of when it is led by the Spirit and models a selfless pattern of Christlikeness. After Peter's sermon at Pentecost, those in attendance were cut to the heart and their response involved the adding of three thousand souls. This was obviously not the work of man but rather the work of the Spirit. God used the one who denied Christ three times to convict the hearts of those in attendance. After he finished speaking and the people responded there was an interesting "dilemma" of sorts. Kent Hughes summarizes "Three thousand new children of God—3,000 shepherding responsibilities for the apostles."²¹ While the number of souls was impressive, the responsibility to train and nurture these souls must have been daunting.

If this task had been left to man, it would have surely failed. But with the help of the Spirit, the group who came to

²¹ R. Kent Hughes, *Acts: The Church Afire. Preaching the Word series* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1996), 46.

know Christ slowly became a model for churches for generations to come. David Roper acknowledges "These verses present a picture of an exceptional congregation—a congregation composed of new Christians on fire for the Lord."²² This community of believers did not take their task lightly but embraced their new identity as followers of Christ. M. Scott Peck suggests,

If we are going to use the word [community] meaningfully, we must restrict it to a group of individuals who have learned how to communicate honestly with each other, where relationships go deeper than their masks of composure and who have developed some significant commitment to 'rejoice together, mourn together' and to 'delight in each other, make others 'conditions our own.'²³

When we spend time with the early church described in Acts chapters two and four we see clearly what community can look like when Christ is the center and furtherance of the kingdom is top priority. Roper writes "The followers of Jesus may have looked like *many*, but they were really *one*."²⁴ If we allow ourselves to read the text with fresh eyes, Bob Hostetler observes that we will see that "those folks had a whole

²² David L. Roper, *Acts 1-14. Truth for Today Commentary: An Exegesis & Application of the Holy Scriptures*. Gen. ed. Eddie Cloer (Searcy, AR: Resource Publications, 2001), 93.

²³ M. Scott Peck, *A Different Drum* (Los Angeles: Simon and Schuster, 1988), 59

²⁴ Roper, 166.

different vocabulary than we do, a whole different way of looking at things, and a whole different perspective.”²⁵

To clarify, when we speak of the church mentioned in Acts chapter two, we are not speaking of groups organized for worship, evangelism, or anything else, but rather we are describing the wonderful creation of God that was born at Pentecost and is yet to mature fully. Neil Cole and Phil Helfer state “It has its visible expression in the many ways and various families of Christ followers throughout the centuries and around the globe.”²⁶ The church is a living and growing being made up of all who belong to Jesus and are led by his Spirit.

An important word in the passage is “devoted.” This means that the community of faith made fellowship a priority. Kent Hughes suggests “It denotes a steadfast and single-minded devotion to a certain course of action.”²⁷ While we do not read of a Sunday night or Wednesday evening service, we do see a priority on being together. There is no insinuation in the text of forsaking the time together or excluding other sincere followers. Bill Hull explains “The phrase ‘each day’ is used twice in this text, which tells us the practices here are

²⁵ Bob Hostetler, *Quit Going to Church* (Abilene, TX: Leafwood Publishers, 2012), 19.

²⁶ Neil Cole and Phil Helfer, *Church Transfusion: Changing Your Church Organically from the Inside Out* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2012), 14.

²⁷ Hughes, 47.

routine.”²⁸ This was an immutable part of their lives. Regarding congregational care, this is but one way in which we have lost our grasp on the urgency and prevalence of the spirit of the early church. In the busyness of life, our responsibilities to God and the community of faith are often the first to be compromised.

The first thing mentioned in the description of the early church is their devotion to the teaching of the apostles. John Stott suggests “A Spirit-filled church is a New Testament church, in the sense that it studies and submits to New Testament instruction. The Spirit of God leads the people of God to submit to the Word of God.”²⁹

Bill Hull proclaims that “The apostle’s teachings were the teaching of Jesus.”³⁰ The apostles had the opportunity to share first-hand what they saw and heard from the Master Himself. They could relay the parables, the tough sayings, the sermons, and the miracles in a way that could only be done by someone who saw them with their own eyes and had the ability to process and internalize what they witnessed. J.W. McGarvey explains

The apostles were as yet the only teachers, and in teaching the disciples they were executing the part of

²⁸ Bill Hull, *Conversion & Discipleship.: You Can’t Have One Without the Other* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), 178.

²⁹ John R.W. Stott, *The Message of Acts. The Bible Speaks Today* (Downer’s Grove. IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1990), 82.

³⁰ Hull, 178.

their commission which required them to teach those whom they baptized all things which Jesus had commanded.³¹

Later in the book of Acts we see that even when faced with persecution they replied, "we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard." (Acts 4:20 ESV) It was their personal experience and it was essential.

Not only were they excited about their conversion, this group of new believers wanted to know more about the Word and Will of God. This is consistent with what we know to be true even today. Hughes contends "The backbone of a healthy Christian life is teaching. Teaching was the milk of the early church under the direction of the Holy Spirit."³² They were not bored by the teaching but wanted more. As new Christians, Hostetler points out "they became hungry voracious students of God's Word, and they applied themselves wholeheartedly to learning from Peter, James, John and the others how to follow Jesus and seek the kingdom of God."³³ They would embody what Paul would eventually write to the church in Ephesus:

And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart, giving thanks

³¹ J.W. McGarvey, *New Commentary on Acts of Apostles*. Vol. 1 (Delight, AR: Gospel Light, 1969), 46.

³² Hughes, 47-48.

³³ Hostetler, 19-20.

always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. (Ephesians 5:18-20 ESV)

Koinonia will be discussed in the following section, but it is important to note here what Hull shares when he writes that "fellowship is what we do and say that holds us together. Without fellowship, the foundation of the apostles' teaching will crumble."³⁴ This was a crucial component to the overall health of the early church. In addition to instruction, it was important that the people spent time together learning how to do life together. When we lose sight of fellowship, we miss a crucial component of a vibrant, evangelistic church.

There is debate on what kind of meal is described in this text, but the fellowship component is unmistakable. When we break bread with others, we enter a new level of intimacy. Couple that with fervent prayer, and you create a foundation for authentic community. Hostetler observes that church members described here in Acts "were passionate about drawing closer to God, crying out to Him, listening to him, telling him their needs, and pouring out their praise."³⁵ As they drew closer to God in prayer, they drew closer to one another and more united in their desire to please him.

³⁴ Hull, 179.

³⁵ Hostetler, 20.

As they began this new life together there was a level of awe (reverent fear) that became commonplace as the apostles performed many wonders and signs. Darrell Bock explains "The practice of communal living in Acts 2 was not driven by eschatological views. Rather, it was motivated by the intimate presence of God as proven by verse 43."³⁶ It is unfortunate that the text does not elaborate on this further but we do glean that as a community, they were of one mind, focused on God, which enabled the apostles to minister in a way they had never seen before.

One cannot overemphasize the change that took place among the early church. Their devotion to the cause of Christ led to lives that would never be the same. Every aspect of their world was transformed into one that follows Christ and not their own agendas. They were not "punching a card" for church attendance but rather seeking out ways to be together. Hostetler contends "This verse [44] reiterates that they were a community. They weren't all the same, but they were all together. And they functioned as a community, giving and serving, back and forth."³⁷ Even though they came from different backgrounds they

³⁶ Bock, 667.

³⁷ Hostetler, 21.

immediately began caring for one another, giving special attention to the weak and helpless. John Chrysostom writes,

This was an angelic commonwealth, not to call anything of theirs their own. Forthwith the root of evils was cut out...None reproached, none envied, none grudged; no pride, no contempt was there...The poor man knew no shame, the rich no haughtiness.³⁸

The phrase "distributed proceeds to all as they had need" (v. 45) is significant. Stott observes "It is noteworthy that both tenses of the verb in verse 45 is imperfect, which indicates that the selling and the giving were occasional, in response to particular needs, not one for all."³⁹ We know this to be true because we learn later that they have homes to eat in and food to eat in them. This was not the same command that Jesus gave the rich young ruler when he challenged him to sell all he had and give it to the poor. Acts 2:45 signals a lifestyle change that gives as you see need without overthinking the gesture. Bock writes "The sharing of material things was not a required communalism but a voluntary, caring response to need, as the end of verse 45 shows."⁴⁰ The implication is that this sharing was repetitive. One of the truest tests of a faithful community is if needs are being met, both in the church and in the community. The antithesis of this thought is what John lays

³⁸ John Chrysostom, *The Homilies on the Acts of the Apostles, preached in Constantinople in AD 400; from A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Father*, ed. Philip Schaff, vol. XI, 1851 (Eerdmans reprint, 1975), 47.

³⁹ Stott, 84.

⁴⁰ Bock, 667.

out in I John 4:17 when he writes "But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him?"

The overall atmosphere was one of joy and generosity. As they ate, worshipped, and lived life together there was a spirit of unity that was undeniable to outsiders. The worship described in this passage is one that could not be confined to a building but one that spilled out onto the public square. Roper suggests "Christians with a vital relationship with the Lord and each other attract other people."⁴¹ It was a constant sense of worship that was inclusive and contagious.

When we think of worship today it often migrates to worship style and personal preferences. The church described in this passage was diverse and yet worship was central to their daily lives. It was not a drudgery but rather something they enjoyed doing together. Stott claims "It is right in public worship to be dignified; it is unforgivable to be dull. The combination of joy and awe, as of formality and informality, is a healthy balance in worship."⁴²

⁴¹ Roper, 100.

⁴² Stott, 85-86.

Despite our best efforts, our frequently manufactured attempts to generate meaningful worship can fall flat. Hull explains,

When people are living spiritually bland lives and are bloated with materialism, they will always find it difficult to worship. If the focus of worship is meeting our needs as consumers, we will not experience the awe and fear of the Lord that leads to authentic change and true obedience.⁴³

The church described in Acts chapter two offers us an organic template to point our hearts to God in all areas of our life. Following their lead, Hostetler points out that "Our community turns outward to mission...and our mission draws us closer to God...and our spirituality draws us closer to each other...and our community draws us closer to those around us."⁴⁴ And the cycle continues.

One of the biggest takeaways is that this did not happen in a couple of pre-arranged meeting times set aside during a week. Bock stresses there is not a command in this passage but rather a "heartfelt response of deep faith."⁴⁵ This was the purpose that woke them up in the mornings, it was the confidence that allowed them to make it through another day, and it was the hope that

⁴³ Hull, 181.

⁴⁴ Hostetler, 27.

⁴⁵ Bock, 667.

made them long for eternity with God while embracing community on earth. Scot McKnight writes

"Kingdom mission cuts deep into our way of living. Instead of seeking to make the world a better place through the political process, kingdom citizens are called to live in the kingdom with one another."⁴⁶

The early church experienced gradual and sustained growth. Stott challenges "We need to recover this expectation of steady and uninterrupted church growth."⁴⁷ All churches want to grow numerically, and this passage shows that it can be accomplished. However, there is not a fool-proof formula that will guarantee growth. What we do have is a description of the early church that was solid in its teaching. They made fellowship a way of life and practiced a sense of awe in the presence of God that was not dependent on the charisma of the preacher or any other man-made factor. It was natural, it was community, and it was kingdom-honoring. Roper observes, "This was a learning church, a fellowshiping church, a praying church, an active church, and a growing church."⁴⁸

This model of the early church allows the reader to see what an imperfect group of individuals can accomplish when they

⁴⁶ Scot McKnight, *Kingdom Conspiracy: Returning to the Radical Mission of the Local Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2016), 106.

⁴⁷ Stott, 87.

⁴⁸ Roper, 93.

"seek first his (God's) kingdom and his righteousness" (Matthew 6:33) above the wants and wishes of individuals. Authentic congregational care seeks out what is in the best interest of God and others. The final passage serves as a "follow up" of sorts to see how the early church has fared since its inception at Pentecost.

Acts 4:32-35

Following the description of the early church in Acts chapter two it is interesting to see the church still embody many of the same qualities in chapter 4:32-35. There was still a solid sense of community. Tim Keller points out,

The gospel creates community. Because it points us to the One who died for his enemies, it creates relationships of service rather than selfishness. Because it removes both fear and pride, people get along inside the church who would never get along outside.⁴⁹

There is also a growing sense of unity among the believers. This was a church that was still zealous for God and it was evident in how they sacrificially served one another. J.W. McGarvey observes,

Considering the large number of persons in this congregation, and the variety of social relations from which they had been suddenly drawn together, it is

⁴⁹ Tim Keller, *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 311.

truly remarkable, and well worthy of a place in the record, that they were 'of one heart and soul.'⁵⁰

Unity with a group of any size is difficult. When you consider different backgrounds and cultures it would seem unsurmountable. But the Spirit was active. Hughes contends "The insistence that others be just like us is one of the most disunifying mind-sets a church can have because it instills a judgmental flexibility that hurls people away from the church with lethal force."⁵¹ We do not get the impression from the text that people had to lose their identity to be a part of the group. It was their unique gifts and talents and their common bond in Christ that made it work. A.W. Tozer states,

Has it ever occurred to you that one hundred pianos all tuned to the same fork are automatically tuned to each other? They are of one accord by being tuned, not to each other, but to another standard to which each one must individually bow. So one hundred worshipers met together, each one looking away to Christ, are in heart nearer to each other than they could possibly be were they to become 'unity' conscious and turn their eyes away from God to strive for closer fellowship.⁵²

Once they found their identity in Christ, they had the freedom to be themselves and did not have to conform to anything or

⁵⁰ J.W. McGarvey, *New Commentary on Acts of Apostles. Vol. 1* (Delight, AR: Gospel Light, 1969), 79.

⁵¹ Hughes, 69.

⁵² A.W. Tozer, *The Pursuit of God* (Harrisburg, PA: Christian Publications, 1948), 97.

anyone else except the Word and Will of God. Joseph Hellerman summarizes it this way...

What would Christianity look like if we truly recapture Jesus' vision for authentic Christian community? It would likely vary considerably from person to person and church to church, since the surrogate family values we observe among the early Christians would manifest themselves in different ways in different church environments. The values themselves—group loyalty and the sharing of material resources, for example—would remain much the same. But these fundamental expressions of social solidarity would surely express themselves in our churches in a myriad of ways.⁵³

This selflessness in the early church answers Jesus' high priestly prayer for unity in John 17. Stott acknowledges "This was the fundamental solidarity of love which the believers enjoyed, and their economic sharing was but one expression of the union of their hearts and minds."⁵⁴ People were both willing to give and to receive. They were willing to humble themselves and welcome assistance from fellow believers.

The boldest statement in this section of scripture was that "there was not a needy person among them." This was not due to legislation but rather an outpouring of love and concern for each other. It was a testimony of the working of the Spirit not only in where they will spend eternity but how they responded to

⁵³ Joseph H. Hellerman, *When the Church Was a Family: Recapturing Jesus' Vision for Authentic Christian Community* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing, 2009), 144.

⁵⁴ Stott, 106.

others while on earth. It was the product of a transformed life and a transformed culture.

John Stott describes the parallels between the two passages (Acts two and four) as being a radical attitude towards possessions, a radical attitude towards sacrificial actions, and a radical attitude towards distribution proportionate to genuine need. In relation to my project, I see an exemplary model of congregational care to emulate. This early church culture does not transpire quickly, and it takes a renewal of the Spirit and a rededication to the basics to garner different and restorative results. Love, Foster, and Harris point out,

To a greater or lesser degree, every New Testament community trusted worship, leadership, Scripture, distinctive ethics, and the leading of the Spirit to help them remain true to their calling and purpose, and these elements provided a broad kind of consistency from congregation to congregation.⁵⁵

This passage presents the radical nature of a church that is wholly devoted to the cause of Christ and makes the needs of others top priority. This is accomplished through proactive care and intentional time spent with one another in genuine fellowship, or *koinonia*.

⁵⁵ Love, Foster, and Harris, 87.

Koinonia in the College Avenue Context

Scot McKnight explains "The term 'fellowship' (*koinonia*) refers to the inner life that creates unity of life in the *ekklesia* in the world."⁵⁶ It is something that many define but few know how to genuinely practice. Holly Catterton Allen and Christine Lawton Ross state, "*Koinonia* and *koinonos* are words that align with the situative-sociocultural perspective, that is, the idea that growing-becoming-being formed-is intrinsically embedded in the social community."⁵⁷ It can be used to refer to both a Christian's participation in the life of God and to communal life. It transcends mere church attendance and even involvement in ministries. Stott observes

Koinonia is a Trinitarian experience; it is our common share in God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. But secondly, *koinonia* also expresses what we share out together, what we give as well as what we receive.⁵⁸

It delves past the pleasantries and enables true community to take place. Marion Leach Jacobson claims "It is precisely that experience of a deeper communion, of a supernatural intercommunication, which perhaps every believer occasionally

⁵⁶ McKnight, 91.

⁵⁷ Holly Catterton Allen and Christine Lawton Ross, *Intergenerational Christian Formation: Bringing the Whole Church Together in Ministry, Community, and Worship* (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012), 115.

⁵⁸ Stott, 83.

has felt in the presence of other believers.”⁵⁹ The struggle is that true *koinonia* is not easily manufactured...it happens over time.

Regarding Acts 2 and 4, Hughes notes “this kind of fellowship did not exist before the giving of the Spirit at Pentecost. The word *koinonia* is not even found in the gospels.”⁶⁰ However, every time this word is used in the New Testament it involves some form of sharing. Hughes continues “When we think about this Christian word we use and abuse all the time; we need to remember its link to giving. Do you want fellowship? You must be a giver.”⁶¹

College Avenue has experienced true *koinonia* on many occasions, but it is only experienced when we become vulnerable and accountable to one another and allow the community to minister to us in authentic ways. As a church family we have rejoiced, loved, wept, encouraged, and cared for those who are most vulnerable. It is in each of these moments we get a glimpse of what true community can be like. The key is to move from glimpses to a “better normal.” We must change the function, and even the layout, of the local congregation. James W. Thompson writes “It [the local church] is not a corporation interested

⁵⁹ Marion Leach Jacobson, *Crowded Pews and Lonely People* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1976), 177.

⁶⁰ Hughes, 48.

⁶¹ Ibid., 49.

only in numbers but a family in which siblings care for each other. Nor is it a theater for entertaining attendees; rather, it is a body in which all participate."⁶² While the Holy Spirit guides this process, it helps when we are receptive to His nudging. Jacobson in her book, *Crowded Pews and Lonely People*, points out that even the design of many churches can prohibit true *koinonia*. All the pews facing the pulpit is not conducive to conversations and genuine fellowship.

This is also a call for more freedom. How has the structure of the church limited the power of *koinonia* from taking place organically? In 2 Timothy 3:17 Paul writes, "where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom." Jacobson concludes "This freedom and openness are possible only when there is informality and intimacy- freedom from set forms and patterns."⁶³ Unfortunately, many have simplified the church experience to worship services and ministries to the neglect of facilitating room for the Spirit to act and guide our movements.

Most crave accountability and want to be vulnerable but fear that church is not a safe place. Jacobson states, "I believe that needed church renewal can come only as a church is ready to provide some kind of situation in which its people can

⁶² Thompson, *The Church According to Paul*, 197.

⁶³ Jacobson, 177.

share with each other the experience of *koinonia*—the fellowship of the Holy Spirit.”⁶⁴ By creating a sense of openness, churches can emulate the principles we find in Acts chapters 2 and 4.

Mark Love, Douglas A. Foster, and Randall J. Harris conclude,

Community is clearly essential to God’s redeeming work in creation, and his saving work always involves calling a distinct community to live for the sake of the world. The church, therefore, is more than just a collection of people who are saved; it is a community in which people discover what it means to be saved.⁶⁵

Summation of Theological Emphases

In each of the passages and concepts described, God allows us to see what can be accomplished when the church is a top priority in the life of the believer. In 1 Corinthians, Paul lays out an interdependent model of a human body where each part is dependent upon and appreciates the other parts and what they offer. In Acts chapter two, Luke provides insight as to the daily components of the early church. The necessity of prayer, teaching, fellowship, communal meals, and the distribution of goods allow us to see the church at its best. It also proves that much good can come from the simple rhythms of a life lived fully for God. The actions laid out in this

⁶⁴ Jacobson, 179.

⁶⁵ Love, Foster, and Harris, 72.

passage are not unattainable, but they are intentional and proactive.

Acts chapter four proves congregational care is sustained when the local church understands and embraces the same mission and is willing to sacrifice to make it happen. The concept of *koinonia* in the local church serves as a challenge to refocus on genuine fellowship that brings members together for the cause of Christ rather than simply to create another ministry event or program. It stems from vulnerability and accountability. Both concepts improve the overall quality of congregational care on all levels.

Chapter Three

Results

When asked to select a project, we were encouraged to identify an area in our ministry context that would benefit the church and would outlast our tenure in our given context. I can say with full confidence that I selected the right project. The responses, the conversations, and the suggestions validate my assumptions and give me hope that there are multiple members who see the same inconsistencies in our faith community and are willing to participate in the solution. I appreciate their candor and their willingness to share both the good stories and the times that they felt lonely in a crowded room. There were many stories that I knew prior to the interviews but I also learned a lot about our church family that had been suppressed until I asked the right questions. Giving people permission to share their hurts and agreeing that this is an issue that needs to be addressed allowed people to process their angst and hurt feelings.

