

Lancaster Theological Seminary

**When Did We See You Hungry: Saving the Church
by Serving the World**

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in Candidacy for the Degree of
Doctor of Ministry

by

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When Did We See You Hungry: Saving the Church by Serving the World
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Abstract

Predominantly white churches tend to engage in transactional ministry with people living in poverty; giving food, clothing, bus passes, and Christmas presents, or paying utility bills from the confines of their church buildings. At the same time churches are taking this transactional approach, “none” is the fastest growing religion in the United States marking the church’s ongoing decline. In this work we: a) hear from predominantly white congregations’ leaders in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania about how they and their congregations see their work with people living in poverty, b) engage in a theological dialogue with multiple researchers on what the Bible has to say about poverty in Deuteronomy, Ruth, the Prophets, and the Parables of Jesus, c) examine two current movements to get congregations out of their buildings and into their communities, d) look at the relational models that have influenced my secular work in poverty, and e) hear from two leaders in African American and Latino churches about how they engage with people living in poverty. Finally, incorporating elements from all these touchpoints, I lay out a path for church leaders to move their churches to relational models with people living in poverty, not to play the role of “Good Samaritan,” but because the church itself is in need of saving and has much to learn in and from the neighborhoods and communities it generally avoids.

Dedication

Dedicated to my wife and children
my grandparents and
my mother

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Foreword: I Was Hungry

I wasn't always a Christian. I managed to reach my twenty-first birthday without ever regularly attending any church. By that time, I could count on one hand the number of times I'd gone to church or a youth group function with a friend. It was foreign territory for me. There was always an explicit note of recruitment and pressure to each visit that ensured it was once and done.

At twenty-one, though, my life had hit a rough patch. I had been a college dropout for over two years. I was working as a laborer for a particularly unethical home remodeling contractor. My wages were six dollars per hour "under the table": no unemployment or social security, no benefits. I was handed cash every Friday.

Work on any job site started promptly at 8:00 a.m. and ended at sundown. In the summer months that meant hard, physical labor for twelve to thirteen hours per day. At the end of every shift my body hurt. It wasn't long before I found myself drinking every day after work to dull the pain.

The tragic part of that behavior was that I knew better. There are multiple alcoholics and substance abusers in my family. My stepfather was one of them and had subjected my family to ten years of domestic violence before abandoning my mother, my sisters, and me to homelessness and poverty. I knew where the path I was on would lead, but I was walking it anyway.

At perhaps my lowest point, I got a call from a friend from high school. The Presbyterian church a block from my apartment was looking for men to audition for a production of *Godspell*. I had been involved in musical theater throughout high school, and even though I hadn't

performed in years, I missed it. I remember sitting in my slum apartment and thinking that my days had become a numbing pattern of work and drinking with nothing in between. I agreed to audition.

As fate would have it, I got a part in the musical. Instead of drinking after work I went to rehearsals. Instead of partying on the weekends, I went to rehearsals. I kept waiting for someone to pitch me on joining the church, which would have likely sent me running for the hills. Instead, the other people in the production became my friends, accepting me as they found me, and not asking for anything in return.

When the production was over, I ended up attending the church on my own without being asked. What I found there was life changing. The First Presbyterian Church of Clayton, New Jersey was filled with surrogate brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles, parents, and grandparents who also took me as I was and asked nothing from me. They surrounded me with love and encouragement and countless examples of life lived well. It wasn't long before I joined the church and was baptized.

One of my brothers in the church happened to work in admissions at the local community college. He encouraged me to apply. In 1988, right after graduating from high school, I had attended Rutgers Camden with a full Martin Luther King Jr. scholarship before dropping out after one semester. The itch to finish what I'd started was growing strong, stoked in no small part by the people who surrounded and supported me at church.

I applied and was accepted at Gloucester County College in 1992. In 1994 I graduated with honors and awards and applied to Rowan College, from which I graduated with honors in 1996. Three years later I attended Lancaster Theological Seminary where I earned my Master of

Arts in Religion degree in 2003, and where I'm now completing my Doctor of Ministry degree with the very act of writing this work.

During the seventeen years between my seminary degrees, I built a career fighting poverty and protecting vulnerable populations that saw me helping a city make real reductions in its poverty rate, testifying before Congress about innovations in reducing poverty, and becoming the first Executive Director of Governor Tom Wolf's PA Office of Advocacy and Reform where I had the opportunity to write the state's *Trauma-Informed PA* plan. Most importantly, during that time I was involved in initiatives that changed and even saved people's lives in provable, documented ways.

I worked hard. I was driven to fight the forces of poverty and trauma that continue to devastate my family to this very day. Even so, none of my life's accomplishments would have been likely to happen if not for a small church in a small town, and a few dozen people who somehow instinctively knew how to be in relationship with a poor, young, Latino teetering on the edge of alcoholism and despair. Whether they knew it or not, through an unconditional relationship grounded in love, those people set me on the path that led to the work you're reading today. They saw me hungry, in so many ways, and they fed me. This work, focused on the church adopting a theologically focused, relational model of engagement with those living in poverty in its communities, is the fruit of their love.

Chapter One: There Was a Rich Man

American Christianity is in decline and I have come to believe that only deep, meaningful relationships between the church and people and communities struggling with poverty can save it. According to the Pew Research Center's *U.S. Religious Landscape Survey*, in 2008 16.1 percent of people identified themselves as unaffiliated. By their 2018 survey, that segment of the population had risen to 22.8 percent.¹ That's over one in five Americans identifying as "Nones."