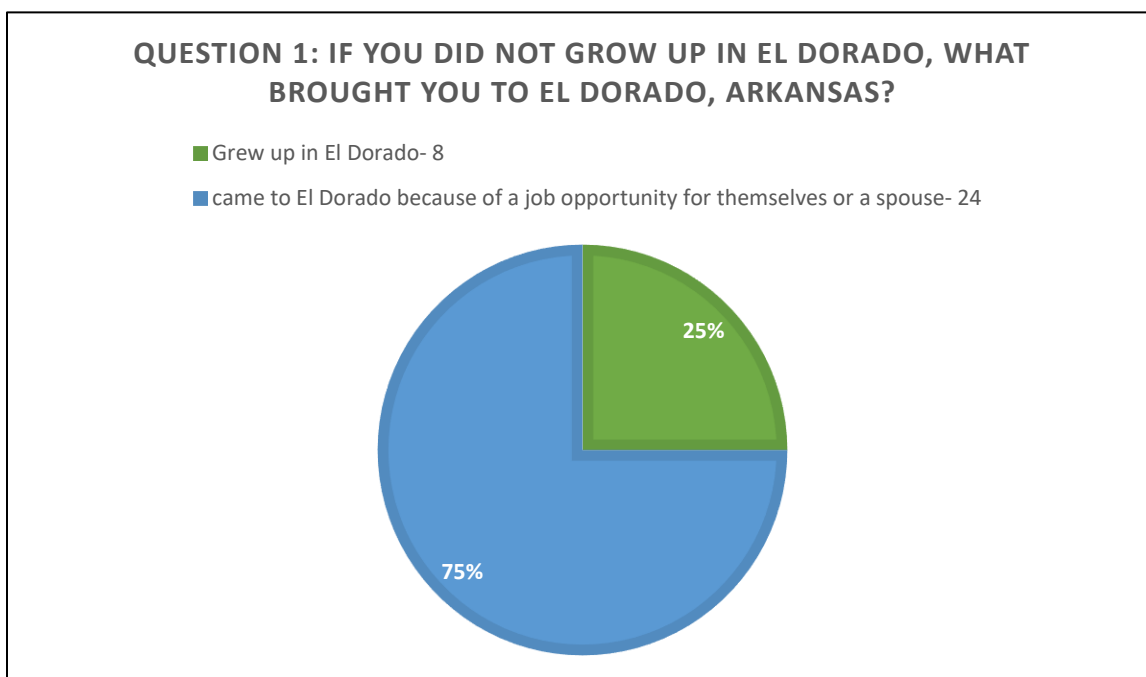
My initial perspective called for thirty in-person interviews. Before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, I had completed eighteen of the thirty interviews. With the approval of the Harding University Internal Review Board, I amended the process to include both Zoom and hand-written responses. There

is no substitute for the face-to-face interviews and many of those who responded after the revision requested a personal visit later to elaborate on their responses. I dispersed thirty-five interviews and received thirty-two completed interviews.

Results of the Interviews

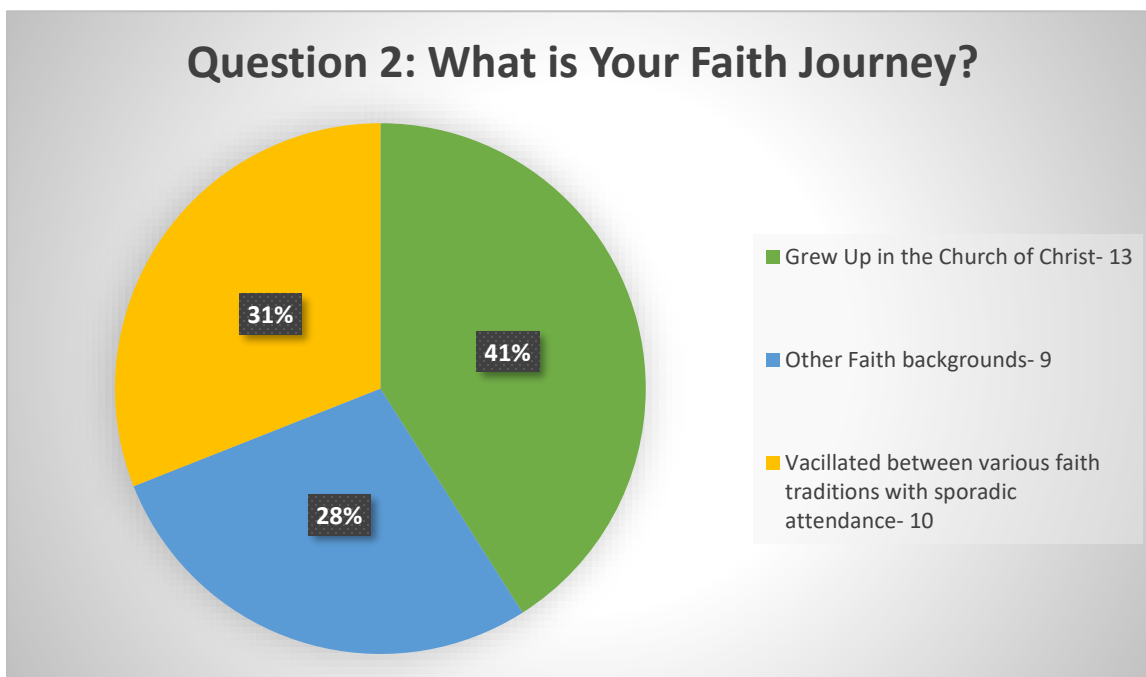
Question 1...If you did not grow up in El Dorado, what brought you to El Dorado, Arkansas?

Of the 32 people interviewed, twenty were female and twelve were male. Furthermore, out of the 32 interviewed, only eight grew up in El Dorado. The other 24 came to El Dorado because of a job opportunity or the job opportunity of their spouse.



Question 2... Tell me about how you came to Christ. What is your faith journey?

While this question did not directly address the topic of congregational care, it served several purposes. The first question was more factual in nature and prompted short, succinct responses. This was a disarming question that allowed them to be unique, and to essentially share their personal story of how they came to know Christ. This was one of the questions that those who did not get to do the face-to-face interviews wanted to come in later and tell me their stories in person. Again, several stories I knew, but most I did not.

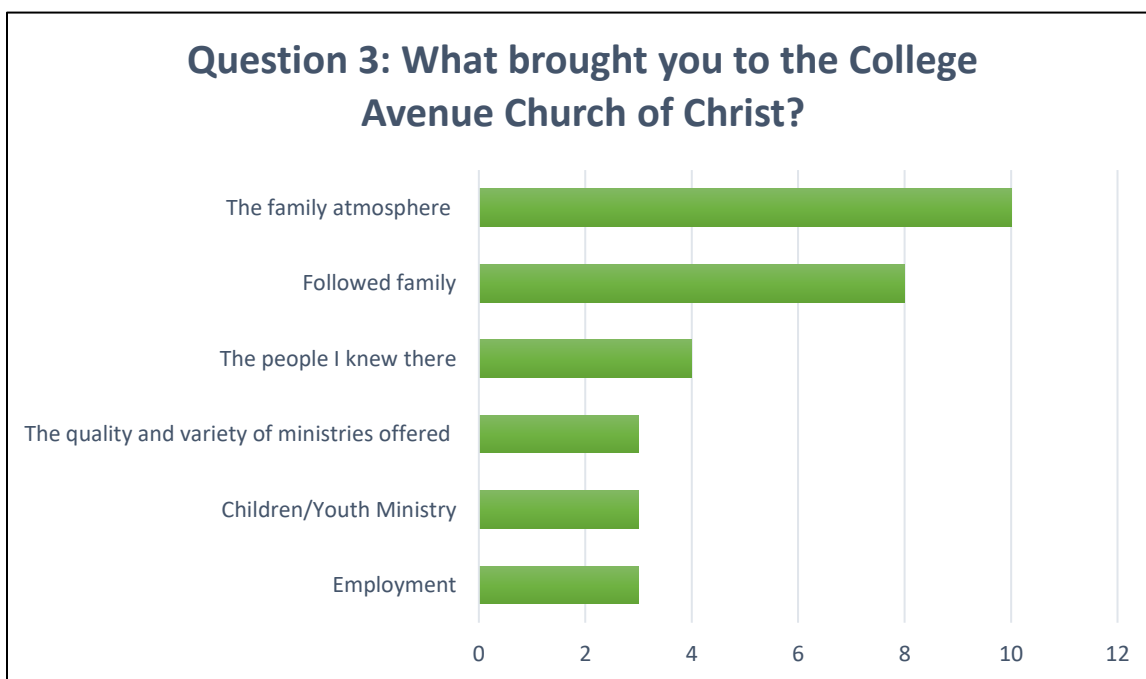


There was a good mix of those who were raised in the Church of Christ and those who were not. Of the 32 interviewed, 13 (41%) grew up attending the Church of Christ, 9 (28%) came from

other faith backgrounds (2- Catholic; 7- Baptist), and 10 (31%) vacillated between various faith traditions with sporadic attendance.

Question 3...What brought you to the College Avenue Church of Christ?

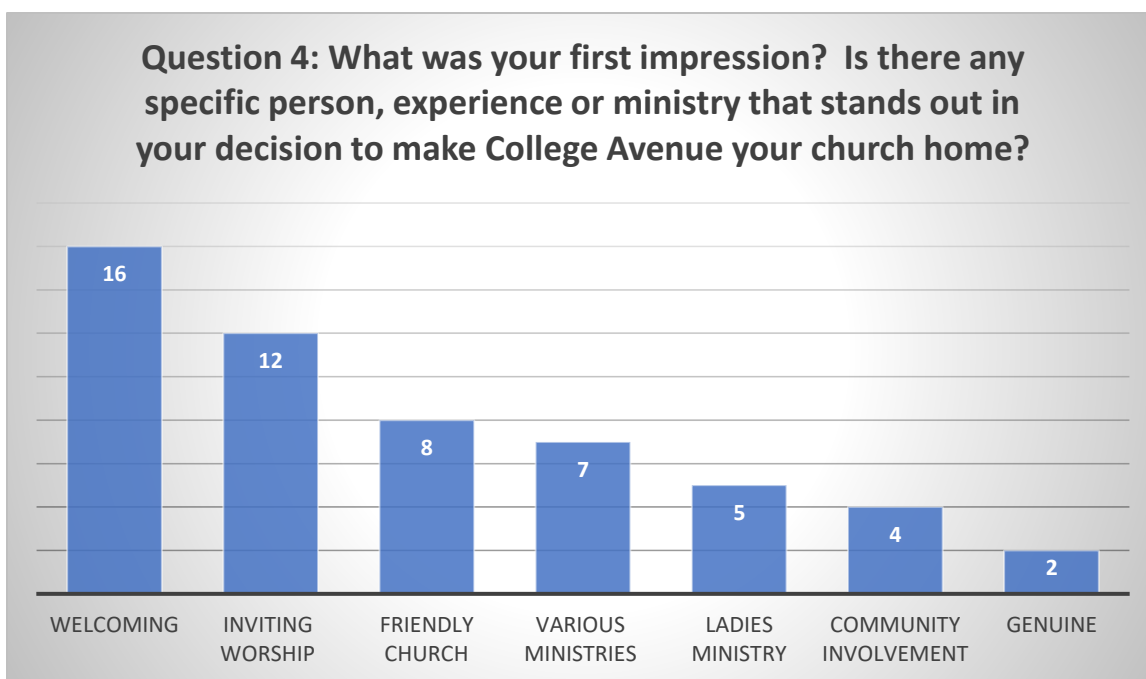
As the questions begin to focus more on the importance of intentional congregational care, this question allowed interviewees to share why they chose our congregation in a city that currently has 104 operating congregations.



Question 4...What was your first impression? Is there any specific person, experience or ministry that stands out in your decision to make College Avenue your church home?

Despite one's best effort, it is true that you never get a second chance to make a first impression. During my 19 years as

a minister at College Avenue, the leadership has made countless decisions geared towards enhancing the College Avenue experience from ministries, to the worship experience, to the overall appearance and appeal of the campus itself. This was a question that I generated for the purpose of discovering if what we placed emphasis on as leadership factored into the first impression of those who were interviewed. The synopsis of their responses are as follows:



Other responses included: generosity of folks (money, time, and resources), accountability of the Sunday school class, positive interaction with the minister, not everyone spoke, very intimidating and large, and 29 people were mentioned by name as giving a great first impression.

Question 5...If someone in the community were to ask you to describe our church, what words would you use?

When my wife and I arrived in El Dorado, Arkansas for our first interview we stopped at several businesses over the weekend and asked the same question without a disclaimer, "What do you know about the College Avenue Church of Christ?"

Responses ranged from indifference to stereotypical hearsay to mild admiration. Over the years, we have been intentional about reaching out to the community and becoming known more for what we are for than what we are against. We have partnered with churches throughout the community regardless of denominational affiliation and have been able to accomplish a lot of good in the community in the name of Christ.

This question served as a barometer as to how our own members describe our church family. Are they proud? Are they willing to invite others to be a part of what is happening at College Avenue? When asked where they go to church, do they answer with pride, and how would they describe our church family to those in the community? Their responses were as follows:



Other responses given included: Kingdom-focused, maturing, flawed (not perfect), giving, joyful, dynamic, caring, not over your head, we don't bash others (open-minded), diverse, hopeful, missions-focused, and not the "Campbellite" stereotype.

Notable quotes from Question 5 results:

- "The perfect church for imperfect people"
- "A big church with a small church feel"
- "We are a group of average people that love the Lord, love people, and love sharing the good news."
- "Y'all are the church that DOES..."

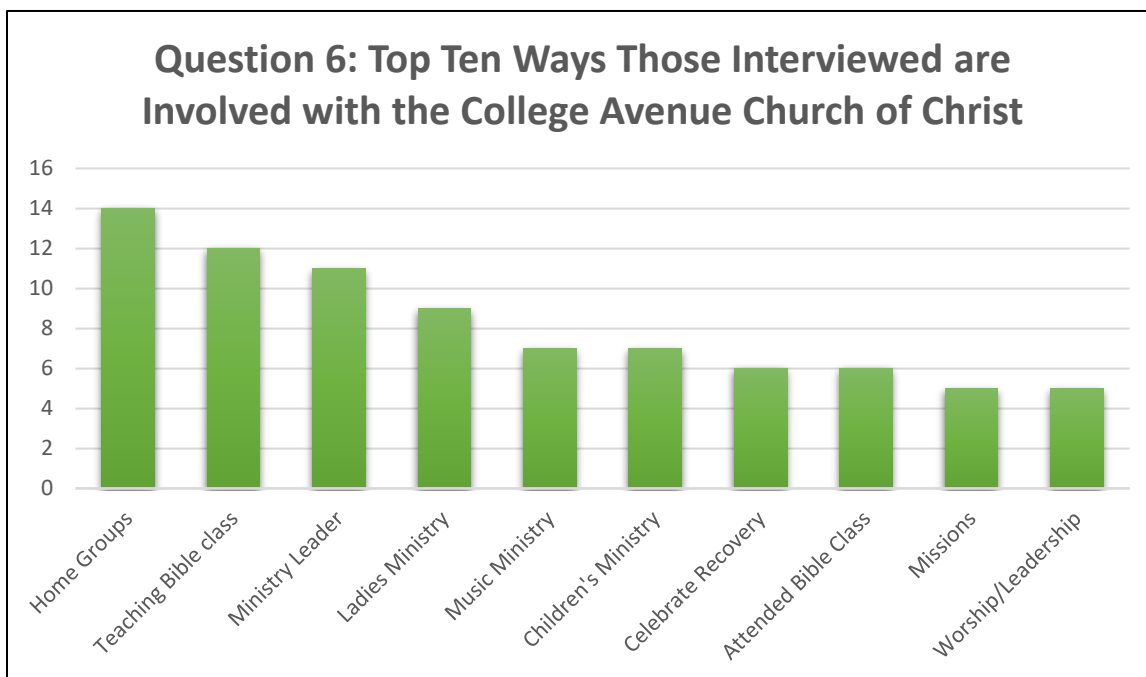
Question 6...In what ways have you become involved with the College Avenue Church of Christ since you became a member?

Those who are actively involved with a church family tend to feel more cared for and in turn care for others. As stated earlier, our congregation is highly programmatic and those who are plugged in to a set of ministries tended to feel more

acclimated and cared for. This observation Lyle Schaller made many years ago still has merit,

There is considerable evidence which suggests that at least one-third, and perhaps as many as one half, of all protestant church members do not feel a sense of belonging to the congregation of which they are members. They have been received into membership but have never felt they have been accepted into the fellowship circle. Evangelism and receiving new members into a congregation are two separate actions.¹

This question serves as an inventory to allow interviewees to identify all the ways they are involved in our church family. The main takeaway is that most were more involved than they realized but still either wished they could do more or wanted to stretch themselves for the sake of Christ. The table below shows how interviewees are involved with College Avenue:

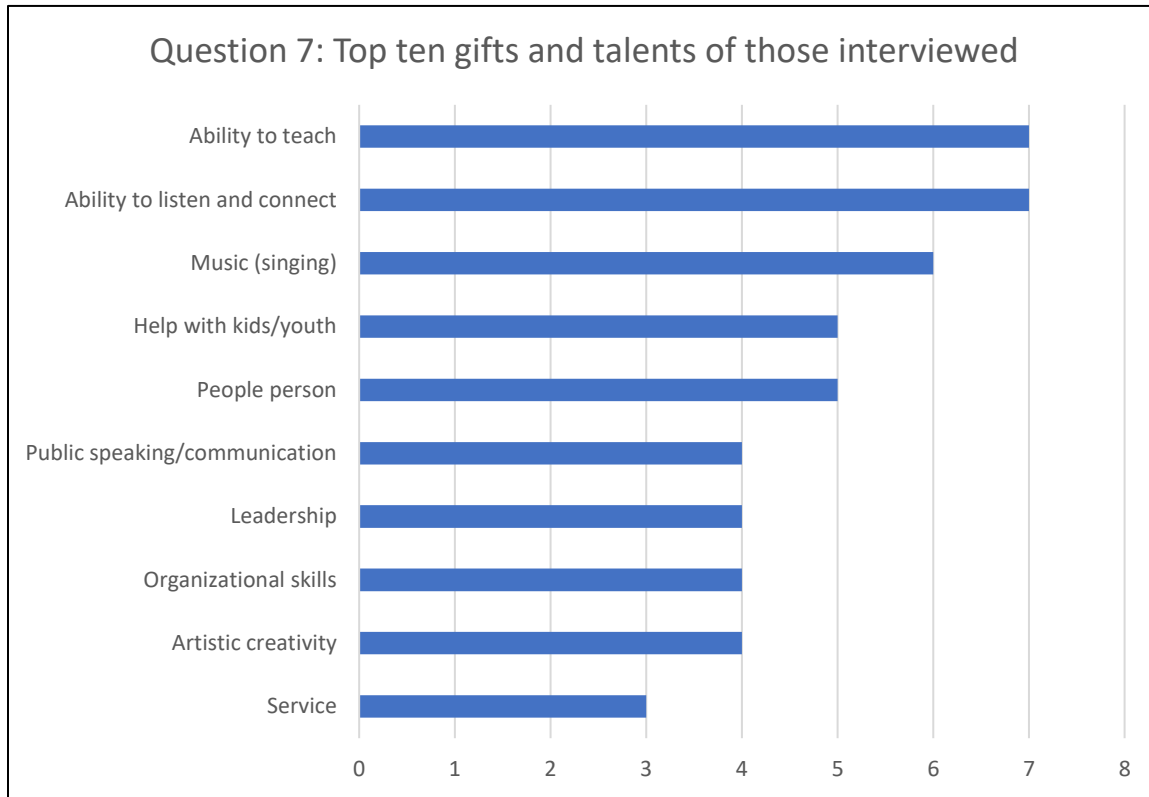


¹ Lyle, E. Schaller, *Assimilating New Members* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1978), 16.

Other responses given were youth ministry, camp, The CALL, clothing drive, building and grounds, men's ministry, library, benevolence, preaching, security, prime timers (senior adult ministry), school supply giveaway, greeter ministry, policy and procedures committee, and the finance committee.

Question 7...What do you view as your unique talents and gifts? How are you using these gifts and talents at College Avenue?

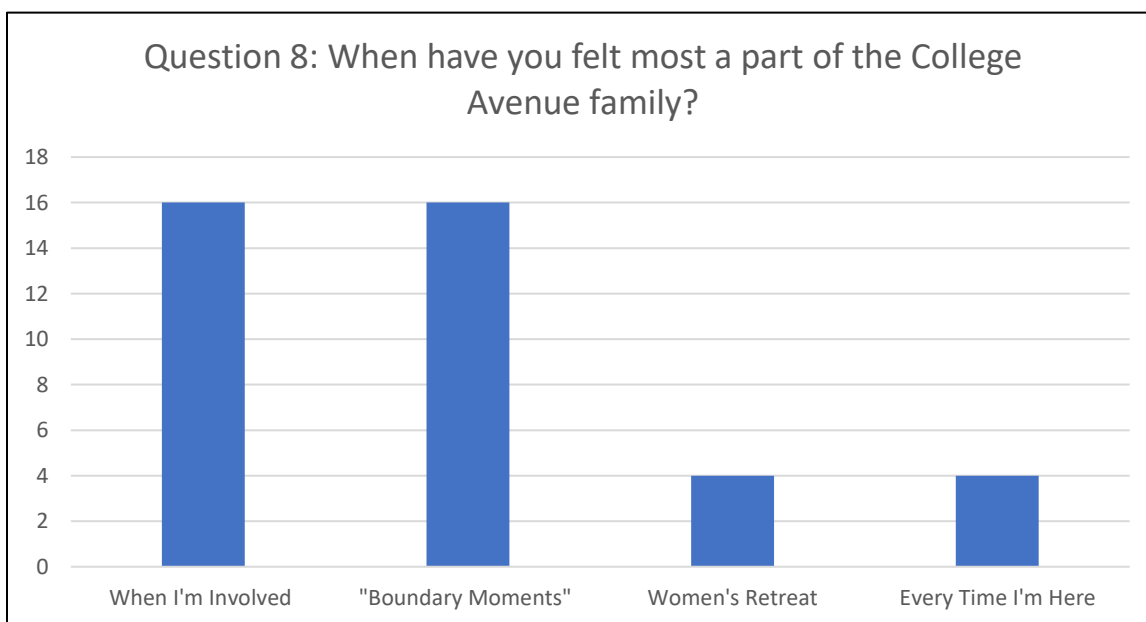
While College Avenue offers a lot of ways to engage its members and encourage them to use their gifts and talents for the glory of God, it is naïve to believe that the list is exhaustive. As part of congregation care, it is helpful to know which members are blessed with certain abilities that can be utilized for the kingdom. Unfortunately, too often, members are forced to fit into existing ministry forms without allowing the Spirit to lead in new and exciting directions. While the previous question asked members to identify areas in which they are currently serving, this question allows them to measure their previous response with their unique skill set and if they are using those gifts or just fitting in to a traditional mold. There responses are as follows:



Other responses included: hospitality, prayer, helping with the elderly, empathy and sympathy, encouragement, craftsmanship, work alone with repetition, open to learning, foster care support and resources, decorating, technologically inclined, love to visit, discernment, drawn to "weird kids", greeter, shepherding, giving, working with the recovery community, church security, research and planning, helping with disadvantaged kids, knit, logical thinker, team player, first responder/EMS skills, writing, and finance.