In an April 2019 Gallup article titled, *U.S. Church Membership Down Sharply in Past Two Decades*, author Jeffrey M. Jones states, "The past 20 years have seen an acceleration in the drop-off, with a 20- percentage-point decline since 1999 and more than half of that change occurring since the start of the current decade.... On average, 69 percent of U.S. adults were members of a church in 1998-2000, compared with 52 percent in 2016-2018."²

The evidence is alarming. Why this precipitous drop in religious identity and church attendance? Perhaps the best way to determine what's happening lies in the opinions of those who've left the church behind.

In *Choosing Our Religion: The Spiritual Lives of America's Nones*, Elizabeth Drescher interviews the growing number of the unaffiliated to determine their reasons for being unaffiliated and their spiritual practices. Her assessment paints a grim picture for the future of the church as we know it. "All of the numbers tell us that if the unaffiliated gathered into a formal

¹ "U.S. Religious Landscape Survey: Religious Beliefs and Practices," *Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project* (blog), June 1, 2008, <https://www.pewforum.org/2008/06/01/u-s-religious-landscape-survey-religious-beliefs-and-practices/>.

² Gallup Inc, "U.S. Church Membership Down Sharply in Past Two Decades," Gallup.com, April 18, 2019, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/248837/church-membership-down-sharply-past-two-decades.aspx>.

religious organization, it would be larger than any Protestant denomination and all Mainline Protestant denominations combined.”³

As it turns out, the majority of the unaffiliated were once very much affiliated:

I’d been talking about the percentage of the unaffiliated—nearly three-quarters—who were raised in families with some religious affiliation, generally in a Christian denomination. The exodus is most pronounced among Protestants. Some 44 percent of Nones were raised in a Protestant tradition; 27 percent were raised as Roman Catholics. Among Protestant denominations, progressive Protestant denominations (Disciples of Christ, Episcopalian, United Church of Christ) are tied in the percentage of their contributions to the ranks of the unaffiliated: 20 percent of young people raised in each of these traditions become unaffiliated as adults. The losses are only slightly lower for Nondenominational Protestants at 19 percent. Among those raised as Roman Catholics, 14 percent become Nones, but their larger population overall, along with that of more conservative Protestant denominations, means that numerically more Nones come from Catholic and Evangelical backgrounds than from Mainline Protestant traditions....⁴

In other words, it isn’t that these unaffiliated people are coming out of nowhere. Many of them are leaving the church. This is backed up by Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell who assert based on the statistics that, “most of the nones must have been raised as ‘somethings.’”⁵

From book titles to articles, you have only to do a Google search to see the church’s decline is much discussed. The article and book titles are telling. Robert P. Jones’ provocatively titled *The End of White Christian America* goes even further when he draws his conclusion:

The death of White Christian America marks the end of an era in the nation’s life. For many, it is a cause for considerable grief; for others, relief or even celebration. But this much is clear: in the soil fertilized by White Christian America’s remains, new life is taking root.⁶

What does that new life look like? Are there hints within it for where the church itself should go if it is to survive, or even thrive into the future?

³ Elizabeth Drescher, *Choosing Our Religion: The Spiritual Lives of America’s Nones*, 1 edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 6, Kindle.

⁴ Drescher, *Choosing Our Religion*, 16.

⁵ Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010), 126, Kindle.

⁶ Robert P. Jones, *The End of White Christian America*, Reprint edition (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2016), 240, Kindle.

When we look at Drescher's work interviewing the growing number of American "Nones," I believe the clues are there. While what follows are the quotes of only a handful of people, Drescher quotes many more in her book who can be reasonably seen as representative of the now nearly seventy million Americans who claim "none" as a religion. As I look at each of these quotes separately, I find the challenges I, myself face in the modern American church. I would boil the quotes down to four categories: seeking, labels, relevance, and following Jesus and helping others. I'll open each section below with quotes that illustrate the greater point and leave us clues as to the migration away from the church. These clues point to many who've been put off or even injured by the traditional church. Their words are illuminating.

Seeking

*I guess I'm a seeker..., but I wouldn't call myself that exactly now. I really would say I'm Spiritual-But-Not-Religious, which includes seeking as part of just what you do.*⁷

*I mean, I do think there's something, but I don't know what it is. I don't think anyone can be sure, you know? No one can prove it. And I sure don't think it matters, you know, in terms of how most of the world works—like the government or businesses.*⁸

Some of the people Drescher interviewed were clearly looking for something that they weren't finding in the church. In fact, given how that seeking ties into the other categories, I'd go so far as to call it the overarching theme in that in addition to seeking in general, they were more

⁷ Drescher, *Choosing Our Religion*, 26.

⁸ Drescher, *Choosing Our Religion*, 27.

specifically seeking to be free of labels, seeking relevance in a more complex and pluralistic world, and seeking more of a focus on helping others.

Within the more general category of seeking, it has been my experience that sometimes churches themselves are not welcoming places for that inclination. When churches claim to know all the answers or admonish people to leave the unknown alone and chalk that up to having faith, there isn't much room for exploration. In my mind, the best churches and traditions are open to questions and doubts and exploration. They do not see seeking as a threat. Some faith traditions, though, can be steeped in inerrancy and absolutisms.

Charismatic leaders can sometimes claim to have all the answers. With the rise of the prosperity gospel, we're told by their leaders that all we have to do is listen to and follow them and we'll be rewarded with riches, not in the next life, but this one. Take Joel Osteen for example, who may be the poster boy for the prosperity gospel. He took over his father's 8,000-member church in 1999 and defied national trends by growing that membership to 43,500 by 2015, making it the largest megachurch in the country.⁹ While this might seem on the surface to be a huge success, this model of Christianity creates all kinds of cognitive dissonance that isn't lost on many Christians and nones.

It's problematic to suggest that God rewards faithfulness with financial prosperity because that also suggests the converse is true. That is, people living in poverty must be sinful and faithless, and therefore they are responsible for where they are and deserve what they're getting. It also seems obvious to me that the Christian receiving the most prosperity from his teachings is Joel Osteen himself. While reportedly taking no salary from his church, he has a net

⁹ "Lakewood Church Pastor Joel Osteen: By the Numbers," accessed December 12, 2020, <https://www.sfgate.com/news/article/Lakewood-Church-pastor-Joel-Osteen-By-the-numbers-6418086.php#photo-6478721>.

worth of approximately \$100 million from book sales and speaking fees.¹⁰ Even while these kinds of churches grow, however, the cognitive dissonance they create with the gospel can hurt the reputation of Christianity writ large.

In addition to what feels like hypocrisy, their certainty can also breed suspicion in those that see the universe as an endless sea of complexity. Those who claim the Bible as the inerrant word of God also need to set aside the multiple debates (and even arguments) the Bible has with itself. Just one example is Deuteronomy 16:15 which could be seen as a defense of the prosperity gospel idea that proper worship leads to material prosperity, while in Mark 10:25 Jesus gives a camel a better chance of getting through the eye of a needle than a rich man has for getting into the kingdom of God. For the curious, twenty-first century seeker, it can be hard to accept that all wisdom is contained in one book that was closed hundreds of years ago. Faith has a place in the modern world, but so do exploration and wonder and science.

Labels

I wouldn't say I lost my religion then exactly. I have kids, so, you know, you kind of find yourself praying whether you want to or not. And my wife goes to a Lutheran church, so sometimes I go with her. But I did give up any and all religious labels. I just think they make things worse, make it harder to engage human being to human being.¹¹

But I knew the church wouldn't stand by me, let alone stand up for me. I knew they were willing to throw out all the good done by faithful Catholic lesbians and gays just so

¹⁰ "Joel Osteen Net Worth," *Celebrity Net Worth*, January 18, 2020, <https://www.celebritynetworth.com/richest-celebrities/joel-osteen-net-worth/>.

¹¹ Drescher, *Choosing Our Religion*, 33.

*they could win this fight. I mean, the letters they sent to be read in the churches on Sundays. The things they mailed to our homes. It was horrible.*¹²

Labels are how we differentiate between one thing and another. They can be helpful. In the tribal atmosphere of modern America, however, labels can also be used to show who belongs, and who doesn't. At their ugliest, they can determine who is with us and who is against us: who is good and who is evil.

Some denominations can come across as the judgmental chosen, steeping hate and labels on any groups that don't fit their ideology. The greater population sees this intolerance as well, and again, lays these sins at the feet of Christianity itself. This can become especially distasteful when it intersects with politics. In *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us*, Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell use multiple surveys to show decades of change as a growing number of Americans did not want their church leaders involved in politics.

This change could be seen "most strongly among the growing number of nones, those who rejected all religious identification. Young Americans came to view religion, according to one survey, as judgmental, homophobic, hypocritical, and too political."¹³ Both Robert P. Jones' *The End of White Christian America* and *American Grace* show that this change in American attitudes was happening at the same time that Fundamentalists and Evangelicals were exerting more influence on and becoming more intertwined with the Republican Party through the "Moral Majority," the "Religious Right," and eventually the "Tea Party."^{14,15} Jones points to an Evangelical survey that shows over 85 percent of Generation X and Millennial respondents view

¹² Drescher, *Choosing Our Religion*, 75.

¹³ Putnam and Campbell, *American Grace*, 121.

¹⁴ Jones, *The End of White Christian America*, 96.

¹⁵ Putnam and Campbell, *American Grace*, 120.

modern Christianity as antigay, judgmental, and hypocritical. He also highlights that “for members of this generation, who grew up with the conservative Christian political movements as Christianity’s dominant expression, seven of the top ten attributes they used to describe contemporary Christianity were negative.”¹⁶

To put it in more Christological terms, American Christianity has garnered a reputation of proclaiming the speck of dust in its neighbors’ eyes while ignoring the log in its own. The hypocrisy that has plagued the church for decades, from Catholic pedophiles to Protestant embezzlement and sex scandals, has also “damaged the brand.” Never mind the fact that for every church drowning in scandal, there are hundreds that have done nothing wrong. The damage is done, especially in an age of mass media where conservative Evangelicals seem to have cornered the market on direct, mass messaging.

Several scholars point squarely at conservative Evangelicals as a source of this damage and the decline of the church overall. This includes Drescher, who claims, “Increasing politicization of religion by conservative Evangelicals reinforced the alienation from institutional religion experienced by many in the Baby Boomer generation and modeled discontent to subsequent generations.”¹⁷ Michael Hout and Claude S. Fischer, in addition to identifying that the church is failing to attract young generations from both church and unchurched families, also point out that another reason for the decline is, “liberals (and many moderates) distanced themselves from organized religion when organized religion became more conservative.”¹⁸

¹⁶ Jones, *The End of White Christian America*, 131.

¹⁷ Drescher, *Choosing Our Religion*, 59.

¹⁸ Michael Hout and Claude Fischer, “Explaining Why More Americans Have No Religious Preference: Political Backlash and Generational Succession, 1987-2012,” *Sociological Science* 1 (2014): 21, <https://doi.org/10.15195/v1.a24>.