Question 8...When have you felt most a part of the College Avenue family?

The goal of this project is to improve the overall climate of congregational care at College Avenue. The point of this question was to call to the mind a time when the interviewee experienced congregational care at its best. When had they felt what Luke describes in Acts chapter 2 in his description of the early church? Before we could fix the problem, I wanted them to recall the church at its best. They offered the following responses:

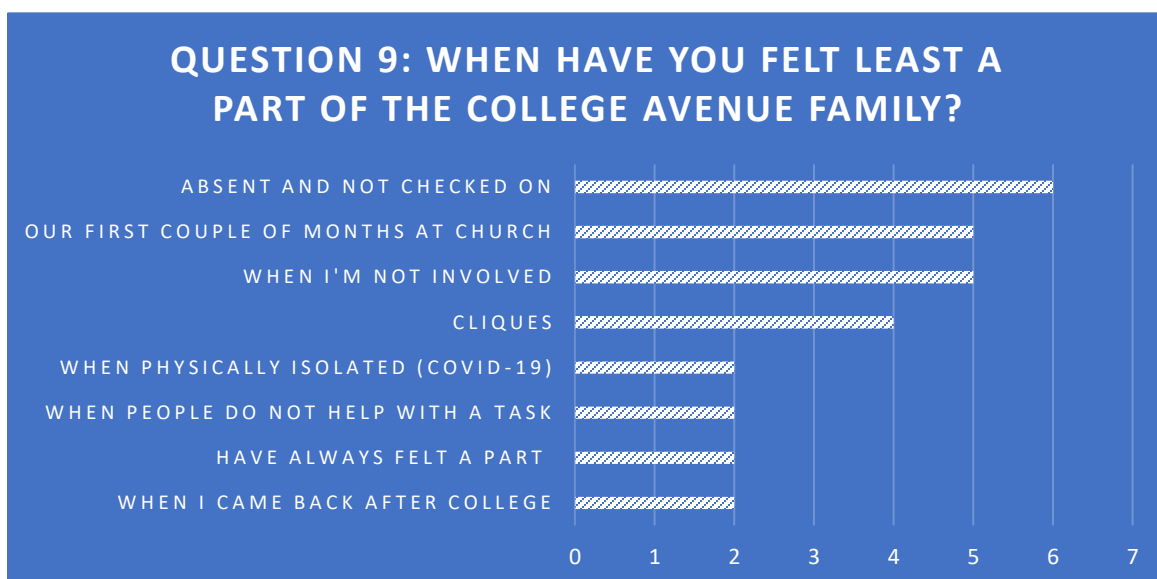


Question 9...When have you felt least a part of the College Avenue family?

Before a problem can be addressed it must first be acknowledged. None who were interviewed had a difficult time recollecting a time when they felt most a part of the College

Avenue family. Similarly, most did not have a difficult time recalling when they did not feel a part of our church family. This was also a question affected by the pandemic/Internal Review Board modification. Those who were denied a face-to-face interview hesitated to write out their response to this question. Several expressed a desire to convey their emotions verbally.

As a leader at College Avenue, my goal would have been for no one to have a negative experience, but I chose this topic because I knew some issues that needed to be addressed. This was the hardest question to process. I appreciate their honesty and willingness to share painful experiences. Several apologized before they told their stories because they did not want to “burst my bubble” or be negative towards the bride of Christ, but it proved necessary for real change to take place. There responses are as follows:



Other responses included: Sunday afternoons when everyone goes with families/holidays, being new to town and trying to plug in with folks who've known each other longer, off-hand remark in class that hurt, when we have potlucks and no one sits with us, when I feel I should be doing more, assumptions based on ethnicity, when I got divorced, when politics are presented as "matter of fact," my identity as a woman, when one biblical interpretation is presented as the only one, when we went through significant life events (surgeries, death in the family, etc.) and were not checked on.

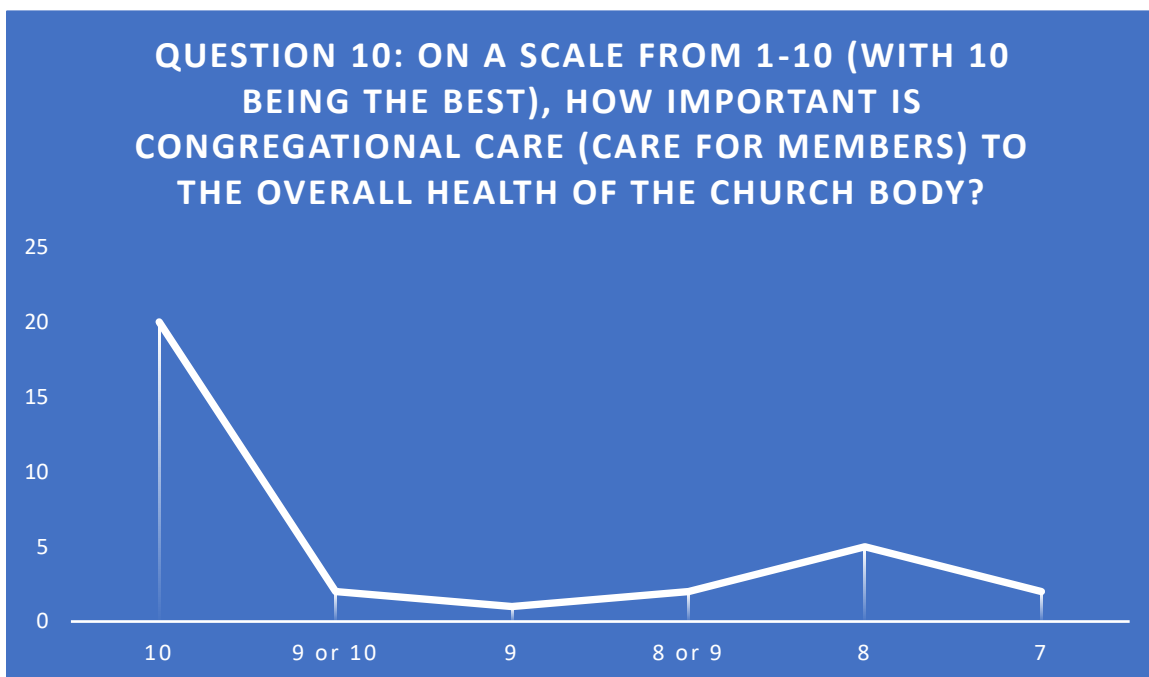
Notable quotes from Question 9 results:

- "I have felt alone standing in the full foyer"
- From a woman: "I'm not allowed to pray in a group but one of the first ones called for a prayer chain."
- "It seems when nothing is going on between life's big events, we turn into just another person."

Question 10...On a scale from 1-10 (with 10 being the best), how important is congregational care (care for members) to the overall health of the church body?

This was not a difficult question and the responses were not surprising, but it did remind us how important congregational care is to the health of a church. This is also where many confessed that the responsibility falls to each member. Even in the previous question, members would openly admit they felt distant when people did not check on them, but

they needed to do a better job of checking on others. Their responses are as follows:



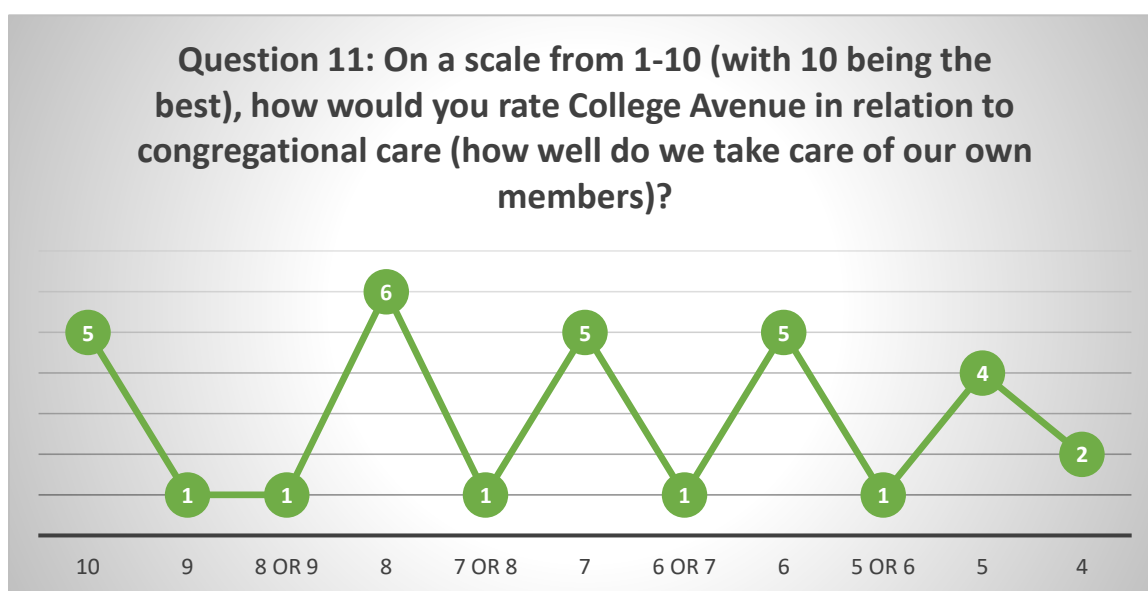
Notable quotes from Question 10 results:

- "If people don't feel cared for, wanted, etc. there is no reason to stay at that particular church. There are plenty of other churches."
- "If you do not depend on your church family to be able to provide some of the love and support you are looking for—why go?"
- "We make up the church, not the building and we wouldn't neglect our building so why would we neglect the people that make up the actual church."

Question 11...On a scale from 1-10(with 10 being the best), how would you rate College Avenue in relation to congregational care (how well do we take care of our own members)?

Those interviewed overwhelmingly agreed that congregational care was essential to the health and overall well-being of the

local church. Every church can claim to be friendly and every leadership wants to believe that they are doing right by the membership, but are they really? How often do we ask the membership how we are doing as leaders and as a congregation at practicing proactive congregational care? This question is also a litmus test of sorts as to whether I chose the right topic for my project. If everyone thought we were doing a stellar job, my time and energy would be better spent in a different direction. Here are their responses:



Notable quotes from Question 11 results:

- "We do, but it is separated and segregated."
- "Depends on who you are"
- "This is a really hard one because when it is a special occasion such as a wedding, birth or death there is no doubt this is one of the best churches in town to rise to the occasion but for anything else I feel like we may actually be the worst."

- "My feelings have been hurt but I know my church family is there if I really need them."
- "I think it is talked about really well but the actions and follow through is not executed."
- "I think the ministers do a really good job of trying to connect with everyone and make a point to check in, but the members as a whole don't seem to do that as well unless you are already in their former 'group'."

Question 12...What do you envision to be the ideal way to conduct congregational care for our congregation?

Part of the solution to improving the quality of congregational care in our church family is to solicit input from the church family itself. When they read through the pages of scripture, what do they envision as being the ideal? The top responses were that it falls to more than one person- all sheep have responsibilities, light a fire under the membership (without guilt), and improve the discipleship structure. Other suggestions included: more intentional interaction and care, get outside of our comfort zone. look to the interests of others" (Philippians 2:4), be honest with each other- have a protocol for honesty, divide the larger ministries (women's, men's, youth, etc.) into flocks/multiple layers of folks checking on folks, communicate awareness of genders and ages, make a list of folks who don't feel connected, identify the continuum of intimacy, more accountability in congregational care, be intentional about making sure everyone gets a chance to participate, must be organic-not a check-list, emphasize the

little things (they can mean more than the big things), bring back Sunday school classes caring for each other, follow through and follow up, stick around after church for a minute to connect, and texts and e-mails mean the world.

Notable quotes from Question 12 results:

- "Minister has the right answer for 500 people"
- "Trick is to make people feel included, accepted, and cared about"
- "Following through and following up with people; we often have good intentions, but no follow up."
- "Encourage and nurture spiritual growth in all members- not just some"
- "Reach out and ask. Many are too proud to ask for support."
- "We need conflict resolution to be a priority in the congregation, we cannot allow internal strife to smolder."
- "I think some of it also has to take place outside of the church. It is great to check in with people on Sundays and Wednesdays but there is no real connection that is going to happen in that small amount of time."

Question 13...What are some ways you think we as a congregation could improve on the score you gave?

After establishing the importance of congregational care and getting a glimpse into their perception of what is ideal, I invited the participants to offer suggestions on how we could improve the score they gave and bring College Avenue more to ideal. They produced some insightful and poignant concepts. The top responses were to learn who my shepherd is (these responses were given pre-pandemic), we are doing great, greet your neighbor ("pass the peace"), and emphasize the little things.

Other suggestions included: create an environment where all feel welcome, more accountability (in home groups, bible classes, and Worship), require more effort, more ministry flocks, make home groups less repetitive, eliminate destructive cliques, have greeters at the rows as well as the doors, home group accountability, have your shepherd host an event each quarter, GroupMe members, increased awareness of those who are not attending, "continuum of intimacy": the fear of doing wrong makes it worse, inspire people to get involved, don't guilt, good communication, "adopting" a family or individual to check on, longer invitation song (more time for people to respond and be vulnerable), use the prayer list as guide (for congregational care), increased vulnerability, embrace the non-nuclear family, mentor in your peer group, more whole congregation blending, greater emphasis on discipleship, "check your section"-(this is something often said from the pulpit), random list of members for members to pray for (whether you know them or not), and gift identification and acclimation into ministry (discipleship).

Notable quotes from Question 13 results:

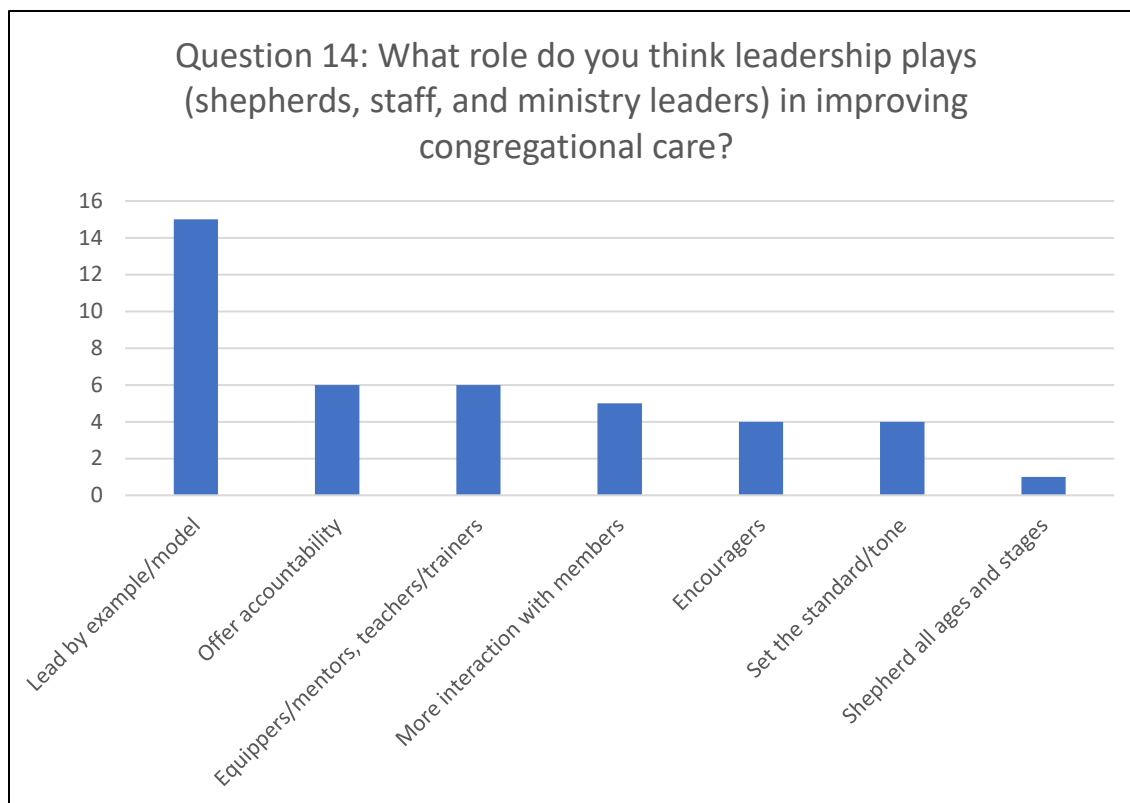
- "Our older members tend to look after the younger, weaker, newer, etc. while those who are in their 20's and 30's tend to look after self and their children"
- "I never want to be in a church that considers themselves a 10. I want to be in one that is always working to be a 10."
- "only way to make folks grow is to make them feel uncomfortable"
- "communicate the 'why' "

- "We are to be a hospital and not a social club"
- "I think people at College Avenue are really great at caring for the people in their circles and the community in general, but for people like me who feel that they don't really have a circle can sometimes feel very left out or overlooked."

Question 14...What role do you think leadership plays (shepherds, staff, and ministry leaders) in improving congregational care?

I was very intentional in the wording of the questions as well as my conversations with the participants that this project was not geared towards making shepherds and ministers better. The goal was to improve organic, member-to-member care.

However, it would be foolish to assume that leadership does not have at least a small role in bettering congregational care. After all, the leaders are members as well. Here are the responses regarding the role of leaders in improving congregational care:



Notable quotes from Question 14 results:

- "[They are the]catalyst to all improvement in the congregation"
- "Modeling is not the key component; holding members accountable is key (expectations)"
- "It may make us a smaller church but a healthier church (if we hold folks accountable)."
- "Leadership trickles down. Poor leadership = poor congregation."
- "It is easier to follow an example that is seen and not just talked about."

Question 15...What role do you think members play in improving congregational care?

After hearing their stories, listening to their ideal, and hearing their suggestions, I wanted to hear what they viewed as their role in bettering the climate of congregational care.

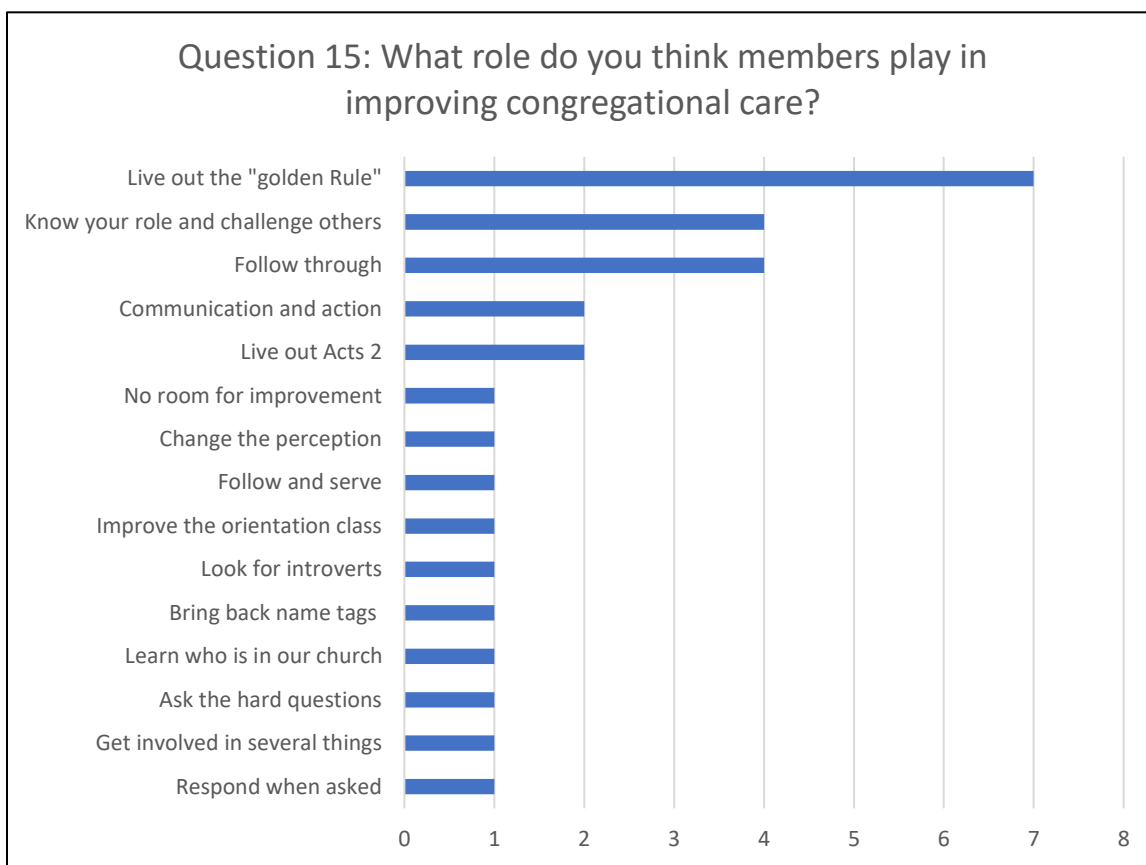
After all, it is Bob Russell who writes, "One of the keys to advancing the gospel is for the church to be made up of individuals who consider it their task to do the work of the ministry..."² Even though shepherds and staff can and should lead by example and constantly be in a season of improvement, ultimately, members taking care of members is crucial to the life of a church. Thom Rainer points out,

High expectation churches are not solo efforts. Membership carries with it the expectation of ministry. And the higher the level of laity involvement, the more likely the members are to remain in the church as productive disciples.³

In my ministry experience, members expect leadership to carry out congregational care tasks, but are more appreciative when it comes from a member who genuinely cares, and not a paid staff member or a shepherd who responded to a need simply because they were in their flock. Members described their role in the following ways:

² Bob Russell, *When God Builds A Church: 10 Principles for Growing a Dynamic Church* (West Monroe, LA: Howard Publishing, 2000), 175.