The dominance of conservative voices in the church and their influence within politics was illustrated perfectly for me while participating in a panel on gun violence at a local synagogue. I was on the panel with leaders from the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim faiths, all of whom expressed the need to edit their comments so as not to jeopardize their institutions' nonprofit status. This was in a small synagogue assembly room with maybe 50 people in attendance. Meanwhile conservative Evangelicals have no such fear while not only espousing partisan political views but also endorsing specific conservative Republican candidates sometimes from their pulpits, often in public, and even on national television. The New York Times documented this trend in 2020,¹⁹ and while it happens in both parties, recent studies have shown that Republicans are the only group where the majority of respondents approve of that activity.²⁰

The other label within conservative Evangelicalism that Robert P. Jones points out is race:

Throughout their history, white evangelicals have developed a rich lexicon of apocalyptic anger. Evangelical sermons and hymns are infused with martial imagery, and nostalgic “re-” words like “reclaim,” “restore,” “renew,” “repent,” and “revive” are staple fare. This vocabulary originates in the evangelical theological emphasis on human sin and divine judgment, but it’s bolstered socially by evangelicals’ self-perception as an outgunned minority struggling valiantly against outside powers. In the American context, this sensibility has been reinforced time and again over the past 150 years, first in the South’s defeat during the Civil War, then during federal occupation and domination during Reconstruction, in the aftermath of the Scopes Trial in the 1920s, and during a second wave of federal interventionism during the civil rights movement.²¹

¹⁹ Ruth Graham, “Preaching or Avoiding Politics, Conservative Churches Walk a Delicate Line,” *The New York Times*, November 1, 2020, sec. U.S., <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/01/us/church-sermons-election-politics.html>.

²⁰ Aaron Earls, “More Pastors Endorse Political Candidates in 2020,” *Christianity Today*, October 27, 2020. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2020/october/pastors-endorse-political-candidates-personal-pulpit-lifewa.html>.

²¹ Jones, *The End of White Christian America*, 203.

It doesn't take much imagination to see the common racial threads in most of these evangelical touchpoints, or why after two terms of the first African American President in American history Evangelicals would be eager to "make America great again." When the Religious Right talks about taking their country back, what I and many others hear is their desire to take "their" country back from black and brown people. These calls are no doubt becoming more desperate as the reality sinks in that whites will be a minority in America by 2045.²²

In examining the positions of the Religious Right, Putnam and Campbell lay the groundwork for many of Drescher and Jones' assertions:

...beginning in the 1980s and continuing into the first decade of the new century, conservative politics became the most visible aspect of religion in America. While that development encouraged a certain kind of triumphalism among some leaders of the Religious Right, it deeply troubled many other Americans, especially those whose attachment to organized religion was weak, in part because they were just coming of age. For many Americans raised in the 1980s and 1990s, religion as they saw it around them seemed to be mostly about conservative politics and especially about traditional positions on issues of sexual morality, like homosexuality. In effect, many of these Americans, who might have been religiously inclined, but were liberal on moral issues, said "if that's what religion is all about, then it's not for me."²³

These authors point to the changing sexual and political attitudes that emerged in the 1960's as pivotal to the divides that contributed to the decline of a church that didn't keep up with the world around it. They see this divide itself as an echo and worsening of the divide between fundamentalists and modernists in the late 1800's and early 1900's.²⁴

²² "3 Ways That the U.S. Population Will Change over the next Decade," *PBS NewsHour*, January 2, 2020, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/nation/3-ways-that-the-u-s-population-will-change-over-the-next-decade>.

²³ Putnam and Campbell, *American Grace*, 81–82.

²⁴ Putnam and Campbell, *American Grace*, 12.

Relevance

*I try to follow Jesus... It's that simple. And I guess that hard. I don't want someone to see me as self-righteous or judgmental. I don't want them to assume I hate gays or think there were dinosaurs on Noah's ark. And I mean that for people in churches as much—maybe more—than I do for people I just meet on the street or whatever.*²⁵

*[H]ow many times do [my kids] need to hear “do unto others” and Jesus is the Good Shepherd? You know, they're good kids—well-behaved, smart, friendly. They're not going to, like, turn to a life of crime without church. I just thought, “What are they really getting out of this that we're not teaching them at home?”*²⁶

As early as the mid 1980's Putnam and Campbell point to young peoples' declining interest in the church because of its lack of relevance.²⁷ There are real things happening in the nation and the world right now; things that affect people's everyday lives. When people don't feel the church is engaged in those happenings, they go elsewhere. Alan J. Roxburgh posits that people may be leaving the church, “because the Christian narrative seems less and less connected to people's growing sense of economic, social, environmental, and spiritual dislocation.”²⁸

Indeed, as we have discussed above, sometimes the Christian narrative adds to that sense of dislocation. The positions a church does or doesn't take can drive people away. Worse yet,

²⁵ Drescher, *Choosing Our Religion*, 33.

²⁶ Drescher, *Choosing Our Religion*, 66.

²⁷ Putnam and Campbell, *American Grace*, 99.

²⁸ Alan J. Roxburgh, *Missional (Allelon Missional Series): Joining God in the Neighborhood* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011), 88, Kindle.

when the church takes no position, especially when the world is on fire (literally in the case of California these days), the church makes itself irrelevant.

If the church is just a membership-based social club that we attend on Sundays as a way to keep a placeholder in a pleasant afterlife, then many are reaching the conclusion that it's a waste of time and resources. That's juxtaposed against those churches offering those who feel burdened "bumper sticker" certainties as to how God will help them past modern problems. They may proclaim, "just do x and y will happen." People can also find themselves left choosing between conservative churches that preach things antithetical to the teachings of Jesus and modernist, liberal churches that can seem to stand for nothing lest they damage their nonprofit status.