³ Thom S. Rainer, *High Expectations: The Remarkable Secret for Keeping People in Your Church* (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman Publishing, 1999), 174.



Notable quotes from Question 15 results:

- "How can we do the mission statement better?" (Our mission statement is: Love God. Love Others. Share the Good News.)
- "When we see we are the body of Christ we should act accordingly (even if it's messy)."
- "If you don't ask, I assume it's covered."
- "If family doesn't check on itself...it's not a family."
- "The leaders are not superhuman and can't read minds."
- "Leaders are not great or successful because of the work that they can do, but they are successful because of what they inspire others to do."
- "Members must go deeper than, 'How are you doing today?'"

Question 16...Is there anything else you would like to share that would be helpful in improving the quality of congregation care here at College Avenue?

I gave each participant a copy of the questionnaire prior to our meeting so they would know what to expect when we spent time together. No questionnaire is ideal and so I concluded my time with each person by asking if there was anything they would like to add. Through this question, several of them gave me some helpful insights that were not necessarily covered in the first fifteen questions. These were their responses:

- Membership awareness (who's a member/bring back name tags)
- Make sure we strike a balance between discipleship and evangelism in all our ministries (kids and adults)
- Pay more attention to what we control rather than what we do not.
- Strive to be more organic and member-led
- Get older folks involved in kids' ministry
- Take all school calendars into account (not just El Dorado)
- Check on all family members and children
- More involvement from younger parents
- Bring "heart to home" back (ladies bible study/fellowship/accountability group)
- Offer more family activities to mingle and meet needs
- Act out our mission statement
- Strive for more involvement
- It's all good

Notable quotes from Question 16 results:

- "Ask folks how they are REALLY doing."
- "We must model what we want"
- "Big question? How to plug in in my season of life"
- "Be aware of demographic abnormalities; we don't all fit in the same categories- is that message being preached (not just about sin)?"

- "More opportunities to participate- I'm always looking for ways to give back; we have a lot of BIG projects, but not a lot of SMALL projects- 'dip your toe into ministry' projects"
- "Tension between congregational care and reaching others; Not either/or; it is both/and- evangelism AND discipleship. We need to offer to take the bus to pick up members and their kids as well. A stronger infrastructure/discipleship would lead to more effective evangelism."
- "College Avenue does a great job of helping others in the community, but that same care and attention can also be shifted inward."
- [regarding the current pandemic, period of isolation and moving forward] "I think the church's physical family is facing some serious challenges making congregational care even more important as well as different."
- "Encourage others instead of relying on the consistent few because it is quicker and easier. Have less of the segregation that we have created by trying to have focused classes and groups. Some have been going to the same class, sitting in the same place and interacting with the same subsection of the congregation for years."
- "Work with teachers on how to involve all in the class and be willing to go where the Spirit leads."
- "Overall, I think that College Avenue has stepped in the right direction when it comes to congregational care but that it still has a long way to go."

Feedback from the Shepherds/Staff

On Wednesday, June 10th I presented my findings to the shepherds and staff during a regularly scheduled meeting. I began by explaining my criteria for choosing participants, who I picked and why. I explained why I selected the topic and tried to reassure them prior to the presentation that none of the results were intended to be an indictment of any person or ministry. I also shared that if someone shared it with me, I recorded it, meaning if anyone got their feelings hurt or felt

slighted in a group or event, I recorded it in my findings. My fear was that the shepherds and/or ministers would become defensive based on the responses reported. This was a valid concern.

To be fair, while they knew I was conducting interviews and they had heard the topic, my presentation was a lot of information to process in a short amount of time. They requested copies of my presentation so they could process it further and give a more educated response. I was eager to accommodate.

The response I did receive the night it was presented was mixed but overall positive. The group agreed that if these same questions were asked in almost any other church context, the results would be similar. One shepherd verbally wondered how those who had been members 20+ years at College Avenue would respond to the same questions.

One of the key initial takeaways was the importance of checking on congregants. Whether the absence was due to illness, travel, or simply not attending, interviewees shared their hurt in not being contacted by a shepherd, staff, and/or church member. One shepherd related the story of his adult child who lives in another town who went four months without attending after the birth of their first child. They did not receive as much as a phone call. The consensus was that regardless of how

well we are doing (or think we are doing), we can always do better.

Even though the term "linger event" was not mentioned, the concept was certainly conveyed in the responses. Church members wanted to remain on campus following services and spend time connecting. There are three doors exiting our Family Life and Worship Center and after services there is never a "bottleneck." Members filter out the three exits quickly and efficiently after service with few staying to visit, build relationships, or check on others.

The shepherds expressed the need to visit more members and to do it more often. One shepherd mentioned his two takeaways were "accountability" and "harmful cliques." We are clear that we want everyone to be involved in various ministry opportunities but there is little follow up. For example, we take attendance in every adult Bible class but very few classes follow up with those who are not in attendance. In Thom Rainer's book, *High Expectations: The Remarkable Secret for Keeping People in Your Church*, he points to the importance of Sunday school, but also the importance of accountability in Sunday School. "Sunday school was the most important program for effective assimilation."⁴ The key issue for Rainer was

⁴ Rainer, 173.

expectations. When congregants were expected to be in class, they felt a part of the group and in turn were more likely to invite friends and co-workers.

The shepherds were concerned about the presence of cliques that were not receptive to others and discussed the topic at great length. Cliques were mentioned by several who agreed to be interviewed. Some of this was voiced from those who did not grow up in El Dorado who have had a hard time making friends and breaking into groups of people who have known each other most of their lives. There was also a facet of this issue in which birthday parties and other events had been planned and some church members were invited, and others were not. This has taken place with both kids and adults. In the spirit of congregational care, it was suggested by several to be more intentional about trying to be more inclusive. Most agreed this was usually done unintentionally, but the hurt was still present.

The shepherds and staff discussed this further noting that it is human nature to associate with those with whom you have common interests and a shared history. But in the spirit of being a true, spiritual family of believers, we need to strive to be more considerate of those who may need extra attention or may not naturally fit into a certain group.

The final takeaway discussed by the shepherds and staff centered around our adult Bible class program and how they do

not lend themselves to members mixing classes and getting to know new people. For years our classes have been formatted around the concept of affinity groups. For example, we have what we call a "Foundations" class for those who are young and single, those who are engaged, and newlyweds. Our "Taxi Parents" class is designed for those parents who have grade-school children. The next class is what we call our "Free at Last" class which is geared towards empty nesters. From there we have a "CrossTalk" class that tends to focus on the textual and has a solid core that has met for many years. The final class is our "Heroes of Faith" class which is comprised of many of our senior adults. One class we used to have was our "Single on Sunday" class that was made up of people who were single on Sunday through divorce, single (over 35 years of age), widowed, or their spouse did not attend. Over time, this class has been absorbed into the "Free at Last" and "Heroes of Faith" classes.

The shepherds began the brainstorming process of how we could reformat our classes to facilitate more variety in our classes and encourage our members to get to know other people. We are blessed at College Avenue to have a discipleship minister who works with education as well as a member who is a ministry leader of adult education. This format shift would not have to be (nor would it be) a shepherd-led process.

One shepherd met with me privately after processing the presentation for several days and had several poignant observations that were indicative of his shepherd's heart and his desire to see the body of Christ mature at College Avenue. He expressed a desire to aid in helping members plug in to smaller ministries and to do a better job of having deeper conversations with those inside and outside his appointed flock. One word he kept using was "proactive." He saw through the interviews the power of personal interaction that was not predicated on a boundary life event.

He saw the need to better empower our ministry leaders. As a congregation, we have identified over forty men and women who oversee specific ministries. This is a relatively new model for many who have been trained over the years to present every detail of their ministry plan to the elders before they proceed. By continuing to empower these leaders, ownership and responsibility is effectively dispersed, and it allows the shepherds to devote more time to shepherding their respective flocks.

As the conversation continued, he offered several suggestions that would improve the quality of congregational care on a pastoral level. For example, he was a proponent of shepherds meeting with their flock as a group each quarter for a meal and fellowship. He wanted to see our member orientation

class (Welcome to the Family) have more of a shepherd's presence (at this point it is staff-led). He wanted to be visible in this class and put names and faces together early on regardless as to whether they were assigned to his flock.

His final takeaway was to find ways to publicly highlight the pastoral component of the shepherds to the congregation. Whether it means receiving members as they respond to the invitation (something the preaching minister does currently), highlighting how the different shepherds are shepherding their respective flocks, and/or making them more visible for prayer before and after church services.

One of the most encouraging parts of our meeting was his willingness to learn and know better so he can do better. He communicated that he wished there was a manual (outside of Scripture) for shepherds on what it looked like to lead a congregation of God's people in very practical ways. It was a sobering reminder that while I have had formal training at the bachelors, masters, and now doctoral level, shepherds have had minimal formal training and base their behavior on what has been modeled (which was largely administrative).

Feedback from the Interviewees as a Group

On June 18, I presented my findings to the group who participated in the interviews. A meal was provided while I went through the PowerPoint presentation. I asked them to be thinking

about three ideas as I went through the presentation: "What did you hear/see?", "What would you add?", and "What ideas has this triggered?/How can we do better?"

Of the thirty-two interviewed, there were twenty-three in attendance (and one shepherd). I conveyed my appreciation to all who participated and made special mention of the final fourteen interviews who had to navigate the amended parameters due to the pandemic. I presented my findings and then opened the floor for thoughts and questions. The response was uniformly positive, and I was once again validated that this was a topic that needed to be addressed at College Avenue. Some of their suggestions included:

Being Mindful of Introverts

This idea surfaced more in the feedback session than in the interviews. The group discussed ways to be mindful of the differences between introverts and extroverts and how they approach congregational care. Several introverts shared their stories and discussed their dislike of the traditional "meet and greet" during the worship service. This was another place where we saw the benefit of "linger events" and allowing members to visit casually before and after church in a less formal and off-putting format.

One of the outspoken introverts (as ironic as that sounds) shared that one way to bring introverts out of their shell is to engage them in smaller groups. The more emphasis we put on linger events, home groups, Bible classes (with a fellowship component), the more likely introverts would be to tackle corporate worship "meet and greet" opportunities.

They expressed the need to explain the "why" when asking members to take a minute and greet those in their section. Extroverts and introverts alike might be more willing to engage if they knew that the "meet and greet" was intended to build community and improve congregational care on an organic level. I believe that over time it would become more natural and the potential stigma would be removed.

Name Tags for Members

Another practical suggestion was bringing back name tags for our congregation. In the past, each member had a name tag and was asked to wear it during worship. Several attendees mentioned that they were uncertain who was and was not a member and that often kept them from reaching out and introducing themselves for fear of embarrassment. It was even suggested that we put on the name tag how long a person has been a member at College Avenue so we could alleviate the awkwardness of introducing yourself to someone who had attended for decades.

One other point related to identifying members was to have men introduce themselves when they are in front of the congregation for any reason (praying, presiding over communion, reading scripture, etc.) and explain why they are doing what they are doing. This would allow people to put faces with names and what role they held at the church. There is also an underlying assumption that everyone knows how and why the service is structured with little explanation as to the "why." This is also a courtesy to guests who may be unfamiliar with the way in which we conduct worship and the theological underpinning. While this does not seem to directly address congregational care, anything we can do to communicate and teach will aid in making both guests and members alike more comfortable and willing to engage others.

Intentional Assemblage of Home Groups

For over thirty years, in-home small group ministry has been a staple at College Avenue. My predecessor wrote curriculum for over two decades and the format of the group and the curriculum was streamlined after much experience and research. He was very intentional about mixing the groups each fall so that exclusive cliques did not form, and members would spend time with a variety of members. In his absence, we became complacent in the

shuffling of groups and in doing so unintentionally allowed for the formation of cliques.

It was suggested that the staff assign every church member to a group so we could be intentional about having a cross-section of ages and stages in the groups. This would eliminate the unhelpful cliques and would allow members to fellowship with members they may not know as well. This was a great idea that was met with affirmation from those in attendance. One of the ladies in attendance shared that the recent ladies retreat at church assigned ladies to groups and even though she did not know many of the ladies in her group by the end of the weekend she had made some amazing connections. Home groups have been an integral part of our congregation for many years and it has the potential to be a driving force in improving congregational care moving forward if it is done with intentionality. As Russell observes "Mediocrity breeds indifference, but quality attracts."⁵

Additional "Flocks"

As a church we desperately want to meet needs and make sure that no one ever feels unloved, unappreciated, or lost in the crowd. Bob Russell notes that to accomplish this goal our church must "be a place where needs are met, it must have an intricate infrastructure of relationships where people's lives are

⁵ Russell, 112.

interwoven and therefore able to reinforce each other against the storms of life.”⁶ Everyone in attendance liked the idea of having the shepherds divide the congregation into flocks, but they were in favor of more levels of accountability. The ladies’ ministry recently divided the church into ten “flocks” and ten ministry leaders are taking responsibility for reaching out to and caring for their “flock.” In a similar vein, the youth and family ministry as well as the children’s ministry naturally have a group they work with, but I see the need for a more intentional pastoral approach. These “flocks” are easy to define.

One concept that was brought up was a program we used to have at College Avenue. We had “care groups” that divided the congregation geographically and allowed individuals to care for those close by regardless of their age. This was a great system for many years, but as was mentioned at the meeting, we had a hard time finding willing volunteers to serve as coordinators to serve as point people for the various groups.

As care groups phased themselves out, the next model was to have the same kind of care through our Sunday morning bible classes. We formatted our adult classes around affinity groups and structured them to where every class had a host, a

⁶ Russell, 226.

fellowship coordinator, an outreach coordinator, and a care coordinator. While this looked great on paper, we had issues with members who did not attend bible class (who cared for them?) and once again, we had a hard time staffing these roles in each of these classes. People wanted to be cared for but were often too busy to coordinate the care of others.

Regarding shepherd's flocks, it was suggested by several that the shepherds should host quarterly events for their respective flocks as an opportunity to get to know their flock as a group and allow the group to know one another better. This idea came up when I presented the survey results to the shepherds and they agreed this would make their role as shepherds easier and would allow those in their flocks to check on one another if they knew who else was in their flock.

"Fruit Basket Turnover"

As we slowly make our way back to campus while the pandemic remains an issue, we can easily alter our seating layout to make it more conducive to congregational care. Our facility has room for approximately 550 chairs, and we average between 335-350. As creatures of habit, efforts to encourage people to sit in a different spot has been met with expected resistance. However, with everyone away from campus for almost three months, we have been afforded a chance to create a new worship experience.

"Linger Events"

The group conveyed the idea of "linger events" without using the phrase. This concept was universally accepted by the group and we brainstormed what some of these events would look like in our ministry context. Many shared stories of wanting to visit with people, but after they picked up their kids from children's church (at the other end of campus) many people were already gone. It was emphasized that these events did not have to be complex, nor did they have to involve a lot of money. A great suggestion was to have something for the kids to do immediately after service (make a card for a shut-in, a quick craft, or a coloring page) that would allow parents to visit while kids were occupied doing a craft or something service-oriented. One of our praise team members noted that they used to sing a song they were learning immediately after service to send people out with a song on their heart. They called it the "walkout song." He said this song alone made people linger for a couple of minutes and visit while the praise team sang. It was noted that the "meet and greet" during the service is also a form of linger event but it is more forced and not as organic.

It was here that I challenged the group. While there were many ideas for linger events that would allow people to hang around after services, we must be careful not to fellowship with

the same people. It has been my observation over the years that those who do linger after church tend to group up with the same people each week.

Work to Eliminate the Cliques

The one issue that kept coming up in the discussion and the interviews was the presence of cliques. Merriam-Webster defines the word, "clique" as "a narrow exclusive circle or group of persons; especially one held together by common interests, views, or purposes."⁷ While it is quite natural to associate with those who have similar backgrounds and interests, churches must guard against groups that become exclusive to the point where newcomers do not feel welcome. I can remember when I served as the youth minister at College Avenue that I believed isolating cliques were an adolescent problem and they would eventually grow out of them. Time has taught me otherwise.

Exclusive cliques are alive and well and are a source of hurt for many people (whether intentional or not). Scot McKnight maintains "The success of a church is first determined by how many invisible people become visible to those not like them."⁸ In the interviews, several people spoke of not being able to fit

⁷ Merriam-Webster, definition of "clique." <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/clique>. Accessed November 5, 2020.

⁸ Scot McKnight, *A Fellowship of Differents: Showing the World God's Design for Life Together* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), 24.

into a group because they did not grow up here or because their kids went to a different school. We saw it in our home group ministry when people would flock to the same home with the same leader and co-leader year after year. Barna notes "highly effective churches teach their people that it's not acceptable to focus on relationships with Christ, family and fellow believers to the exclusion of outsiders."⁹

I contend this is mostly done unintentionally. It is not wrong to have a close group of friends nor is it wrong to have a group of people with which you can share your life. Vulnerability and accountability are byproducts of smaller groups of people feeling comfortable enough to share a piece of themselves with others for the sake of healing and spiritual growth. It is human nature to associate with those with whom you feel comfortable, have similar interests, and have shared life experiences. Ed Stetzer and Mike Dodson contend "Many Christians make little effort to cultivate new friends because they feel comfortable with the friends they already have."¹⁰ It takes intentionality to look for others to include and to make the effort to include them when they do visit your group or sit next to you in church. This problem is exacerbated when El Dorado has

⁹ George Barna, *The Habits of Highly Effective Churches: Being Strategic in Your God-Given Ministry* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 1999), 78.

¹⁰ Ed Stetzer and Mike Dodson, *Comeback Churches: How 300 Churches Turned Around and Yours Can Too* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishers, 2007), 122.

a lot of people who come to town (and our church) because of employment with the El Dorado School District and/or Murphy USA. Many of these employees are fresh out of college with no family ties in El Dorado. Several are Harding University graduates and therefore there is some level of commonality with many of our members, but it is still difficult to acclimate with people who have known each other most of their lives. Stetzer and Dodson suggest,

Because most members have already connected ('snapped together') with other members, the relationships are saturated to the point that there aren't anymore 'blocks' to connect new people.¹¹

Feedback from the Ministry Leaders

On Thursday, June 25th I met with our ministry leaders to discuss our findings. Several years ago, we moved away from the title of "deacon" so that we could include both men and women in ministry leadership positions. This allowed us to navigate around the topic of deaconesses, and to use those in the congregation who had been married before in leadership roles. As of June 2020, we have forty-two ministry leaders who oversee the ministries at College Avenue. This is another way to allow the shepherds to be about the business of shepherding the flock

¹¹ Stetzer Dodson, 123.

while capable ministry leaders oversee the various ministries of the church.

The shepherds give these ministry leaders the authority to make decisions within their area of ministry and provide encouragement and direction (when necessary). This has been a good model for our congregation, and it is important to the success of this project that those who lead in ministry positions have a voice in how we can make a great church even better.

One observation prior to this meeting was how, as a leader, I needed to be more intentional in how I care for the ministry leaders and shepherds. Peter Scazzero writes "the overall health of any church or ministry depends primarily on the emotional and spiritual health of its leadership."¹² The reality is that a leader's internal life can impact more than his or her expertise and gifts. These individuals have responsibilities and authority but are often caring for others to the detriment of their own self-care. Searcy Nelson confirms "How well do you know your volunteers? What's going on in their lives? When are their birthdays and their anniversaries? Do you celebrate milestone

¹² Peter Scazzero, *The Emotionally Healthy Church: A Strategy for Discipleship that Actually Changes Lives* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 20.

moments like marriage with them?"¹³ Looking for big and small ways to minister to my leaders make every aspect of congregational care more effective.

Nineteen of the forty-two ministry leaders were able to attend. Many who were unable to attend cited the pandemic as the primary reason for their absence or they participated in the interviews (eleven of the thirty-two interview participants are ministry leaders) and they elected not to go through the presentation twice.

Their response to my findings was uniformly positive. They agreed on the need to improve in this area and many in the audience could identify with some of the sentiments shared in the interviews. Below are their major takeaways:

The Uncertainty of the Local Church in A Post-Pandemic World and the Need for Community

At the time of this writing, we have been back on campus for four weeks and we have not yet had over one hundred in attendance. Pre-pandemic we were averaging between 320-340 and our last Sunday in March before we stopped meeting on campus, we had 231 in attendance. We have had several who have made it clear they will not return to campus until masks are not a requirement for admission into the facility. But what about the

¹³ Nelson Searcy, *Connect: How to Double Your Number of Volunteers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2012), 116.

others? Are they fearful because of COVID-19 or have they simply gotten out of the habit? How do you know? This is where we believe authentic congregational care will be even more important moving forward. Kenneth Boa confirms "Because God has created us in his image, we are relational beings who thrive best in community."¹⁴ If someone did not feel cared for before we stopped meeting for three months and no one checked on them during the pandemic, why would they come back? If you have grown accustomed to sleeping late and watching church online in your pajamas, why would you go back?