As one Episcopal priest quoted in *American Grace* puts it, "in a time of conservatism, we've declined in membership because we simply can't offer certainty."²⁹ He went on to conclude, "Our greatest strength is that we don't come down hard on a lot of issues. But it's also our greatest weakness."³⁰ If conservatives are turning people off to church because they are too vocal in labeling and "othering" those that don't fit their ideology, perhaps liberals are turning people off to church because they're doing the opposite. It is possible that in an attempt to offend no one, liberal churches have also managed to inspire no one.

When I was providing pulpit supply as a much younger seminary student I once preached on the sin of "keeping up with the Jonses." After the service two older, white men in the congregation advised me separately that I was going to have to "knock that stuff off" when I got my own church or the "deep pockets were going to leave." I can't help but wonder if statements

²⁹ Putnam and Campbell, *American Grace*, 54.

³⁰ Putnam and Campbell, *American Grace*, 54.

like that live in the back of every pastor's mind as they decide what to do, and not do, about injustice and inequity in their communities.

For all the stories of his kindness and love, Jesus held little back when talking about those who oppressed people living in poverty. While Jesus doesn't mention the major social issues that divide religious conservatives and liberals today, he mentions our treatment of people living in poverty dozens of times in the New Testament. Jesus's warnings on this one issue in particular are especially harsh, and he didn't seem concerned about offending those in power or the rich as he issued such warnings.

Following Jesus and Helping Others

I don't belong to any church. I won't... I just don't believe that's what Jesus wanted—these institutions, these corporations.³¹

But, when I read the gospels, I just don't see that Jesus was about, you know, let's raise \$10,000 so we can get a new sound system for the youth auditorium. I'll give my money, when I have it, where I see that it's helping "the least of these." But I'm not interested in a program with, you know, an executive director and a staff of twenty people. I'll buy a homeless guy a sandwich, you know. I'll mow an old lady's yard. I want to help people who really need help. I don't know that, for me or most people my age, 'Christian' means that anymore.³²

³¹ Drescher, *Choosing Our Religion*, 35.

³² Drescher, *Choosing Our Religion*, 36.

Here we come to the crux of what I want to lay out as the crucial piece of the puzzle as we try to figure out not only why the church as we know it is in decline, but also how to end that decline. I started down this path during my time earning my Master of Arts in Religion degree at Lancaster Theological Seminary between 1999 and 2003, where my focus was Christology. It was years later, however, that I began to analyze the work of the church and my own anti-poverty work through a deeper, Christological lens.

In 2012 I was hired as the CEO of the University Area Community Development Corporation (UACDC) in Tampa, Florida. It served the “University Area,” an unincorporated part of Hillsborough County outside of the City of Tampa proper also known as “Suitcase City” because of the level of transience and the number of substandard, slum properties. The neighborhood was one of the most impoverished communities in the state of Florida. It literally had third world outcomes; an infant mortality rate equal to Malaysia, an HIV rate a little worse than Somalia, and overall health outcomes equal to El Salvador. It was overwhelming to address at first, but we chose to break our response into two strategies.

First, we worked on building a coalition of partners who shared a belief that we could be more effective by bringing our individual gifts together to face the community’s greatest challenges. Second, we worked one person at a time, empowering residents to make a difference in their own lives, families, and communities. We also trained them to do the same for someone else. Something impossible to miss in this work was the absence of the church.

Other than a couple of churches that had been planted in the neighborhood specifically to address the issues therein, or that had been there since it was a “good neighborhood,” there was very little engagement. Affluent churches from the surrounding area that would often send teams of people to places like El Salvador for complex projects that would last a week at a time would

only come into the University Area for the occasional food give-away or clean up: something I've come to call drive-by philanthropy. Given the number of times Jesus talks about the wealthy, the poor, and the need for justice, I found myself wondering how the church could be so disengaged from the widening gap between those who have and those who do not in their own communities? There was little difference with other Christian organizations in the area as well.

The local Christian hospital was not only required by the Affordable Care Act to do a community health needs assessment, they were also required to do something about whatever they found as a result. They came to me for feedback about what I thought the community needed. After talking with them and looking at data for weeks, I ran the numbers for them on what a free clinic would do for the community, and how a fraction of their emergency room losses could fund the entire initiative, and even save them more money than they invested. More importantly, access to free primary care seven days per week in the center of the neighborhood would have a major, positive impact on the community's third world health outcomes.

Ultimately, they decided to give a fraction of what we were asking for to a church in a nearby, affluent community. It turns out a few doctors went to church there and wanted to offer free clinic services at the church one or two evenings per week. Three things upset me about this decision. One, the church was a mostly white, affluent church and would be intimidating for the mostly minority, low-income population of the community I served. Two, the location of the church created transportation barriers to care; most would not be able to walk there. Three, people who got sick the other five or six days of the week when the church clinic was closed would be out of luck.

When I raised these concerns with the hospital, their response was, "we understand, but we're a Christian hospital." I took their meaning to be something inside the walls of a church

was better than something in the community where the need existed. My immediate reaction was to tell them a Christian hospital should want to follow the example of Christ. I pointed out that Jesus didn't stay in his synagogue in a nice neighborhood and tell people who needed healing to stop by on Tuesdays and Thursdays between 6:00 and 9:00 p.m.. Jesus went to where the people who polite society had shunned lived and offered them healing where they were. He touched the untouchable.

The hospital stopped inviting me to meetings.