Before the pandemic our culture was seeing a shift away from authentic community. Boa suggests it has been marked by "a quest for independence, self-preservation, control, privatization, avoidance of accountability, superficial relationships, and alienation."¹⁵ Moving forward, we have the opportunity as a church to reclaim what it means to function as a biblical community. In Randy Frazee's book, *The Connecting Church*, he lays out the seven functions of biblical community as spiritual formation, evangelism, reproduction, volunteerism, international missions, care, and extending compassion. Freeze points out that "these biblical functions are not departments

¹⁴ Kenneth Boa, *Conformed to His Image: Biblical and Practical Approaches to Spiritual Formation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 415.

¹⁵ Boa, 415.

within the church that people pick and choose.”¹⁶ Instead it is a conglomeration of what a healthy church views as its priorities.

The Importance of the Ministry Inventory Form

One of the concepts that resonated with this group was identifying small tasks within their respective ministries that would allow members the chance to serve. Not everyone can do big things, but everyone can do something. As one ministry leader put it, “people want to feel needed.”

Over a decade ago, the staff at College Avenue created an exhaustive list of all the ministries and distributed them to all the members asking them how they wanted to serve. The idea was simple: Russell instructs “When they see all the areas of service opportunities at one time, they can more easily choose a ministry suited to their gifts.”¹⁷ This allowed each member to serve in a ministry in which they felt comfortable and did not force anyone to do anything that was not in their area of giftedness. Over the years this document has grown as the church has grown and ministries have expanded (see appendix 5).¹⁸ Over the past ten years, we have distributed updated forms three

¹⁶ Randy Frazee, *The Connecting Church: Beyond Small Groups to Authentic Community* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 82-83.

¹⁷ Russell, 182.

¹⁸ Appendix 5, 161.

times to reflect new ministries and to give people fresh opportunities to engage and try new things.

The intended purpose of this document is that when a member fills out the form, their preferences are then entered into an Excel spreadsheet and then our administrative assistant can print off a list for each of the ministry leaders of the jobs people are willing to do in their corresponding ministry. It is a great system if people will fill out their ministry inventory forms. This has been a constant struggle for me. I see the value in them and when someone wants to be used more, my first question is always to ask if they have filled out their form. The answer is almost always "no." In a room full of ministry leaders, several had not turned theirs in. There are staff members who have not filled one out.

I have preached on the importance of plugging in to the church family and finding your place in the body of Christ, and have cast vision of what it would look like if everyone filled out the questionnaire and was using their gifts for God in an area in which they were passionate. While I do not think the form is the answer to everything, I do believe it is the best instrument we currently have in place to match ministries and needs with members who need to use their gifts.

One suggestion that came out of this discussion was for each of the ministry leaders to identify small projects within their ministry. These small tasks could be compiled in the church office for anyone who had some extra time and wanted to serve. Another astute observation was that there is often resistance to plugging into a ministry because there is not an intentional "exit strategy." In other words, if someone agrees to serve in a ministry, is it part of a rotation or is it assumed that you will serve in this ministry forever? For many it is simpler to not volunteer than to get "stuck" in a ministry they cannot gracefully exit after an appropriate amount of time.

The Importance of Multiple Flocks

The group spent a great deal of time discussing the men's ministry and the need for additional levels of encouragement and accountability for our men. One of the ministry leaders in attendance was over our men's ministry and shared his frustration in trying to plan events and ministries in which men would participate. We have seen the success of the women's ministry and the growth that has occurred in large part due to their retreats, bible classes, events on days other than Sundays and Wednesdays, and the emergence of their own "flocks" where ten ladies divided the ladies into ten groups and they are shepherding their respective flocks.

Men's ministry has been an ongoing discussion because the need is there, the ministry structure is there, and even the budget is there. The disconnect is creating an interest among our men to participate and make it a viable ministry. Regarding congregational care, it was agreed that men need to be asked hard questions because even though there is a stereotypical tough exterior, they have issues and insecurities just like the ladies. Too often, men wait until something in their life is broken before they ask for help, and often then it is too late. Proactive congregational care that asks hard questions based on genuine relationships creates an environment where men can be vulnerable and mature in their walk.

The morning after the meeting, a ministry leader came to my office and shared his thoughts after having the night to think about it. His main takeaway from the presentation and discussion was the need for ministers and staff to be proactive by showing appreciation to the congregation and modeling exemplary congregational care, and the congregation will follow suit. Barna notes "One of the most powerful antecedents for a congregation learning to live according to relational priorities is having the church's most visible leaders model that lifestyle."¹⁹ Much of the discussion on all topics revolved

¹⁹ George Barna, *The Habits of Highly Effective Churches: Being Strategic in Your God-Given Ministry* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 1999), 80.

around getting members to speak up and share their struggles, be vulnerable, etc. The reality is leadership must establish relationships with members so they can learn these needs firsthand.

He also made a thought-provoking observation regarding those who made an impact in people's lives at College Avenue. The fourth interview question asked, "Is there any specific person, experience or ministry that stands out in your decision to make College Avenue your church home? He observed that all the names mentioned were noted because they were proactive and engaged people. Making congregational care a priority for leadership will increase the probability that members will make it a priority.

Chapter Four

Conclusions and Future Implications

Limitations

Along with the effect of COVID-19, there are several limitations that I noticed as I completed the project. First, by limiting my sample size to those who had placed membership in the last decade, the overall picture is incomplete. The result might be the same, but I would be curious to know how many who have been here for a longer period would acknowledge the perceived cliques. If they do, what would be their suggestions for addressing them? Would I be shocked to hear stories of members who have been here for decades who have always felt lonely but have stayed out of obligation or have come to grips with the notion that this is just the way it is?

Also, by limiting the voices to the past ten years, I was not able to hear from those who knew previous ministers. I would like to hear their stories of what ministries and programs worked and did not work in the past. What suggestions would they have regarding congregational care moving forward based on their experiences from the past?

Another limitation is that it only reflects our congregation. I would be interested to know how other religious

groups in El Dorado would answer the same questions. Are there some denominations that are better at congregational care? Is congregational care an issue across the board in the community of El Dorado? Love, Foster, and Harris observe "If there is anything we have learned from the history of Christianity, it's that each church must live its own part of the story in its own place and time."¹ How College Avenue approaches congregational care will not necessarily determine how others should address their approach to congregational care.

To take it one step further, I would be curious to see how our congregation compared to other Churches of Christ in south Arkansas. We are thirty miles from both Camden and Magnolia, Arkansas. How would their congregations answer the same questions? We are noticeably more progressive than both congregations. Would this make a difference in the quality of our congregational care? Why or why not?

Another limitation is the shifting definition of congregational care. The "how" of congregational care is a moving target. Depending on the generation someone grew up in, whether you are an introvert or an extrovert, whether you embrace social media as a viable form of care, and many other factors, your preferred method of congregational care is unique

¹ Love, Foster, and Harris, 179.

to you. The limitation in this project is that while focusing on the need for improved congregational care, it does not fully explore what forms of congregational care are best suited for the various demographics represented at College Avenue.

A final limitation is that as we generate interest and input on implementing changes to improve congregational care, we are having to devise two plans: mid-pandemic and whatever post-pandemic will look like. Many of our best suggestions will only work when we can all be together again without masks and without social distancing. This is not a unique challenge to College Avenue, but it is difficult to improve the quality of congregational care when the congregation cannot physically gather the way it once did.

Looking Ahead

The Case for Being Proactive

One of the most important parts of this project is the need not to only improve congregational care but to do it proactively. Ideally, members would be aware of the ongoing needs and concerns of their fellow congregants and would respond organically before they read about it in the church bulletin. One way to be proactive is to make sure we accept others and see everyone as part of a process. Steve Sjogren observes, "Acceptance allows people to be in process. Acceptance allows

people to be in church even if they don't have it all together."²

In Sjorgen's book he lays out a cycle that allows members to move from *hospital* to *family* to *school* to *army*. In each of these stations, members can progress through the steps. In the hospital phase they are cared for. As part of the family, members see the benefits of community. In the school phase, members are equipped for life and ministry and in the army phase they receive help as they battle spiritual warfare.

In Angela H. Reed and Richard R. Osmer and Marcus G. Smucker's book, *Spiritual Companioning*, they refer to a Gallup poll that illuminates this concept. The poll (conducted in 2005) revealed the results of a congregational engagement survey. As a result of their study they "developed a list of twelve statements that express what people need in order to be engaged in the life and ministries of a local church."³ Here is the Gallup list:

1. As a member of my congregation, I know what is expected of me.
2. In my congregation, my spiritual needs are met.
3. In my congregation, I regularly have the opportunity to do what I do best.
4. In the last month, I have received recognition or praise from someone in my congregation.
5. The spiritual leaders in my congregation seem to care about me as a person.

² Steve Sjogren, *Making a Good Church Great: Becoming a Community God Calls Home* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 2010), 147.

³ Angela H. Reed and Richard R. Osmer and Marcus G. Smucker, *Spiritual Companioning: A Guide to Protestant Theology and Practice* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2015), 27.

6. There is someone in my congregation who encourages my spiritual direction.
7. As a member of my congregation, my opinions seem to count.
8. The mission or purpose of my congregation makes me feel participation is important.
9. The other members of my congregation are committed to spiritual growth.
10. Aside from family members, I have a best friend in my congregation.
11. In the past six months, someone in my congregation has talked to me about the progress of my spiritual growth.
12. In my congregation, I have opportunities to learn and grow.⁴

I did not know about this list initially. This would have certainly influenced my questions and given me a template to see how our congregation measured up against Gallup's findings. In the spirit of being proactive, this certainly gives us a tangible standard to aim for as church leaders and as a congregation.

Another way to be more proactive moving forward would be to incorporate a phone circle for home bound and elderly persons. This would provide consistent care and concern for often overlooked members and would involve the congregation in the process. The same idea could be utilized within our existing shepherd's flocks. In addition to a shepherd reaching out to his

⁴ Albert L. Winseman, "Congregational Engagement Ascends." *Gallup*. February 15, 2005. <http://www.gallup.com/poll/14950/congregational-engagement-ascends.aspx>.

flock, fellow sheep could check on one another. This could be accomplished either by text or phone call.

One final way in which our congregation can be more proactive is to be more intentional when protecting vulnerable others and preventing sexual misconduct on a leadership level. In Linda Oxford's article, "What Healthy Churches Do to Protect Vulnerable Others and Prevent Clergy Sexual Misconduct," she lays out several ways in which congregations can avoid the pain and damage that comes from inappropriate sexual advances and actions within the church community. Oxford defines "healthy churches" as "those congregations that act to prevent clergy sexual misconduct by implementing prevention and protection practices suggested by existing research and reports."⁵ I found it interesting that she identified the concept of a church "family" as a potential negative. Based on her extensive research, she asserts that "the idea of the church as a family system has been identified by several writers as highlighting risk factors."⁶ This may not appear compatible with Paul's charge in Galatians 6:10, but the rationale makes sense. The family concept portrays a deeper level of intimacy than what may be a

⁵ Linda K. Oxford, "What Healthy Churches Do to Protect Vulnerable Others and Prevent Clergy Sexual Misconduct," *Family and Community Ministries*, Vol. 25 (2012): 82.

⁶ Oxford, 85.

healthy relationship. The article promoted the idea of "community" over the image of the "family." Other helpful suggestions in the article spoke to the need for education for both members and congregants as well as open communication, increased accountability, and support and resources for ministry leaders.

This is certainly an area in which we can improve. While we have certain measures in place, there is always more that can be done to ensure the safety of our members (children and adults) and the integrity of the ministry staff. Unfortunately, too many congregations learn these lessons in hindsight.

The "Corona Component"

When my prospectus was approved and I began to work on my project, terms such as "COVID-19" and "coronavirus" were not part of the American vocabulary. The concept of "social distancing" and the necessity of masks were not an obligatory part of everyday life. I completed eighteen of the thirty-two interviews around a small table in my office with a recorder, my questions, and a pen. Once the pandemic became a reality, I completed the remaining fourteen interviews via Zoom and email submissions.

While I understand and appreciate the decision of the Harding University Internal Review Board to require social

distancing in the project proceedings, I missed the one-on-one interchanges that took place at the beginning of the process. With few exceptions, those who returned a paper copy of their responses to my questions expressed their desire to explain their answers when we could be together again physically. The nature of several of my questions asked people to share their faith journey and a time when they were hurt by the church and this was not something people wanted to do simply by filling out a form. They wanted to share their heart and elaborate on certain points of their story. Having said that, everyone was extremely accommodating and willing to help me complete the interviews and be involved in the process.

Not all the pandemic disruption was negative. While I wish I could have done more face-to-face interacting, this time of social distancing forced the staff and shepherds to rethink the way we do ministry. For years, we have passed clipboards down the rows of chairs on Sunday mornings so we would have a record of everyone's attendance. If someone missed three or four weeks, the administrative assistant would put their name on a list and at the next shepherds/staff meeting, we would look at the printout of what we called the "sheep in danger" list and see if anyone in the room knew any reason why the people on the list were not attending church. From that point, the shepherd that was responsible for the member would reach out to them before

the next meeting and report back as to what they found out. The staff would also reach out to the "sheep in danger" as well.

While this is an acceptable process, in many ways it is playing defense rather than offense. It unintentionally neglects those who attend faithfully but could still use some extra attention. As one interviewee observed, "It seems when nothing is going on between life's big events, we turn into just another person." When we ceased meeting on campus on March 15th, and did not resume until June 7, it required the shepherds and staff to check on everyone in their flocks and not just those who were going through boundary events in their lives or had missed multiple Sunday morning worship assemblies.

At the time of this project, the future of the virus and the lasting effects of the restrictions on society are unknown. However, I can say with certainty that it has changed the way our congregation has approached congregational care on many levels. As a result of the isolation, the children's minister and I took forty bud vases to our widows and shut-ins and had conversations through screen doors and in driveways (six feet apart). It made us visit members that would normally not be checked on unless they missed several Sundays in a row.

The Coronavirus also made me more aware of those in our congregation who are battling mental health issues. Prior to the

pandemic, I was aware of those who were struggling, but during the pandemic I have been diligent about checking on those who I know are struggling at least once a week. I am asking the deeper questions and am making sure they are aware that there are others who care about them and are there for them.

I am already tired of the phrase, "new normal." My goal is a "better normal" and congregational care lessons learned during the pandemic will be a large part of my "better normal." When the pandemic runs its course and society regains a form of normalcy, we will be wise to see God as the one in control and recognize whatever role Satan played in the process. At this point, we will be wise to take the approach of Joseph as he looked back over the events of his life and spoke these powerful words, "As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good." (Genesis 50:20- ESV)

Red, Yellow, Black, and White

In addition to political strife and a global pandemic, during my project there was a renewed awareness of the racial inequality that continues in our country. While our congregation does not reflect the demographic makeup of our community, we still have several members who are African American. The sad reality is that as Don McLaughlin points out "although there are definitely signs of hope for greater cultural and racial

integration in the North American church, over 90 percent of U.S. churches are still ethnically and culturally homogenous.”⁷ Love for God may be difficult to see, but love for people is subject to relational verification. We can only love our neighbor as ourselves if we love God with all that is in us and allow Him to work in our hearts.

Congregational care in this context must mean several things. First, it forces the leadership to be mindful of those in our congregation who may feel as if their voice is not being heard and lead accordingly. McLaughlin writes, “The church that is willing to take tangible steps towards intentional integration can make a difference, and we have learned that the rays of hope must be wrapped in practical steps.”⁸ But we must be willing to have the dialogue. Beverly Daniel Tatum explains “We need to talk about it at home, at school, in our houses of worship, in our workplaces, in our community groups.”⁹

The second component is that we must address and overcome the fear of saying the wrong thing. Paralysis by analysis is not

⁷ Don McLaughlin, *Reconciliation Reconsidered: Advancing the National Conversation on Race in Churches of Christ*. Ed. By Tanya Smith Brice (Abilene, TX: ACU Press, 2016), 180.

⁸ Ibid., 189.

⁹ Beverly Daniel Tatum, *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria? And Other Questions About Race* (New York: Basic Books, 2017), 331.

helpful, and in most cases, does more harm than good. What is the fear? Tatum continues,

Some white students were afraid of their own ignorance, afraid that because of their limited experience with people of color they might ask a naïve question or make an offensive remark that could provoke the anger of the people of color around them.¹⁰

We cannot allow fear to keep us from asking the hard questions and keep us from being proactive as a church by ministering to all our members and reaching out to those who may not have the same color skin. Biblical, proactive congregational care cannot have boundaries.

The final component is we must be willing to listen. On the first Sunday after the murder of George Floyd, one of our shepherds (who is African American) stood on the stage and passionately apologized to a room full of predominantly white faces. He apologized in case he or anyone in his family had ever done anything that would make any of the church members want to put our knee on his family's necks until they could no longer breathe. You could have heard a pin drop. I had asked him to pray for our congregation and our nation, but he did so much more.

¹⁰ Tatum, 332.

In his prayer he reminded all of us that "this was ultimately more about grace than race."

Congregational care in the Kingdom also means we acknowledge that, "God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them." (Genesis 1:27) To blindly claim that one has more of the image of God than another or that one matters to God more than another is pure heresy.

People often asked me how they can know God's will for their lives. They usually mean whether they should take a certain job or marry a certain person, but it is bigger than that. Paul writes in his second letter to Corinth,

All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. 2 Corinthians 5:18-20

As believers, God has given us the ministry of reconciliation and even though it can seem overwhelming to tackle the topic of racism on a national level, we can and must begin with how we treat our fellow church members.

Unfortunately, McLaughlin contends too often "the church is

following society rather than confronting and transforming it.”¹¹ In Don McLaughlin’s chapter he tells the story of a black woman who gave him an article to read. After his first reading he did not see anything he disagreed with. The woman politely asked him to read it again. This time as he read it through “her eyes” he saw the issue. The article called for people to be colorblind. While this sounds like a vote for tolerance and acceptance, it denies an important part of the nature of God. McLaughlin observes “God is not colorblind. God is colorful, and his creation absolutely bears witness. Color is beautiful whether it is a rose, a sunset, or our skin.”¹² He marks this as the moment he went from being colorblind to embracing being colorful. As the book of Revelation reminds,

After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!” -Revelation 7:9-10

Congregational Care with Respect to Generational Differences

Even though my sample group was centered on those who had placed membership in the past ten years, there was a healthy

¹¹ McLaughlin, 180.

¹² Ibid., 181.

representation of several different age groups. While all were united that congregational care must be a higher priority, the response on the best way to accomplish the task varied. This is to be expected and certainly an integral part of a growing church. According to Gary McIntosh "Today's church leaders understand that ministry must take place among a mosaic of groups and subgroups—most notably generational cohorts."¹³ One older gentleman said, "conversations are king" and continued to explain that technology is not part of the solution but rather plays a large role in the current predicament. Others would argue that many in today's world would rather reply to a quick text than to carry on an actual conversation over the phone or in person. There is merit in each viewpoint as well as the generations not represented in my interviews. McIntosh continues, "Scripture uses the word *generation* in three different ways. It can be an age group in a family, a period of time, or a group of people connected by their place in time."¹⁴

As a church with multiple generations represented, we must take the time and make the effort to get to know people on a deeper level and learn the best way to minister to them moving forward. Holly Catterton Allen and Christine Lawton Ross observe

¹³ Gary L. McIntosh, *One Church, Four Generations: Understanding and Reaching All Ages in Your Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2002), 9.

¹⁴ Ibid., 11.

"The church is a place where generational differences are to be transcended rather than reinforced."¹⁵ We are also seeing that church loyalty is slipping among some of our newer Christians. As one of those interviewed shared, "If people don't feel cared for, wanted, etc. there is no reason to stay at that particular church. There are plenty of other churches." There are many other reasons to stay with a church, but I understand the sentiment. Putnam agrees that "more people are 'surfing' from congregation to congregation more frequently, so that while they may still be 'religious,' they are less committed to a particular group of believers."¹⁶

With the rise of the group known as the "nones" we need to be deliberate in how we approach this next phase of the church. James Emery White contends

If the church is going to reach out to a group of people who have given up on the church, not to mention membership and labels, then one thing is clear: we must renew our own commitment to the very thing they have rejected—the church.¹⁷

A trap for many churches is to grow complacent in their practices and to squash doubts and questions as they arise.

¹⁵ Holly Catterton Allen and Christine Lawton Ross, *Intergenerational Christian Formation: Bringing the Whole Church Together in Ministry, Community, and Worship* (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012), 155.

¹⁶ Putnam, 74.

¹⁷ James Emery White, *The Rise of the Nones: Understanding and Reaching the Religiously Unaffiliated* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2014), 165.

Putnam explains "The religious orientations of the so-called Generation X strongly suggest that this long-run ratcheting down of religious involvement has not yet run its course."¹⁸ The present generation and the one to come has not been nor will they be satisfied with proof text and denominational party lines. The intergenerational nature of the church should challenge us to spend time in the Bible so that we can explain our beliefs and have a renewed confidence in our own faith. We cannot exhaust the avenues in which we can minister to those in our church family.

The Role of Men in Congregational Care

The idea of men's ministry has been a challenging one at College Avenue. Everyone sees the need and the value of having an established men's ministry. Men will openly admit there is a need for a quality ministry program. The shepherds have seen the value in such a program and have allotted money in the budget for men's ministry. We have appointed numerous ministry leaders over men's ministry but, up to this point, the ministry has not been successful. When events have been planned, men come and bring friends, but we have not had leaders in place who had the time and giftedness to make the ministry productive. To the leadership's discredit, just because someone is passionate about

¹⁸ Putnam, 75.

men's ministry does not necessarily mean they have the skill set to coordinate the ministry. This is where I see a need I can meet.

In his book, *Why Men Hate Going to Church*, David Murrow points out the needs for spiritual fathering. Characteristics of spiritual fathering include having an ongoing relationship with their children, teaching by example, teaching boys how to release their masculinity in a healthy way, they are not mothers, they discipline their children, they name their child, they give the boy his sacred role in life, and he prepares his boys to be a father. Throughout his book he makes a strong case for church leaders to make men a priority and engage those who may be the hardest to engage.

Murrow also acknowledges that every man needs a band of brothers. Relationships are key even if they are not clearly articulated by men. "Though men want and need relationships, they rarely use the term or think relationally."¹⁹ He also goes on to note that while women build relationships face to face, men build relationships side by side. I can see this in my own relationship with my dad and even with my boys.

¹⁹ David Murrow, *Why Men Hate Going to Church* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2005), 223.

After the completion of my project, I would like to devote a significant amount of time to getting our men's ministry organized and efficient. Many men in the congregation will participate in a men's event but few are willing to take a leadership role in planning one. As Murrow points out, "don't push men too far, too fast, or they'll push away." We will have to be aware of this truth moving forward. I have this skill set and am willing to devote the time to create a team that can assist but not be tasked with the role of planning.

Throughout the interviews and the processing sessions, it was obvious that the ladies' ministry is meeting needs and that their ministry is tackling proactive congregational care in a big way. I think the same is possible (and essential) in men's ministry. Greg Ogden notes "In an impersonal world, people hunger for intimacy, personal care, deep friendship and spiritual bonding. This is particularly true for men."²⁰ It will look different to be sure, but the need and the framework is present; it just needs a leader.

In Defense of the "Meet and Greet" and the Importance of "Linger Events"

It can be an introvert's worst nightmare. The church service has begun and then someone from the stage says, "let's

²⁰ Greg Ogden, *Transforming Discipleship: Making Disciples a Few at a Time* (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 127.

take a minute and greet our neighbor." One minute you can worship in virtual anonymity and the next you are shaking hands with members, guests, and a mix of people that you aren't sure if they are members or guests. You are forced to make small talk and feign interest in the minutiae of the lives of others you only see for an hour once a week. Is it any wonder that so many are opposed to this forced mingling of parishioners on a Sunday morning? I think this experience can be salvaged and improved.

While the idea of standing and greeting friends and strangers may be unsettling for many, the significance cannot be overstated. As I listened to interview after interview of people who did not feel connected to the church family, they also shared that they came into the facility, found their seat, remained seated, and left promptly once service was over. If we want to change the DNA of how we care for one another, it must be an integral part of our gatherings. The concept of greeting your neighbor, if done the right way, should allow members and guests to mingle in a way that is not superficial but essential to the health of the church.

One way to improve this uncomfortable time for many is to do a better job from the pulpit in explaining the "why." If church members better understand the rationale and reasoning behind such an event, they might be more receptive. Rather than

being viewed as unavoidable or a time killer, it could be something we looked forward to as a church as a chance to practice proactive congregational care in a controlled setting.

To further complicate the approval rate of the “meet and greet,” pandemic protocol has made social distancing the norm and prolonged interaction is currently discouraged. According to Thom Rainer’s eBook forecasting future trends facing the church, he suggests,

social distancing will change permanently some of the traditions in many churches. Stand and greet is gone and will not return in most churches. Church huggers will no longer be tolerated. Even handshakes will be minimized.²¹

One possible response to this new reality would be to place public interaction closer to the end of the service so as part of a concept known as “linger events.”

Long before I was made aware of the phrase “linger events” we knew the value of people spending time together before and after events. We have been intentional as leadership in planning events over the years that brought the congregation together in an informal way. From our annual homemade ice cream supper to our annual watermelon supper, we have several events, especially

²¹ Thom Rainer, *Leading A Post-COVID Church: A Pastor’s Guide to Ministry Challenges and Opportunities*. (Nashville, TN: Church Answers, 2020)5-6, accessed November 10, 2020, Church Answers eBooks.

on Sunday evening, that allow for casual fellowship and relationship building.

.Even our Sunday evening format during the summer could be considered a linger events of sorts. We structure our 242 service around Acts 2:42 where we have fifteen minutes of singing, fifteen minutes of instruction, and then we enjoy a meal together. We encourage those in attendance to mingle and not sit with the same people each week. We also do not put an end time on this event but encourage people to stay and visit if they like.

It is easy to exit quickly and not have to engage anyone. We have also noticed a steady decline in our attendance at potlucks. We believe this is somewhat of a generational trend. Many I have asked expressed concern about not knowing the origin of a certain dish and the cleanliness of their kitchen. Others are picky in what they eat and are concerned about the unseen ingredients of certain submissions. In response, we have started providing the meat and the congregation provides the sides and desserts. This seems to have helped to some degree. Our best attended "potlucks" are when the entire meal is catered. While this is effective, it is expensive.

As a staff, we are brainstorming ways we can be more intentional about creating linger events before, during and

after services as well as incorporating linger events into all our ministries. As a limitation, this season of pandemic will alter the way we linger in the short-term and may potentially change the way we engage others long-term.

The value of linger events extends beyond the worship assembly. After the processing meeting with the ministry leaders, one of the staff mentioned the importance of incorporating the linger event concept into every aspect of their ministry. This would be an intentional component that allowed time, regardless of the event, for youth group members and families to spend some loosely planned time in fellowship with other families rather than simply picking up and dropping off from gatherings.

The Continuum of Intimacy

Sarah Trenholm and Arthur Jensen note that, "Communication takes many forms. It can be as simple and direct as a smile or as complex and eloquent as a novel."²² While communication is necessary, it can be difficult to navigate what is appropriate in a specific setting. It is often difficult to properly respond on a case by case basis. Trenholm and Stensen point out "Although communication always involves the cooperative of creating meaning, it can take on quite different forms depending

²² Trenholm and Jensen, 23.

on the situation.”²³ During one of the interviews, the individual across the table voiced a phrase that I did not recognize. While speaking about ways in which she could more effectively use her talents, she confided that she struggled with the concept of “the continuum of intimacy.” She elaborated that this idea spoke to what was and was not acceptable for a person in how they interacted with others. Another way this concept can be labeled is “role competence.” Trenholm and Stensen continue,

[Role competence is] the ability to take on social roles and to know what is appropriate behavior given these roles. We must know the roles we play safely in any situation; we must recognize what behaviors are appropriate and what are off-limits.²⁴

For example, if someone in our church family loses a loved one, based on your relationship with the person, what is appropriate? A card? A heart-felt phone call? Do you need to be in their living room with a shoulder to cry on and a listening ear? Do you bring the casserole, or do you mail a gift card? What is appropriate on a case-by-case basis and how do you know? Should the continuum even exist in the Christian world? How can we know? Would a more organic approach to congregational care eventually eliminate the continuum or is the continuum a necessary part of the Kingdom? After all, Jesus had those who

²³ Trenholm and Jensen, 24.

²⁴ Ibid., 13.

were in His inner circle who appear to be more open to share thoughts and feelings than say, a Bartholomew or a Thaddeus.

A large part of clarifying what is and is not appropriate is by making assimilation into the church body a priority. By engaging members in ministry, it allows relationships to be created that normalizes more Christ-like behavior in response to boundary events and everyday life. Cathy H. George writes, "Church communities that nourish and equip members to live in the complexity of the world are communities that practice intimacy."²⁵ But this process takes intentionality and must be modeled from the top down. Thom Rainer states "Effective assimilation requires hard work, and the leaders must be visibly at the forefront of the efforts."²⁶

The Power of Courting

In my limited marriage counseling experience, a common thread that runs through most of the issues couples face is that they stopped pursuing their spouse with the same vigor they did when the relationship was fresh and new. They ended the courting phase of the relationship. Over time jobs, kids, bills, and many other things begin to take their toll and if couples are not

²⁵ Cathy H. George, "Howard Thurman's Practice of Intimacy in the Development of Community." *Journal of Pastoral Theology*, 26 no 1 (March 2016): 30.

²⁶ Rainer, 170.

cautious, they can slip into a season of complacency and find themselves distant and not even realize it.

I see the same concept present in our church family when I see the attention we have given to congregational care. For many in the congregation, there was a time when they were more willing to meet new faces and engage their neighbors in nearby pews. When I asked those interviewed when they felt most a part of the College Avenue family, each person smiled and spoke of times they were "courted" by members of the church and when they felt valued and appreciated. But over time, the busyness of life and the lure of other pressing matters can keep us from exhibiting the same zealous spirit we once possessed or experienced. According to Randy Frazee for many "there are too many sets of relationships that do connect with each other, but all take time to maintain."²⁷

Like a marriage relationship, we can recall a time when we were infatuated with our future spouse and the attention we gave to the courting process. We knew their favorite things and remembered important dates. We put their needs above our own and made sure they knew they were valued. The family of believers would benefit from remembering what it was like to be new to the faith or to be new to the church family, from being intentional

²⁷ Frazee, 33.

in how we view every person who is part of our church family, and from rekindling the fire that we possessed early on in our walk. Ed Stetzer and Mike Dodson wisely conclude that, "Friendliness is not enough—people are not looking for a friendly church, they are looking for friends."²⁸

Matthew Kelly writes about the ten reasons some people have great relationships. They are: they establish a common purpose, they clearly define what makes a relationship great, they agree on a plan to establish a great relationship, their plan is realistic, they believe they can achieve their goal, they make it an absolute must to be a part of a great relationship, they persevere and follow through, they hold each other accountable to their purpose and plan, they don't give up in the face of major challenges, and they get quality coaching. While each of these may not be as applicable to relationships within the church as they are in marital relationships, I believe there is much we can learn from the concepts. In these concepts I see expectations, accountability, and non-negotiables. There is a plan in place and failure is not an option. Hard work is assumed, and the stakes are high. Kelly concludes "Invert them [the reasons], and you will discover ten reasons some people do

²⁸ Stetzer and Dodson, 130.

not have great relationships.”²⁹ Anyone in ministry long enough can share stories of people who no longer attend in large part because they did not establish an/or maintain lasting relationships.

The Lost Art of Hospitality

If you had asked me prior to conducting the interviews to identify a concept that would be repeated throughout the process I would have hypothesized that it would be hospitality; however, not one person mentioned it. No one even alluded to it. There were a couple who mentioned being checked on more than Sundays and Wednesdays, but there was no mention of homes (outside of our small group ministry) or food or fellowship as part of the solution to improved congregational care. I believe this is both a cultural and a generational shift. Christine Pohl summarizes the current state of hospitality among many today. She writes,

Today when we think of hospitality, we don't first think of welcoming strangers. We picture having family and friends over for a pleasant meal. Or we think of the 'hospitality industry,' of hotels and restaurants which are open to strangers as long as they have money or credit cards. Perhaps larger churches come to mind, with their 'hospitality committees' that coordinate the coffee house, greet visitors, or help with the parking. In any case, today most understandings of hospitality have a minimal moral component—hospitality is a nice extra if we have the time or the resources, but we rarely view it as a spiritual

²⁹ Mathew Kelly, *The Seven Levels of Intimacy: The Art of Loving and the Joy of Being Loved* (New York: Beacon Publishing, 2005), 247.

obligation or as a dynamic expression of vibrant Christianity.³⁰

I attribute much of the misgivings towards hospitality to the busyness of our culture. Most people are overscheduled and the idea of adding one more thing, especially if it means having to clean your house, prepare a meal, etc. did not cross anyone's mind. It seems there was a time when it was viewed as inconvenient; now it seems like it is rarely considered.

Regarding the theological implication of hospitality, Jerry Shields unpacks several powerful thoughts. First, he sees hospitality as a response to God's welcome. When we internalize the welcome and love given to us by God, we should want to extend that same love to others. Next, he sees hospitality as a form of resistance to "a number of current cultural trends towards individualism, exclusivity, isolationism, and self-protection."³¹ The pandemic will certainly not help this issue, but it does make it clear where we need to start. He goes on in his essay to view hospitality as a new way of thinking and seeing, the creation of space, love in action, and an embodiment of the Kingdom of God. Each of these insights allows the reader to gain a better grasp of the necessity of hospitality to the

³⁰ Christine D. Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1999), 4.

³¹ Jerry Shields, *The Effective Practice of Ministry: Essays in Memory of Charles Siburt*. Tim Sensing, ed. (Abilene, TX: ACU Press, 2013), 174.

lifeblood of the church but also reasons as to why it is a discipline worth reclaiming.

Scripture makes a strong case for focusing on others, opening our homes, sharing a meal and engaging in conversations. Mark Love, Douglas A. Foster, and Randall J. Harris write the following: "The first Christians understood hospitality as an extension of the welcome they received from God through Christ Jesus (Romans 12:1; 13; 15:7)."³² C. Christopher Smith and John Pattison submit "It was so important to the early church that it was a test of character (1 Timothy 5:10) and a requirement for leadership (1 Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:8)."³³ This is another area I hope we can reclaim once the pandemic has passed. C. Christopher Smith and John Pattison warn "The greatest challenges to stability in churches today are hypermobility and individualism."³⁴ As people have been forced to clear their schedules and spend time at home, home improvement projects have soared, gardens have been planted, and families have cooked and eaten at home. Prayerfully, this will lead to opening our homes again and sharing our lives with others. This is a discipline that should be reclaimed. Henri Nouwen claims "If there is any

³² Love, Foster, and Harris, 85.

³³ C. Christopher Smith and John Pattison, *Slow Church: Cultivating Community in the Patient Way of Jesus* (Downer's Grove, IL: IVP Praxis, 2014), 199.

³⁴ Smith and Pattison, 62.

concept worth restoring to its original depth and evocative potential, it is the concept of hospitality."³⁵

If congregational care is to be a priority for our congregation moving forward, hospitality must be an integral part of the solution. Christine Pohl observes, "The practice of hospitality is important for communities as they reach out to others and as they work to strengthen relationships."³⁶ Today's church would benefit from additional models of a more authentic Christian life in which glimpses of the Kingdom can be seen and the promise of the Kingdom embodied. Pohl further expands, "More than words or ideas, the world needs living pictures of what a life of hospitality could look like."³⁷ This is yet another case where leadership can lead the way by modeling hospitality, setting the standard, and raising the level of expectations. It will take time to implement this concept back into our church's way of life. There is much to be said biblically for radical hospitality, but I think this will require baby steps on our part as a congregation.

³⁵ Henri Nouwen, *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life* (New York: Image Books, 1975), 66.

³⁶ Christine D. Pohl, *Living into Community: Cultivating Practices that Sustain Us* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 2012), 160.

³⁷ Christine D. Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1999), 10.

The Cry for Accountability

One theme that seemed to be both spoken and unspoken throughout the process was the need for more accountability. Tim Keller observes "Because it [the church] calls us to holiness, the people of God live in loving bonds of mutual accountability and discipline."³⁸ Much of the reading regarding congregational care speaks of accountability: accountability between shepherds and staff, accountability between leadership and the membership, and accountability between the members themselves. It is also important to note that accountability can be taken to two extremes. Kenneth Boa suggests "The first extreme is lack of accountability before other people. The opposite extreme would be a harsh, authoritarian approach in which accountability is used to pressure people into someone's definition of obedience."³⁹

Related to accountability is the level of expectations on behalf of the leadership. In his book *High Expectations*, Thom Rainer describes how churches with higher membership requirements and expectations grow faster and are more evangelistically effective than those without high expectations.⁴⁰ If expectations and accountability are low, then

³⁸ Keller, 311.

³⁹ Boa, 444.

⁴⁰ Rainer, 172.

it is foolish to assume church members will grow and stretch in their commitment to Christ. As one interviewee observed, "Modeling is not the key component; holding members accountable is key." Clearly articulated expectations must be present for the system to function properly. Another takeaway from the interviews was that while many believe that we have a healthy system in place for accountability- there is little to no follow through.

Fear plays a role in that there are over one hundred churches in El Dorado (eight different congregations on College Avenue alone). Paul tells Timothy in 2 Timothy 1:7 "God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control." Even though it is poor logic, there is a legitimate fear that if accountability is enforced, we will decline in membership and not grow. This is the wrong mindset. Lewis Newbegin writes, "With the exception of Acts, the New Testament writings indicate little interest in numerical growth."⁴¹ As Gary McIntosh puts it, "It is as we invest our life and energy in the pursuit of this ultimate goal [making disciples] that growth will happen on its own accord as a by-product of our investment."⁴² It was clear from the interviews that members are craving accountability. As

⁴¹ Lewis Newbegin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1978), 125.

⁴² Gary L. McIntosh, *One Size Doesn't Fit All; Bringing Out the Best in Any Church Size* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1999), 114.

one interviewee keenly observed, "It may make us a smaller church but a healthier church (if we hold folks accountable)." They want to be missed, checked on, and asked why they were not present at church, Bible class or home group. The way in which it is administered plays a large role in the way accountability is received. Boa emphasizes "Biblical accountability is not a matter of external imposition but of voluntary submission."⁴³

In 2018 I had the opportunity to be a part of a class in which Evertt Huffard presented a white paper that addressed the differences between passive followers, active followers, and leaders. The goal of the paper was to explain a model he calls "LeaderLoop" which intentionally moves people along the process from passive followers to leaders who in turn mentor passive followers and the loop continues. In the paper, Dr. Huffard defined "passive followers" as "someone who is a baptized believer with few, if any, spiritual disciplines; attends a worship service with some regularity; and lacks fellowship with other believers in a small group or Bible class or ministry."⁴⁴ From there congregants move to active followers. Traits of active followers include baptized believers who worship regularly, have a vibrant relationship with God, use their spiritual gifts in at least one area of ministry, follow their

⁴³ Kenneth Boa, 444.

⁴⁴ Evertt W. Huffard, *LeaderLoop*. 3rd draft. (Unpublished paper, 2018), 25.

leaders, and take some responsibility for their brothers and sisters. The next step as part of the loop is the designation of leader. Huffard explains that those in this category are

baptized believers who actively participate in the ministry and worship of the church. They have followers. They have said 'yes' to Jesus and the church but see their role in the mission of God within the community and world. They give sacrificially of their time and resources. They can bear heavy burdens.⁴⁵

The point is progression and helping others along the loop to stretch themselves and accomplish even more for God. As part of the class, we were assigned the task of plugging in our own congregation to see where our membership fell in the loop- see appendix 4 for the breakdown of the College Avenue membership.⁴⁶ Overall, due in large part to our plethora of ministries, over 73% of our membership would be identified as an active follower or leaders. While this is great, there is a lot of room for improvement. Involvement in ministry does not necessarily lead to spiritual growth or intentional congregational care. As part of the progression, congregational care must be woven into the activities that allow members to evolve along the loop. Greg L. Hawkins and Cally Parkinson report "Best-practice churches understand that their attenders need spiritual mirrors, which

⁴⁵ Huffard, 41.

⁴⁶ Appendix 4, 160.

means safe, relational networks that help them navigate the ups and downs of an expanding walk with Christ.”⁴⁷

The Desire for Increased Vulnerability

One of the conclusions of the project is that people want to be more vulnerable and they want the church to be a safe place to be more transparent. The reality is, as John Burke points out, “people will only be as authentic and vulnerable as the most vulnerable among them—usually that means the leader.”⁴⁸ To make congregational care a reality, people must make themselves vulnerable to others and feel like it is safe to do so. Ross Parsley points out,

[Church] is a community of people who share privileges and responsibilities as we learn how to live together in harmony. Church can’t be a place where we feel like a visitor, or somewhere we’re afraid to allow others to see our messes. It’s got to feel like home.⁴⁹

Vulnerability in our worship services, bible classes, and home groups were all topics of discussion. One of the people interviewed shared that his parent’s congregation created an environment called “four corners” that took place every Sunday during the worship service. Four corners is the time each week

⁴⁷ Greg L. Hawkins and Cally Parkinson, *Move: What 1,000 Churches Reveal about Spiritual Growth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 231.

⁴⁸ John Burke, *No Perfect People Allowed: Crating a Come as You Are Culture in the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 82.

⁴⁹ Ross Parsley, *Messy Church: A Multigenerational Mission for God’s Family* (Colorado Springs: David C Cook, 2012), 30.

when a shepherd is located at each of the four corners of the building and for a couple of songs, members are encouraged to pray with a shepherd, reach out to a friend they need to pray with, resolve issues between members, and address any other spiritual heart issues they may be battling that week. This congregation has created an environment where it is acceptable and even encouraged to be vulnerable before God and others.

While we could not accomplish this overnight, it is certainly an attainable goal that would be a step in the right direction as we seek to be more proactive in our approach to authentic congregational care. Ross Parsley suggests,

Acceptance and love are part of the raw and gritty realness of family. Openness and honesty are what's required if the church is to be viable for the next generation. And make no mistake, they are watching, listening, and hoping for the kind of vulnerability and acceptance that will challenge them to be a part of an imperfect yet loving church family.⁵⁰

Vulnerability in our home groups is certainly an area for improvement. While the group's intent over the years has focused on textual studies, there is certainly room for increased emphasis on congregational care, encouragement, and accountability. According to Larry Crabb, "When members of a spiritual community reach a sacred place of vulnerability and

⁵⁰ Parsley, 31.

authenticity, something is released. An appetite for holy things is stirred.”⁵¹ The struggle has been the differing makeup of the groups. There are those who prefer a one-hour highly structured, textual Bible study, and there are those who prefer a few short lead discussion questions and room for the Spirit to guide the discussion. We also build into our program weeks that are devotedly solely to prayer or service. These opportunities lend themselves to organic congregational care as you hear the heartfelt needs of those in attendance and serve alongside them as they put their faith into practice.