By July of 2015 I was working in Lancaster, PA for the second time in my career. In August of that year, Franklin and Marshall College published a study of income movement in the City of Lancaster over 14 years. The study showed that while incomes had gone up by 20 percent in the downtown, incomes had gone down in every other census tract during the same time period. In fact, in the poorest parts of the city, incomes had gone down by 20 to 28 percent per census tract.³³

The Lancaster newspaper, *LNP*, reported on the study, which was titled *Lancaster Prospers?*, under the headline, "A Tale of Two Lancasters: How Economic Development is Creating Income Gaps in the City."³⁴ This prompted the Mayor to form *The Mayor's Commission to Combat Poverty*, of which I was named the Chair in October of that year. My charge was to lead 11 other Commissioners and 48 work group members appointed by the Mayor in a deep study of the issues driving poverty in the city and create a plan to reduce poverty with measurable, realistic and timebound goals tied to specific action plans.

³³ Evan Gentry, Berwood Yost, and Callari, Antonio, "Lancaster Prospers?: An Analysis of Census Data on Economic Opportunities and Outcomes," August 2015, 24.

³⁴ Jeff Hawkes, "A Tale of Two Lancasters: How Economic Development Is Creating Income Gaps in the City," *LNP, LancasterOnline*, August 17, 2015, https://lancasteronline.com/news/local/a-tale-of-two-lancasters-how-economic-development-is-creating-income-gaps-in-the-city/article_d7c2488a-42cd-11e5-bc7e-abbf771a5fef.html.

After over a year of work, the *One Good Job* plan³⁵ was created to cut poverty in half by the year 2032. As the plan rolled out, one question came from multiple critics and allies: where is the church? A few pastors were involved in the planning process, but the complaints were that more should have been involved and that the nearly one-hundred-page plan contained no strategy that laid out any specific way the faith-based community was going to be a part of solving this problem. The *First Year Annual Report* of the *One Good Job* plan also figured heavily in this criticism as it shows an absence of faith-based partners aside from a few programs mostly focused on feeding.³⁶

The December 2016 *LNP* Editorial Board piece on the plan specifically shows the public criticism both the Commission and the resulting plan faced due to the lack of church involvement.³⁷ Of course, the issue is much more complicated than *LNP* made it seem, ignoring questions of which churches from which denominations and from which areas of the City were supposed to be included, and in what way? They didn't factor in the willingness of those churches to be involved, or the competitiveness among different churches that my own interviewees acknowledged in this project. In fact, the Mayor's recruiting of Commission members was very public over a period of three months, and, to my knowledge, neither he nor I were approached by any pastors who wanted to be included and weren't. In fact, other than requests for me to do presentations, no churches reached out to the Lancaster Coalition to

³⁵ Dan Jurman and Ismail Smith-Wade-El, *One Good Job: A Strategic Plan to Cut Poverty in Half in Lancaster City by 2032*, "Commission+Plan+for+website.Pdf," accessed May 18, 2020. <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5696e29e9cad6a9d7fc605f/t/585304cf5016e1d1bb29cc76/1481835763393>.

³⁶ Coalition to Combat Poverty, "First Year Annual Report," accessed July 25, 2020, <http://combatpovertylancaster.org/progress>.

³⁷ The LNP Editorial Board, "Report of Mayor's Commission to Combat Poverty Has Some Gaps, but We Hope New Coalition Succeeds," *LNP, LancasterOnline*, December 18, 2016, https://lancasteronline.com/opinion/editorials/report-of-mayors-commission-to-combat-poverty-has-some-gaps-but-we-hope-new-coalition/article_f9e60e6c-c3cb-11e6-ba1e-b7a4b5a44e55.html.

Combat Poverty with requests to serve on any of its action teams during my nearly three years as an executive committee member. Not one.

When *LNP* says they were “puzzled by the lack of involvement of faith-based organizations in this effort,”³⁸ my response would be, “so was I.” Perhaps puzzled wouldn’t be the word I would use, though. I think the word “disturbed,” or even “disappointed,” would be a better description of how I was feeling at the time. As recently as the summer of 2019 we held a special session for churches to plug into the work of the plan, and only four people attended. Two of those were already partners from nonprofits; one from the executive team of Water Street Rescue Mission and one from the United Way who was also a leader in her church. Another was the event sponsor. The fourth and final was a fellow doctoral student at Lancaster Theological Seminary who had reached out to me about how to get involved while we ate a meal together at the school. Thus, my interest in getting to the bottom why churches are doing what they’re doing in relation to poverty in our community, and, perhaps more importantly, why they’re not doing what they’re not doing.

In truth, the *One Good Job* plan laid out frameworks and strategies for reducing poverty that literally anyone could be a part of, including people living in poverty themselves. Churches could plug into the plan in any number of ways. There didn’t need to be a special strategy just for churches. The question I found myself asking as the plan’s co-author at the end of the first year of implementation was why weren’t the churches getting more involved beyond their traditional ministries, like feeding the hungry? Even within those traditional ministries of giving people things without building any deeper relationships with them, why was there no apparent interest in tying that simple work into an intentional, shared, community strategy?

³⁸ The LNP Editorial Board, “Report of Mayor’s Commission.”

The plan was largely built on relational strategies. That essentially means moving beyond the transactional nature of giving people things and walking away, to instead inviting people into deeper relationship in order to walk alongside them as they overcome the issues that led to their poverty and approach a future of their own desire and imagining. With over 250,000 adherents to the various denominations active in Lancaster County,³⁹ imagine the massive power the church could have if it engaged in more relational and less transactional ministries.