The Effect on the Shepherds at College Avenue

There are two lessons I learned through the interviews and my interactions with the shepherds following the interviews. First, this project confirmed the need for the shepherding model. Several years ago, I made a hard push as senior minister to get away from what I would call the administrative model and moved towards a more pastoral model. This was not an easy shift for some, but it was necessary. I went as far as referring to them exclusively as “shepherds” from the pulpit and not “elder” so the congregation would embrace the relationship role more than the authoritative component. I realize both are necessary

⁵¹ Larry Crabb, *The Safest Place on Earth: Where People Connect and are Forever Changed* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1999), 22.

according to scripture. By their own admission, the staff was doing the job of shepherds, shepherds were doing the work of ministry leaders, and most ministry leaders were not feeling equipped or empowered to do much without the close oversight of the elders. Elders' meetings were business meetings and often involved things that could have been handled by competent ministry leaders who were willing to serve.

The shift to a more pastoral approach allowed shepherds to focus on the needs of the flock and empowered ministry leaders to lead in their areas of giftedness. Rather than spending meeting times working on the budget, they became more focused on the flock and the overall direction of the church. Many of them will admit that it is easier to be an administrator than a shepherd, but the results of the project overwhelmingly support the importance of having shepherds who are focused on the needs of the flock, are asking the deeper questions and are holding those in their flocks accountable.

The second lesson I learned regarding shepherds is that we need additional shepherds. Even though the focus on this project was on congregational care and not pastoral care, the role of the shepherd is undeniable. College Avenue Church of Christ has approximately 520 people on the roll. For these members to feel properly cared for and connected, this is a difficult task for

seven men- three of whom have full-time jobs, not to mention families and issues with illness and aging parents and spouses. Additional shepherds would lighten their load and enable them to concentrate on their flocks on a deeper level. This would also allow them to better model what care looks like to the flock.

The Effect of The Project on the Church

Love, Foster and Harris suggest, "The Church expresses its life as the continuation of the ministry of Jesus through the guidance of the Holy Spirit."⁵² This powerful reminder alone should inspire the family of believers to proactively seek ways to better model Christ in a post-Christian culture. The reliance on the Holy Spirit enables the church to see the body of Christ and its mission to the world with fresh eyes. This mindset allows for continuous growth that should transcend the opinions and prevailing rhetoric of the day. However, if we are not vigilant, we can become set in our ways and become blind to the model of Christ and the nudging of the Spirit.

Part of this process is stressing the need for every member to be involved in at least one ministry. Involvement in ministry not only benefits the church but allows the church to care for one another in informal ways. Bob Russell perceives "I'm convinced that people get to know each other more naturally as a

⁵² Love, Foster, and Harris, 72.

by-product of playing sports together or participating in a common activity than if they meet for the specific purpose of relationship building.”⁵³ The bonds that are built while serving are hard to manufacture in any other way. Some of my favorite ministry memories center around what I call “assembly line ministries.” Whether it was sorting school supplies for a local drive or packing lunch sacks to be distributed in the community or clearing a vacant lot, the conversations and memories made are a serendipitous part of the process. The more involved I become in ministry, the greater the opportunity to be a part of one of these unanticipated blessings. Russell continues “Nothing helps you grow as a Christian like service.”⁵⁴

Anytime you point out an area for growth and solicit feedback on the best course of action to improve moving forward you run the risk of offending those who are closest to the system. Despite my best efforts to present the information in an objective manner, it is difficult to not personalize some of the remarks and suggestions. While most comments were complimentary and intended to make a good church better, there were some that seemed to point towards a specific ministry or group of people.

⁵³ Russell, 189.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 178.

The effect of the project is that it raised the issue of congregational care and forced those interviewed as well as the leadership to look closely at the topic and wrestle with the results. This is an area of improvement for our congregation and this project gave members a voice and ownership in the process moving forward. As mentioned previously, College Avenue does not need another ministry; we are highly programmatic. We need to change the climate and the culture of congregational care by being more perceptive and intentional in our approach. Additionally, as Greg Ogden notes, "invitations to programs seem impersonal. An invitation to relationship, by contrast, is experienced very differently."⁵⁵ As humans, we all long to be loved, needed, and appreciated. We can all recall times when we did not feel that way and we must do our best, as disciples of Christ, to ensure other believers under the same roof never feel unloved, unneeded, or unappreciated on our watch. As the apostle Paul writes in his letter to the Galatians, "So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and *especially to those who are of the household of faith.*" (Galatians 6:10)

In their book, *The Come Back Effect*, Jason Young and Jonathan Malm relate the story of the animators who worked on the film, "Who Framed Roger Rabbit?" This pioneering film was

⁵⁵ Ogden, 127.

one of the first to combine cartoon animation with real actors. At a point in the movie the cartoon rabbit bumps a lamp that is turned on and shadows dance across the room. The dilemma was if the shadows would be shown on the cartoon character as well. It would be time consuming and most viewers would not notice the inconsistency. But after much discussion, the animators could not bear the idea of putting out a product that was not their best work. "The scene birthed a phrase in Disney's culture: *bumping the lamp*."⁵⁶ They refer to it any time they want to go the extra mile to make something excellent. Young and Malm contend "Bumping the lamp means rejecting 'just okay' and going above and beyond—even when it's possible nobody will notice the extra effort put into making it excellent."⁵⁷ For too long, our attempts at congregational care have been acceptable but not excellent. I'd like to see us create a culture where we frequently seek to "bump the lamp."

Personal Impact of the Project a.k.a. "The End of Whack-A-Mole Ministry"

My nature is to be a planner and an administrator. In the story of Mary and Martha in Luke 10, I have always identified with Martha. I am task-oriented and thrive off a concise

⁵⁶ Jason Young and Jonathan Malm, *The Come Back Effect: How Hospitality can Compel Your Church's Guests to Return* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2018), 130.

⁵⁷ Young and Malm, 130.

checklist. While this is not all bad, often this can affect the nature of true ministry. Someone once told me sarcastically, "ministry would be easy...if it were not for all the people." They were right. Ministry would be easier if it were all about ministry structures, checklists, and formulas. But the ministry of Christ involved relationships, and the ministry of the Kingdom requires maturing believers who are enmeshed in the lives of others. Jesus engaged those he encountered. Each time one reads the gospels they understand that when Jesus was with someone, they had his undivided attention.

In the busyness of ministry, I lost sight of people and focused more on the programs. I chose this project because I believed this was an area that our congregation (and I as a leader) needed to address. Effective ministry is messy, so those who seek to be like Christ must take the time to engage those in our path and listen. We must shepherd our respective flocks and love our people enough to hold them accountable and ask the deeper and harder questions that develop relationships rather than the obligatory, cursory salutations that overwhelm much of our interaction with fellow believers.

Over the past nineteen years I have been blessed to work with a congregation that saw the value of education and has been

willing to allow me the time to pursue my academic endeavors.
This has come at a cost.

I have been guilty of what I affectionally refer to as
“Whack-A-Mole” ministry. Lexico.com defines “whack-a-mole” as

an arcade game in which players use a mallet to hit toy moles, which appear at random, back into their holes. It is also used with reference to a situation in which attempts to solve a problem are piecemeal or superficial, resulting only in temporary or minor improvement.⁵⁸

Simply put, I responsively deal with those who are in the greatest need at a given time. Having surgery? I am there. Weddings? Funerals? I am your guy.

Several interviewees spoke to how well this congregation responded when they were experiencing boundary events in their lives. This is when they became a priority to me. Those who faithfully attend each Sunday, are active in ministries, and do not need additional attention have not been the priority they should be. It would be easy to blame graduate studies, the busyness of ministry, three active kids, aging parents or several other valid excuses for my lack of modeling quality congregational care. However, the reality is that this project has highlighted what I believed to be true all along...people want to be cared for and checked on even when they are not going

⁵⁸ “Whack-a-mole,” *Lexico*, last modified 2020.,
<https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/whack-a-mole>

through a crisis in their lives. Those interviewed recognized congregation care must be modeled by the leadership and they wanted more interaction and accountability from their leadership.

This congregation has been served a mediocre fare of pastoral and congregation care from me for the past nineteen years. I am eager to devote the rest of my ministry to proactive care that models courting, hospitality, and consistent proactive care. This project represents the culmination of my formal education and the freedom to put into practice what I have learned through my studies and through this project.

Proactive congregation care in 2020 should mirror what we see reflected in the early church in Acts chapter 2 and 4. It embodies the spirit of being a member of the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:12-27) and it takes time to decipher who makes up the family of believers and what role they play in the life of the church. It is time-consuming and it is often messy, but in the end, it is the best way to live out the Kingdom principles we see laid out in the Word and the Will of God. Through the interview process, I rekindled my love and appreciation for relationships that supersede the platitudes and get to the heart of the members at College Avenue, and more importantly, the heart of Christ.

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Appendix 1

Congregational Care Memo

**read during Sunday morning worship (January 24, 2019) prior to the sermon. The statement was approved by the shepherds prior to me reading it.*

When it came time to choose my doctoral project, the question that was posed to each of us individually was, “what do you see as being the greatest need in your congregation?” The goal is to move doctoral students away from dissertations (which hardly anyone ever reads) and on to projects that are practical, relevant and applicable to the candidate’s ministry context. The goal is that if the right project is chosen and is implemented effectively, it will outlast the minister’s tenure with a congregation. After much prayer, discussion, and reflection, I decided that congregational care was the area I needed to focus on here at College Avenue.

We are very outsider-focused, which sounds biblical, but if we aren’t careful, we can neglect those in our church family. Those in our church family include those who do not attend frequently as well as those who do.

College Avenue is a highly programmatic church. We are ministry driven. We have over 40 ministry leaders because we have identified over 40 valuable ministries that minister to our members, our community, and the world. This is a great thing and has served us well in the eyes of the community for many years.

But we also must make sure that we are taking care of our own.

Imagine a large scale. On one end you have a church that is solely focused on insiders. All their ministries focus on “the frozen chosen.” It is all about keeping members happy. Their contribution goes to bigger buildings and ministries that keep themselves comfortable. Little is spent on outreach, missions, and even community benevolence.

On the other end of the scale, there is a church that is so outward focused that they tend to neglect their own members while seeking to be active in the community, “seeker-friendly”, and mission-driven. When this is taken to the extreme, members feel lonely in the pew and often neglected. Focus is on programs and activities rather than on relationships.

I’ve often wondered that if Jesus could write a letter to the church here at College Avenue like what he did with the seven churches of Asia in Revelation 1-3, what would He say? The more I explore this topic the more I believe He would commend us on many things, but He would point to our need for better congregational care and stronger relationships among ourselves as areas of improvement.

It is my belief that we must be vigilant to strike a healthy balance between the two extremes. We do not need to become so inwardly focused that we neglect the commands of Jesus to “go into all the world” and “minister to the least of these” but at the same time we must cultivate and

maintain an atmosphere similar to the early church we read of in Acts 2 and when Paul reminds us not to neglect those who are “of the household of faith.”

This is bigger than 8 shepherds and 4 staff members. My focus is not on pastoral care, but rather on congregational care. The shepherds and staff are part of the congregation and therefore have a role to play, but congregational care is ultimately a membership issue.

Currently, the 8 shepherds have divided up the 219 families (500+ people total) at College Avenue among themselves. While this makes for large flocks, these men have done a great job trying to be more pastoral and less administrative. By empowering ministry leaders, it has and will enable our shepherds to be about the business of shepherding.

Unfortunately, as in life, the squeaky wheel often gets the attention. Often in ministry, our focus has been on those who are going through issues (whether it be health, marriage, loss, etc.) or those who have quit attending for one reason or another. While this is necessary, often those who are overlooked are those who come faithfully week in and week out. Who is checking on them? Don't they need to be checked on as well? I think of a rancher who spends all his time rounding up strays and tending to the sick ones to the neglect of the bulk of the herd (not that y'all are a bunch of cows).

This is where congregational ministry is crucial.

There are things in the works to create a CLIMATE of congregational care. We did not get here overnight, so we will not get out of it overnight. It will require patience and intentionality on all our parts. I don't believe at this point that it will require another ministry or program as much as it will an intentional effort from all to change the CLIMATE of congregational care here at College Avenue.

1. “Check Your Section” is more than a slogan. It is a plea for congregational ministry. It is a call for you to notice who is not around you and to make the effort via text, phone, e-mail, snail mail, or personal visit to check on one another.

We have all fallen into the trap of *assuming* if someone is not here then they are probably out of town or at the lake and we fail to check on each other. This is an area in which can all improve.

But even this is not enough. This helps with those who are not here, but it doesn't help with those who feel lonely in the pew each Sunday.

We are all creatures of habit. We tend to have our section and our pew that we migrate to each Lord's Day. Even though it would mess up the “check your section” idea, prayerfully consider moving sections and getting to know different folks better.

We have all heard the stories of folks who were asked to move because they were “sitting in someone else's pew” and this church is not immune. Consider finding a new pew.

2. We are currently in the process of revamping our Wednesday evening structure to offer more classes for adults, potentially a meal, and go back to meeting as a church family the first 15 minutes to encourage fellowship, community, encouragement, and accountability. This will also

involve more members in the service for song leading, prayers, and brief devotional thoughts (even our youth and younger children). Our prayer is that this will not only increase our attendance on Wednesday evening but more importantly it will foster a greater sense of community among our own folks. This currently involves ministry leaders over women, adult education, hospitality, youth, children, and assembly management in addition to the shepherds and staff.

3. The staff and shepherds have been and are being more intentional about the level of pastoral care being offered. This is a work in progress, but I am proud of the progress that has been made.

4. Home groups and Bible classes are crucial to congregational care. This is where you hear the hearts of our church members in a way that you cannot in Sunday morning corporate worship. I **strongly encourage** you to plug into a Bible class and a home group and pay close attention to the prayer requests being made and then follow up on them throughout the week. This is a part of pastoral care, but it is also the responsibility of the congregation as well.

5. If you aren't already doing so, get plugged in to a ministry. This is a great place to nurture relationships. I have been a part of the Meat Eaters Men's Bible study on Wednesday mornings for the past 4 years and I have really enjoyed getting to know those guys on a deeper level through the discussions before and during class. Relationships are being established and deepened.

*We had a couple, years ago, who left College Avenue because they did not come for a long time and no one checked on them. To be clear, we should have checked on them and I, for one, dropped the ball. But when they were attending, they never attended bible class, never plugged into a home group, and did not participate in any of the ministries we offer. They had not worked on building relationships and when they stopped coming it took a while for people to notice. Again, I should have noticed sooner, but it requires effort on both ends.

6. Don't come immediately to your seat on Sunday mornings and have a seat. Put your stuff down and then go mingle. Check on folks you know and introduce yourself to those you do not. Also, stick around after church for a minute. Check on folks, make guests feel welcome, and maybe have lunch with someone you don't see as much and strengthen that relationship.

7. Practice hospitality. Have folks into your home or find ways to get to know folks outside of these church walls.

I need to say here that I do not believe that anyone comes to church with the intention of ignoring church members and not making members feel welcome. I believe we are easily distracted and get lost in our own worlds and this is a byproduct of that. But the damage is the same.

By show of hands...who has ever felt lonely in the pew at College Avenue on a Sunday morning? Who has ever missed a couple of Sundays and no one followed up to check on you? I'm asking all of us to be a part of the solution.

I'll close with this...as I said at the beginning, this is my doctoral project, so I am deeply passionate about it. Not just for the grade or for the title to come but because (as I said at the beginning) I believe this is an area where our church needs to grow. And listening to several of you over the past couple of weeks, many of you agree with me.

Having said that, I would love to sit down with you and hear your thoughts and ideas. You won't hurt my feelings if you have felt frustrated or neglected. You are not alone. I love this church family and will do all in my power (with the Lord's help) to lead us in a way that is healthy to both insiders and outsiders. It does not have to be either/or.

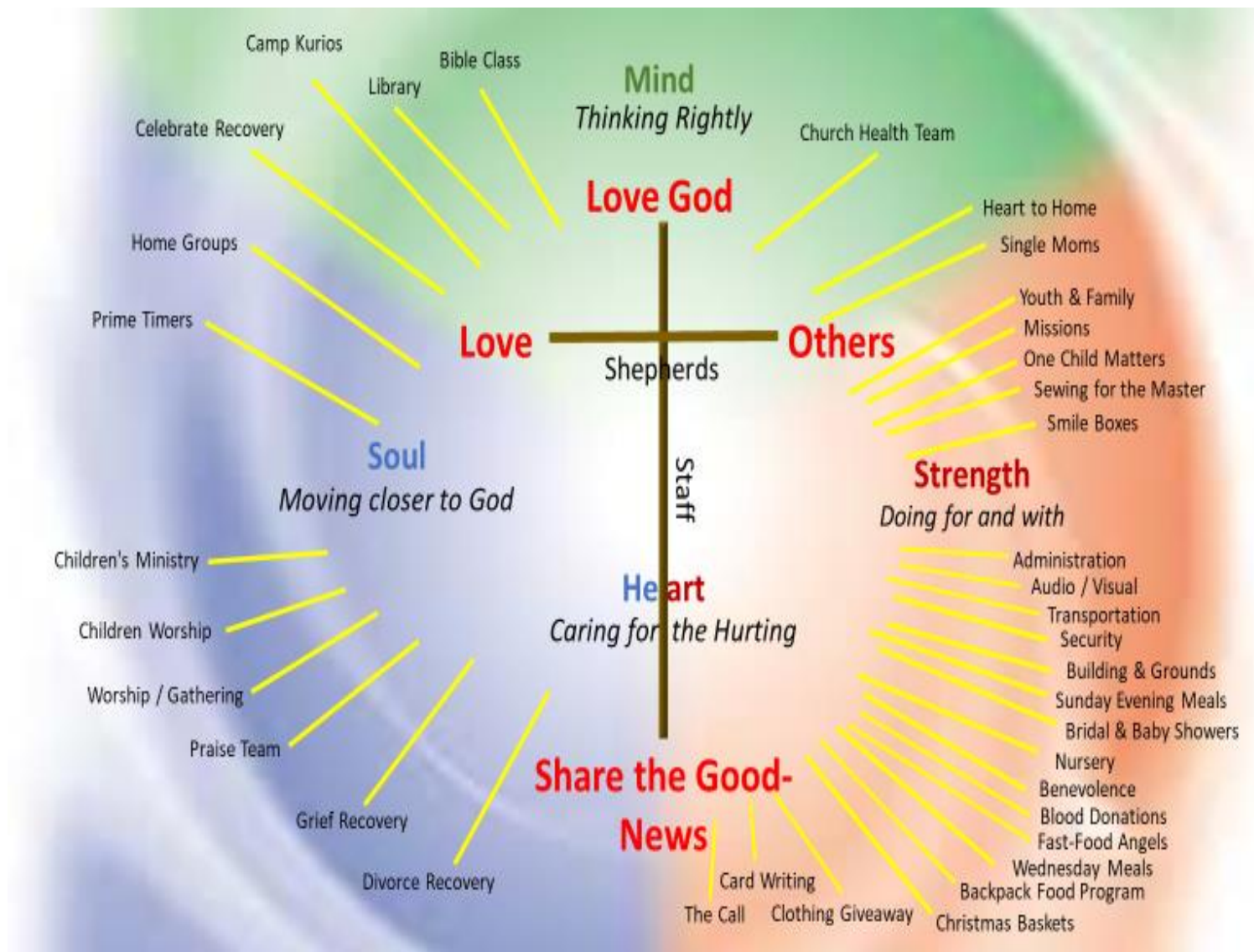
Appendix 2

Breakdown of College Avenue Church of Christ who placed
membership between 2010-2019

	Deceased	Moved	Left	Inactive	Active	Total
2010		6	1		7	14
2011	2	6			6	14
2012	2	11	1	2	8	24
2013		3			9	12
2014	2	5		2	6	15
2015		3	1	3	8	15
2016		2			9	11
2017		3		3	5	11
2018		1		2	11	14
2019					7	7
Totals	6	40	3	12	76	137

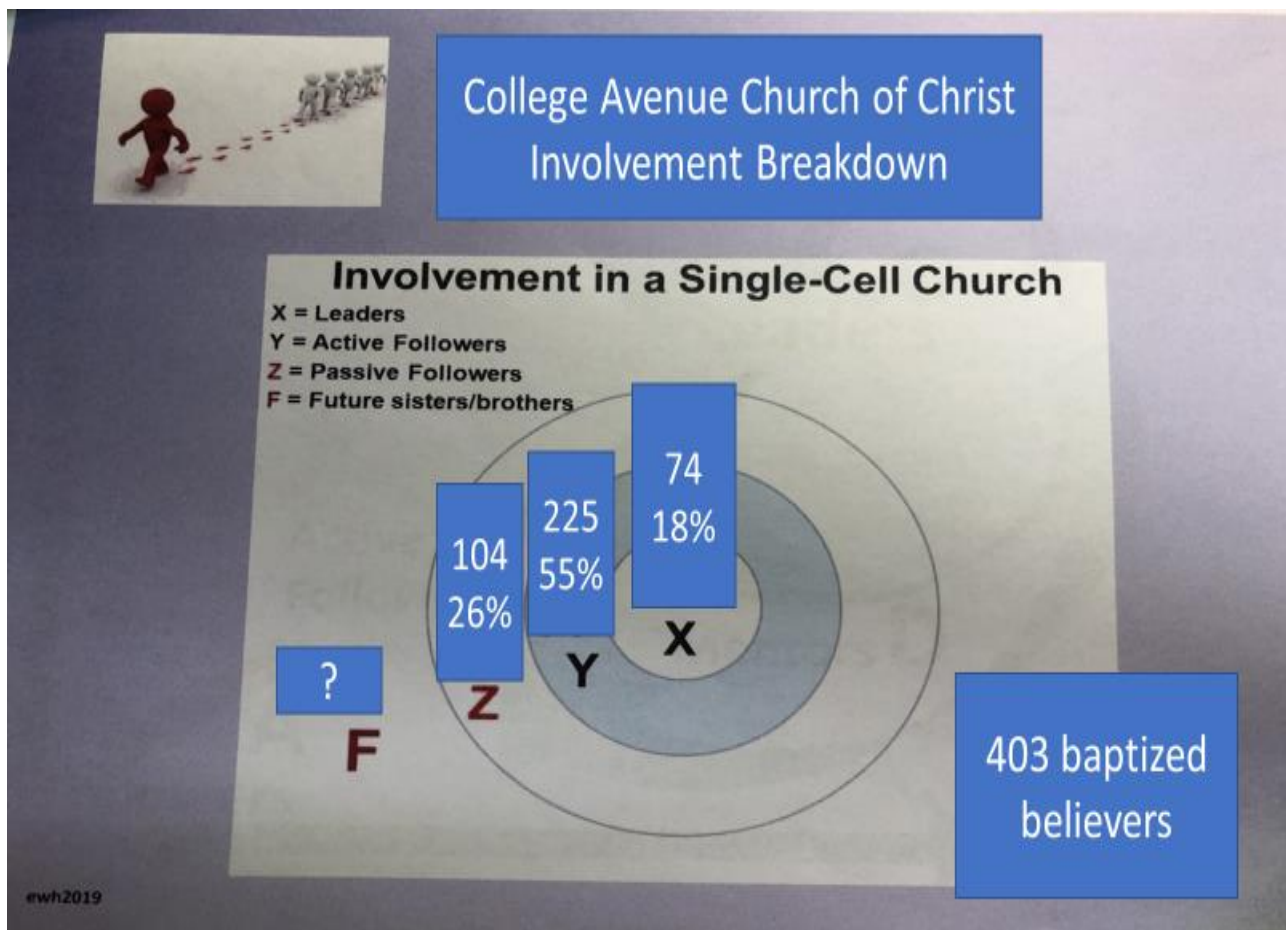
Appendix 3

**College Avenue Church of Christ Ministry Map utilizing the NCD
(Natural Church Development) format**



Appendix 4

Leadership Loop Breakdown of the College Avenue Church of Christ



Appendix 5

Ministry Inventory Form for College Avenue

College Avenue Family of Believers Ministry Inventory Form



"They first gave of themselves" - 2 Corinthians 8:5

"Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others" - 1 Peter 4:10

"The whole body...grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work" - Ephesians 4:12

MINISTRY	I would be willing to DO this	I would like to RECEIVE TRAINING for this
BLOOD DRIVE (<i>ministry leader- Mark Moore</i>)		
Coordinate with Life Share- liaison with their personnel during collection	_____	_____
Set up/cleanup church facilities after the drive	_____	_____
Assist in recruiting donors	_____	_____
CASA MATERNA (<i>ministry leader- Maria Morin</i>)		
Assist in collecting and sorting baby items	_____	_____
Assist in laundering items, if needed	_____	_____
Assist in sorting items by age	_____	_____
Assist in packing items	_____	_____
CELEBRATE RECOVERY (<i>ministry leader- Gary Schloemer</i>)		
Security for our CR group night (Tuesday)	_____	_____
Celebration Place staff- Kid's class time	_____	_____
Landings staff- teen classes	_____	_____
Help with Bible studies in the recovery community	_____	_____
Maintain the CR informational material in the FLC	_____	_____
Help with meals on CR group nights	_____	_____
Supply sweets for CR fellowship nights	_____	_____
Be a friendly face for CR people	_____	_____
CHILDRENS MINISTRY (<i>ministry leader- Jonathan "Coach" Holland</i>)		
Serve on KidMin Steering Committee	_____	_____
Serve in the after school tutoring program	_____	_____
Host an event	_____	_____
Work with Children's Program during Sunday am worship	_____	_____
Work with Carnival in the Park	_____	_____
Work with Kid's Camp (Kurios)	_____	_____
Work with Junior Week (Kurios)	_____	_____
Help pick up children for class (Sundays)	_____	_____
Help pick up children for class (Wednesdays)	_____	_____
Teach a Children's Bible Class on Sunday mornings	_____	_____

Teach a Children's Bible Class on Wednesday evenings	_____	_____
Serve as a substitute teacher in Children's classes on Sunday mornings	_____	_____

MINISTRY	I would be willing to DO this	I would like to RECEIVE TRAINING for this
----------	----------------------------------	---

CHILDREN'S MINISTRY (continued)

Serve as a substitute teacher in Children's classes on Wednesday evenings	_____	_____
Serve as an assistant teacher in Children's classes on Sunday mornings	_____	_____
Serve as an assistant teacher in Children's classes on Wednesday evenings	_____	_____
Serve as a Bible Teacher's assistant for those with special needs.	_____	_____
Teach on the "at a moment's notice" list	_____	_____

CHURCH COMPLEX/BUILDINGS (*ministry leader- Roy Duncan*)

Light electrical work (changing bulbs, ballast, light fixtures, plugs, and switches)	_____	_____
Light plumbing (repair toilets, sinks, outside faucets)	_____	_____
Painting and repair of walls, ceilings, and window facings	_____	_____
Set up & reset Annex for individuals and organizations that use the Annex for meetings	_____	_____
Carpenter work as needed	_____	_____
Yard work as needed (landscaping, mowing, etc.)	_____	_____

CLOTHING GIVEAWAY (*ministry leader- Brandie Reynolds*)

Sort clothes during the week of the giveaway	_____	_____
Pick up donations from Rhea Lana	_____	_____
Put out/pick up yard signs advertising the giveaway	_____	_____
Follow up with contacts made during the giveaway	_____	_____
Help in the Kid's Zone	_____	_____
Help during the giveaway	_____	_____
Help clean up after the giveaway	_____	_____
Help maintain the "clothes closet" throughout the year	_____	_____

COMPUTER, AUDIO, AND SOUND SYSTEMS (*ministry leader- David Wilhelm*)

Work the sound booth during Sunday morning worship	_____	_____
Work the sound booth for funerals/special events (this position is paid)	_____	_____
Perform computer software updates/maintenance	_____	_____
Perform computer hardware updates/maintenance	_____	_____

MINISTRY	I would be willing to DO this	I would like to RECEIVE TRAINING for this
EDUCATION MINISTRY (<i>ministry leader- Greg Humphreys</i>)		
<i>(For Children's opportunities, see Coach)</i>		
Count Bible class attendance and/or worship (Sun.)	_____	_____
Count Bible class attendance and/or worship (Wed.)	_____	_____
Help Maintain the Resource and Work Rooms	_____	_____
Help Organize the Teacher Appreciation Breakfast	_____	_____
Prepare bulletin boards and or visual aids	_____	_____
Promote Bible School through calls/postcards	_____	_____
Serve as a care coordinator in a Bible Class	_____	_____
Serve on the Education Committee	_____	_____
Teach an Adult Bible Class on Sunday mornings	_____	_____
Teach as part of a rotation (3 to 4 times) in a ¼ (Sun.)	_____	_____
Teach an Adult Bible Class on Wednesday evenings	_____	_____
Teach as part of a rotation (3 to 4 times) in a ¼ (Wed.)	_____	_____
Serve as a substitute teacher in Adult classes on Sunday mornings	_____	_____
Serve as a substitute teacher in Adult classes on Wednesday evenings	_____	_____
Teach on the "at a moment's notice" list	_____	_____
CONGREGATIONAL CARE MINISTRY (<i>ministry leader- Kent Jobe</i>)		
Visit hospitals, nursing homes, and/or shut ins	_____	_____
Write cards to people (encouragement, bereavement, those not attending, etc.)	_____	_____
EXTERNAL (RENTAL) PROPERTIES (<i>ministry leader- David Coleman</i>)		
Light electrical work (changing bulbs, ballast, light fixtures, plugs, and switches)	_____	_____
Light plumbing (repair toilets, sinks, outside faucets)	_____	_____
Painting and repair of walls, ceilings, and window facings	_____	_____
Carpenter work as needed	_____	_____
Yard work as needed (landscaping, mowing, etc.)	_____	_____
FAST FOOD ANGELS (<i>ministry leaders- Cathy Meadow/Cherie Simpson</i>)		
Willing to help prepare meals to be frozen that can be used to help families in need at a moment's notice	_____	_____

MINISTRY	I would be willing to DO this	I would like to RECEIVE TRAINING for this
FINANCE MINISTRY (<i>ministry leaders- Jonathan Reynolds/Alan Meadows</i>)		
Count offering	_____	_____
Write checks	_____	_____
Approve invoices	_____	_____
Serve on the Finance committee	_____	_____
Audit financial statements	_____	_____
FIRST IMPRESSIONS MINISTRY (<i>ministry leader-Judy Ward</i>)		
Serve as a host/hostess in the Welcome Center	_____	_____
Serve as a worship greeter (on a rotation)	_____	_____
Serve as a parking lot greeter (on a rotation-as weather permits)	_____	_____
FOSTER FAMILIES AND CHILDREN (<i>ministry leader- Karen Langston</i>)		
Opening my home to foster children	_____	_____
Provide dinner for an existing foster home	_____	_____
Provide yard care & maintenance for a foster home	_____	_____
Sponsor a foster child for birthday or Christmas	_____	_____
Provide childcare during support groups	_____	_____
Open your home to provide temporary care for foster children	_____	_____
Provide school supplies for a foster family	_____	_____
Provide simple home maintenance for a foster/adoptive home	_____	_____
Serve as church rep for the CALL	_____	_____
Host trainings for new foster families	_____	_____
Provide dinner for monthly support groups	_____	_____
Mentor a foster family	_____	_____
GRIEF RECOVERY (<i>ministry leader- Jenny Duncan</i>)		
Co-lead the ministry	_____	_____
Male willing to attend when a male from the community attends the class	_____	_____
HOME GROUP MINISTRY (<i>ministry leader- Kent Jobe</i>)		
Serve as a Home Group leader	_____	_____
Serve as a Home Group co-leader	_____	_____
Serve as a Home Group host home	_____	_____
HOSPITALITY (<i>ministry leader- Lea Thomasson</i>)		
Organize a Sunday evening meal 3 to 4 times a year	_____	_____
Help with a Sunday evening meal 3 to 4 times a year	_____	_____
Organize a Wednesday night meal 3 to 4 times a year	_____	_____
Help with a Wednesday night meal 3 to 4 times a year	_____	_____
Help with preparing/serving special event meals	_____	_____

as needed or available		
Help prepare or serve meals for funerals as needed or available _____		
MINISTRY	I would be willing to DO this	I would like to RECEIVE TRAINING for this
LIBRARY MINISTRY (<i>ministry leaders- Tammy Henson/Maria Morin</i>)		
Prepare books for entering in system	_____	_____
Assist in entering books in system	_____	_____
Maintain card catalog	_____	_____
Maintain the card rack	_____	_____
MARKETING/PROMOTIONS (<i>ministry leader- Magen Olive</i>)		
Graphic Design	_____	_____
Social Media	_____	_____
Advertising	_____	_____
Event Marketing	_____	_____
Website Upkeep	_____	_____
MEN'S MINISTRIES (<i>ministry leaders- John David Turbeville</i>)		
Help organize men's outings	_____	_____
Help cook for events	_____	_____
Present a short devo at a men's function	_____	_____
Help with dinner for those who read the complete Bible in a year	_____	_____
Help plan a retreat for men of some type (camping or fishing trips, etc.)	_____	_____
Help establish a mentoring program through the Boys and Girls Club	_____	_____
MEN'S WORSHIP LEADERSHIP (<i>ministry leader- Paul Choate</i>)		At a moment's notice
Read Scripture	_____	_____
Lead Opening Prayer	_____	_____
Lead Closing Prayer	_____	_____
Preside over Communion	_____	_____
Serve Communion	_____	_____
Lead Singing on Wednesday Night	_____	_____
Present a "short" devo during the "242" Sunday evening format	_____	_____
Present a "short" Wed. Devo.	_____	_____
MISSIONS (<i>ministry leader- Jason Olive</i>)		
Communicate with missionaries	_____	_____
Serve on the missions committee	_____	_____
Organize and lead a short-term mission trip	_____	_____

MINISTRY	I would be willing to DO this	I would like to RECEIVE TRAINING for this
NURSERY MINISTRIES (<i>ministry leader- Tina Newsom</i>)		
Assist in Baby Nursery (in a rotation) birth-18 mo.	_____	_____
Assist in Toddler Nursery (in a rotation) 19 mo.-36 mo.	_____	_____
Work in the Nursery during Sunday Evening ("242")	_____	_____
Willing to fill in last minute as a nursery worker	_____	_____
OCCASIONAL OFFICE SUPPORT (<i>ministry leader- Debby Stevenson</i>)		
Answer phones/take messages	_____	_____
Assist in updating the pictorial directory	_____	_____
Photography for church events	_____	_____
Help prepare mail-outs for bulletin/ministry projects	_____	_____
Process Ministry Inventory Forms	_____	_____
OUTREACH MINISTRY (<i>ministry leader- Gary Schloemer</i>)		
Assist with evangelistic home Bible studies	_____	_____
Serve in a program to assist the needy	_____	_____
Provide meals to hand out to the needy	_____	_____
Invite my friends and neighbors to church	_____	_____
Make follow-up phone calls/send notes to worship guests	_____	_____
Help distribute flyers in neighborhood	_____	_____
Invite visitors out to lunch following church	_____	_____
Have new members in my home for a meal	_____	_____
"Adopt" a new family that has placed membership	_____	_____
Serve as a Friend Day Ambassador (make follow up calls to guests)	_____	_____
Serve at a church "event" focused on guests	_____	_____
PRAISE TEAM (<i>ministry leader- Jason Baker</i>)		
Sing on the Praise Team	_____	_____
Sing at funerals if needed	_____	_____
PRAYER MINISTRY (<i>ministry leader- Jack Baumgardner/Jack & Jane Reynolds</i>)		
Pray for the preacher, lesson, and congregation during the am worship	_____	_____
Pray for the sick, bereaved, and special needs during the am worship	_____	_____
Be available to pray for those on the weekly "church alert"	_____	_____
Be available to go (from time to time) and pray for and with individuals and families when the need arises	_____	_____
Maintain a diligent prayer life myself	_____	_____
Help teach others how to pray	_____	_____
Help others understand the power of prayer	_____	_____

MINISTRY	I would be willing to DO this	I would like to RECEIVE TRAINING for this
PRIME TIMERS MINISTRY (<i>ministry leader- Belinda Brown</i>)		
Drive the van and/or People Mover (people mover requires a CDL)	_____	_____
Make phone calls	_____	_____
Send notes or cards	_____	_____
Visit hospitals, nursing homes, and/or shut ins	_____	_____
Provide a meal	_____	_____
Help co-lead the ministry	_____	_____
SECURITY MINISTRY (<i>ministry leader- Jeff Stinson</i>)		
Lock up buildings after services on Sun. and/or Wed. (on a rotation basis)	_____	_____
Secure buildings during services and events	_____	_____
Maintain security in Nursery area via walk-bys, camera monitoring, etc.	_____	_____
Check building exteriors and parking lots when needed	_____	_____
Provide security for special events at church when requested.	_____	_____
SEWING FOR THE MASTER (<i>ministry leaders- Cathy Meadows/Cherie Simpson</i>)		
Work with Sewing for the Master (sewing)	_____	_____
Work with Sewing for the Master (non-sewing)	_____	_____
SMILE BOXES (<i>ministry leaders- Tammy Henson/Maria Morin</i>)		
Assist with buying or ordering items for smile boxes	_____	_____
Assist in sorting and inventory of items	_____	_____
Assist in getting boxes ready for shipping	_____	_____
SPECIAL EVENTS MINISTRY (<i>ministry leader- Gary Anzalone</i>)		
Help decorate for Christmas party	_____	_____
Help in the kitchen during special events	_____	_____

MINISTRY	I would be willing to DO this	I would like to RECEIVE TRAINING for this
TRANSPORTATION (<i>ministry leader- Mark Moore</i>)		
Assist with maintaining church-owned vehicles	_____	_____
Wash/clean vehicles	_____	_____
Refuel	_____	_____
Arrange for periodic maintenance, oil change, tires, etc.	_____	_____
Drive for church-related functions (people mover requires a CDL)	_____	_____
Drive van to pick up home bound guests on Sunday morning	_____	_____
 WIDOWS/WIDOWERS MINISTRY (<i>ministry leader- Rhonda Rudder</i>)		
Help with quarterly widows/widowers' meal		
"Adopt" a widow/widower and maintain their specific needs	_____	_____
Handyman chores	_____	_____
Carry to doctor	_____	_____
Shopping	_____	_____
Visitation	_____	_____
Cards, phone calls	_____	_____
Prayer	_____	_____
Carry to dinner or include in family activities, etc.	_____	_____
Help from shepherds to determine "needs" status regarding church assistance	_____	_____
Assist with annual review of widow's list and status of each	_____	_____
 WOMEN'S MINISTRIES (<i>ministry leader- Susan Turbeville</i>)		
Help teach a Wed. Night ladies class (for 1 qtr.)	_____	_____
Assist with Ladies Fellowship Banquet	_____	_____
Assist with Ladies Retreat	_____	_____
Write articles for the Ladies Blog	_____	_____
Participate in the Heart to Home ministry	_____	_____
Host a small group of women in your home	_____	_____
Pray for other women in trouble	_____	_____
Plan a ladies night gathering	_____	_____
Prepare Communion Bread	_____	_____
 WORLD BIBLE SCHOOL (<i>ministry leader- Bret Garrett</i>)		
Be a study help through computer/online correspondence	_____	_____
Be a study help through mail correspondence	_____	_____

MINISTRY

I would be willing
to DO thisI would like to
RECEIVE TRAINING
for thisYOUTH MINISTRY (*ministry leader- Jason Baker*)

Host a Devotional in your home

Speak at a Devotional

Assist with Spring Youth Retreat

Drive the van or people mover on trips

(people mover requires CDL)

Chaperone in-town youth trips

Chaperone out of town youth trips (Spring Break, youth rallies)

Mentor for student/small group of students

Teach a Sunday morning class

Teach a Wednesday night class

Work at Camp Kurios (Junior Week)

Work at Camp Kurios (Senior Week)

Serve on the Youth Council

House teens for in town mission trip

Here are some other ways I would be willing to serve that is not currently listed...

Name _____ Home Phone _____

Cell Phone _____

Street Address _____

City/Zip _____

E-Mail Address _____ (will not be shared)

Rev. 5/19



Appendix 6

Consent Form for Interviews

Introduction: My name is Kent Jobe, and I am a doctoral student at Harding School of Theology conducting an ethnographic study for my final dissertation project. My telephone number is (870) 918-2740. My professor/research supervisor is Dr. Carlus Gupton and his phone number is (901) 432-7724. You may contact either of us at any time if you have questions about this study.

Purpose: The purpose of this research is to study the practice of proactive congregational care at the College Avenue Church of Christ. The goal is to assess the responses and find ways to improve the climate of how members care for one another.

Procedure: If you consent, you will be asked several questions in an oral interview that will take place in your home or at the church office. I will be recording the conversation for research purposes.

Time Required: The interview will take approximately 1-2 hours.

Voluntary participation: Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. If you choose to participate, you may still refuse to answer any question that you do not wish to answer.

Risks: There are no known risks associated with this interview. However, it is possible that you may feel distress in the course of the conversation. If this occurs, please inform me promptly.

Benefits: While there is no guaranteed benefit, it is possible that you will enjoy sharing your answers to these questions or that you will find the conversation meaningful. This study is intended to benefit the congregation by enlivening our discourse on the theology and practice of congregational care.

Confidentiality/Anonymity: Your name will be kept confidential in all of the reporting and/or writing related to this study. I will be the only person present for the interview and the only person who listens to the recordings. When I write the report, I will use pseudonyms—made up names—for all participants, unless you specify in writing that you wish to be identified by name.

If you wish to choose your own pseudonym for the study, please indicate the first name you would like for me to use for you here:

Sharing the Results: I plan to construct a report—a written account of what I learn—based on these interviews together with my reading and historical research. This report will be submitted to my professor at the end of the term.

I also plan to share what I learn from this study with the congregation. Portions of the report may be printed and made available to the members.

Publication: There is a possibility that I will publish this study or refer to it in published writing in the future. In this event, I will continue to use pseudonyms (as described above) and I may alter some identifying details in order to further protect your anonymity.

Before you sign: By signing below, you are agreeing to a recorded interview for this research study. Be sure that any questions you may have are answered to your satisfaction. If you agree to participate in this study, a copy of this document will be given to you.

Participant's signature: _____ **Date:** _____

Print Name: _____

Researcher's signature: _____ **Date:** _____

Print Name: _____

-adapted from Mochella, 96-97

Appendix 7

Interview Questions

REMINDER: All interviewees are confidential, and their responses will be reported anonymously.

1. If you did not grow up in El Dorado, what brought you to El Dorado, Arkansas?
2. Tell me about how you came to Christ. What is your faith journey?
3. What brought you to the College Avenue Church of Christ?
4. What was your first impression? Is there any specific person, experience or ministry that stands out in your decision to make College Avenue your church home?
5. If someone in the community were to ask you to describe our church, what words would you use?
6. In what ways have you become involved with the College Avenue Church of Christ since you became a member?
7. What do you view as your unique talents and gifts? How are you using these gifts and talents at College Avenue?
8. When have you felt most a part of the College Avenue family?
9. When have you felt least a part of the College Avenue family?
10. On a scale from 1-10, how important is congregational care (care for members) to the overall health of the church body?
11. On a scale from 1-10, how would you rate College Avenue in relation to congregational care (how well do we take care of our own members)?
12. What do you envision to be the ideal way to conduct congregational care for our congregation?

13. What are some ways you think we as a congregation could improve on the score you gave?
14. What role do you think leadership plays (shepherds, staff, and ministry leaders) in improving congregational care?
15. What role do you think members play in improving congregational care?
16. Is there anything else you would like to share that would be helpful in improving the quality of congregation care here at College Avenue?