Instead, many churches have become more like social clubs with their members more concerned with their personal, spiritual journeys than the world around them, as if the two are somehow separate things. They dress well, and sing, and seek absolution for their sins while Lazarus sits outside their gates hoping for the scraps from their tables. As Roxburgh writes, “One result of this anxiety about our identity and the meaning of the gospel has been the turning of Christian life into little more than private personal experience - going to church and attracting other people to our church.”⁴⁰ The church is not addressing the key concerns of the community. That problem was very much on the hearts of Water Street Rescue Mission staff as they hosted *Compelled by Love*, an event in June of 2018 that brought over 40 churches together to discuss their work in the world.

At the event, the more than 100 church leaders who attended were challenged to think differently about their engagement with the world by me and other Lancaster leaders, but primarily by Dave Runyon, a co-author of *The Art of Neighboring: Building Genuine Relationships Right Outside Your Door*. Runyon shared the story of a meeting between Denver, Colorado faith leaders and their mayor about what churches could do to help with the City’s

³⁹ “Lancaster County, Pennsylvania Detailed Profile - Houses, Real Estate, Cost of Living, Wages, Work, Agriculture, Ancestries, and More,” *City-Data.com*, accessed May 18, 2020, http://www.city-data.com/county/Lancaster_County-PA.html.

⁴⁰ Roxburgh, *Missional*, 88.

serious challenges connected to poverty. He admitted to feeling a sense of embarrassment and shame as Mayor Frie essentially paraphrased Jesus's great commandment and a need for people to be better neighbors.⁴¹ The pastors in that room were looking at poverty and social justice as if those issues lived somewhere outside of their theology. They had seen them as the province of government, not the church. Rightly, their government woke them up with a sermon of sorts.

Much of my own anti-poverty work is tied to the Christological views I formed as an MAR student at Lancaster Theological Seminary. My strategies for engaging the vulnerable are tied to how I saw Jesus conducting the same work, no doubt through my own interpretive lens and modified for modern structures and secular organizations, but Christological nonetheless. Go to where the hurting people are. Accept them as they are. Ask them if they want to be made well. Offer healing with no strings. Invite them into relationship. Equip them to heal others as well.

So what lenses are churches using when they see poverty outside their gates? What decisions are being made as a result? Do those decisions make sense given what Jesus did, and what he commanded us to do? Do they make sense in the larger context of the law, the prophets, and the stories of the Bible that center on poverty and social justice? As I wrestle with those questions, one thing seems clear. What the church is doing now isn't slowing the decline of the church in any marked way, nor does it seem to be having much of an effect on poverty or social justice.

Pastor Otis Moss III gives one of the most intriguing analysis of this problem I've read. Using terms familiar in our modern technology, Moss says, "[if] analog means that you have to come to the device, in digital culture the device comes to you and goes wherever you are."⁴² We

⁴¹ Jay Pathak, Dave Runyon, and Robert Frazee, *The Art of Neighboring: Building Genuine Relationships Right Outside Your Door* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2012), 19, Kindle.

⁴² Otis Moss III, *Blue Note Preaching in a Post-Soul World: Finding Hope in an Age of Despair* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015), 49, Kindle.

have seen this revolution throughout our lives. Thanks to digital culture, I can write this work in my favorite chair and search for every source I need without having to leave my home, the room, or even get up out of said chair.

Moss takes this example even further, however, tying it to our faith, our churches, the spirituality of the faithful, and the teachings of Jesus:

I would argue that there are digital elements in the story of the Ark of the Covenant moving across the plain of the desert. People moved where God said to move. That's a digital movement right there. But with the creation of the Temple, all of a sudden, people came to the Temple, and it had an analog element. People then had to come to worship, versus worship being wherever the people were. Jesus then re-mixed and moved from this analog idea back to digital. Instead of you coming to a specific place, he said, "Wherever I am, also the spirit of God lies" (see John 12). Where does Christ worship? Christ worships outside. There is no better place to worship than looking at the canopy of Heaven. And so worship changes with this radical person by the name of Jesus, who begins to emphasize mobile culture all over again. All of a sudden he is saying things that can easily be replicated because of the focus on oral culture. "I've got to pass something on to you so you can pass it on to someone else." It is not text-based.⁴³

Moss sees Jesus as going back to Israel's earlier mobile innovation under Moses. Given Moss' observations, I can't help but feel that the church has created an analog model in response to Jesus's digital ministry. While that could survive for a time, it is now not only out of touch with how Jesus conducted ministry but is also out of touch with a world that is quite literally digital.

Many pastors and church leaders see this and respond by bringing digital technology into their analog ministries as if adding a new technology will attract new members. For Moss, that misses the point. Jesus's ministry was "digital" because he took it to the people, and then he empowered them to take it to others. It was no longer in the hands of the elites. It wasn't written in a bound and finished book or bound within four walls of a building.

Consider the responses churches are having to the Covid-19 pandemic. Very few seem to be embracing reaching people virtually as anything other than a temporary, stop-gap measure,

⁴³ Moss III, *Blue Note Preaching*, 49.

despite some of its positives: and there are positives. I recently had the opportunity to “attend” live, streaming worship with my favorite preacher in Tampa, something that would have been impossible without traveling 1,000 miles prior to the pandemic. Some would rather risk infection spreading through their congregations than even attempt a virtual option. In fact, several churches have become “super spreaders” since March 2020 despite clear CDC guidance. Many churches are stuck in their buildings and their traditions. Some church leaders are so stuck that it appears they would endanger their communities or even die rather than change. Whether this is a greater or lesser condemnation I’m not sure, but some would also rather let social injustice run rampant than change.

A Road Map for Change

In this work I ask several churches in my community where they are when it comes to poverty. Given their responses, I explore the biblical texts and contexts that inform our tradition using the New International Version translation. I examine movements that are active in my community and local models of relational churches. Finally, drawing on my Christology studies and my secular work fighting poverty and leading organizational transformation, I will lay out five principles for culture change within our churches and five ways that pastors and church leaders can move their ministries in a way that aligns more with the “digital” ministry of Jesus of Nazareth. I intend to lay out a blueprint that looks less like our dying, analog model, and more like the digital model for which modern “seekers” and “nones” are hungry; one that fully connects to their “sense of economic, social, environmental, and spiritual dislocation”⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Roxburgh, *Missional*, 88.

It is my hope that it is not too late for us to build a Christianity that can not only be relevant, but vibrant in our modern era. To do so, we'll need to do the most low-tech thing imaginable; walk outside and talk to other humans. Jesus gave us a map for what that looks like. We just have to decide whether we're willing to follow it, or if we'd rather stay within the four walls of the institutions we've built and hope the decline stops by itself. One of the pastors I interviewed summed up the conclusion I came to quite well.

"I feel overall the church is failing to be the church. We are not who Jesus intends us to be. We're not living as Jesus intends us to. The church has become so insular. And I think as it has shrunk it has become more insular. If the church is dying, there's probably a reason why it's dying. If it's dying, let's go out being the hands and feet."

I contend that "being the hands and feet" is exactly what the church needs to do if it truly wants to stop its decline. In that sense, I'm not arguing that the church should be out in the community saving people living in poverty. In fact, I'm arguing that getting out into the community and building relationships with people in poverty may just be the only thing that can save the church.

Chapter Two: And Who Is My Neighbor?

Given the question, “where is the church?” I felt the most appropriate place to start was to ask those who would know. My aim was to interview a sampling of church leaders from the city, suburbs, and rural areas of Lancaster County, Pennsylvania to better understand how they see themselves and their work in the community. Their answers were in many ways surprising to me and left me with more hope than I expected to find there.

Interview Protocol

My questions were designed to get at the heart of what I wanted to discover through the interviews: what were these churches doing to engage with poverty, and what theological basis were they using for that engagement? That led to six strategically chosen questions:

1. How do you see Jesus’s call on our work in the world?
2. Does your congregation see it the same way you do, and, if not, how do they see it?
3. Who does your congregation consider to be its neighbors?
4. How does your congregation engage with issues of poverty with its neighbors when it finds them?
5. If it was completely up to you, how would you change the way your church works in the word, if at all?
6. Is there anything else you’d like to add?

Question one was designed to get the interviewee thinking theologically right off the bat. I asked this question first because I wanted to minimize the chances their theological answers would change to fit what they would tell me later about what work they were doing. If there were

any inconsistencies between theology and practice, I didn't want to gloss them over.

Question two was designed to get at any space between the call the leader hears and the call the congregants hear. If churches do not see their call as engaging with poverty, was that because the pastors were leading them that way, or because congregations were resisting that call on their lives? Before describing who their neighbors were and how they were loving them, I wanted my interviewees to wrestle with the synergy or distance between their call and their congregants' call.

Questions three and four were designed to examine who the congregations saw as their neighbors and how they respond to the needs of these neighbors when they see them. I asked them in this order to first see how broad or narrow each congregation's view of its neighbors was, and then what type of response they have to them: transactional or relational? Was it "organic and ongoing"¹ and is it "connected to people's growing sense of economic, social, environmental, and spiritual dislocation"?²

Questions five and six were designed to give the leader a chance to reconcile everything they'd examined in their first four answers. How would they like to close the gap between their views and their congregants': between theology and practice? If there was synergy, how did they want to take their practice to the next level? It was my hope to close each interview with some aspiration, and perhaps even some inspiration.

I had originally planned to conduct every interview in-person. The time of year and logistics conspired against me on this. A handful of my interviewees requested a call as opposed to a face-to-face meeting. Since I had no relationship with the pastors in question, and thus an unknown level of trust, I chose to acquiesce to their requests. As a result, six of my interviews

¹ Pathak, Runyon, and Frazee, *The Art of Neighboring*, 19.

² Roxburgh, *Missional*, 88.

were conducted face to face in the churches of my interviewees, and five were conducted over the phone.

Regardless of the medium, I began each interview with an explanation of my project, as well as my commitment to confidentiality and my commitment to protect their anonymity. Each was assured that I would not use their name, the names of their congregations, or the names of their denominations. If any program they mentioned could lead to someone guessing who the subject or church was, I committed to not sharing those program names as well. I also asked for permission to digitally record each interview before getting started.

Selection of Interviewees

My sample of churches was, by design, made up of congregations I knew at least had an interest in self-examination around their work in the world, especially around poverty issues. As a result, I reached out directly to four pastors who I knew were examining their practice. All four of these pastors, with whom I at least had a passing acquaintance, agreed to be interviewed.

In addition, Water Street Rescue Mission sent an invitation on my behalf to everyone who attended their “Compelled by Love” event. The entire event, which featured a keynote from author Dave Runyon, challenged attendees to rethink both who they and their congregants considered their neighbors, and how they were putting loving those neighbors into practice. As a presenter and small group facilitator that day, I felt that everyone who attended should at least have some level of comfort with me that would go beyond a “cold call” interview request.

Water Street sent the invitation and digital survey I crafted to 85 people from the “Compelled by Love” event email list. Of them, 17 completed my survey. Of the 17 who completed my survey, 14 answered “yes” to whether their congregation engaged in anti-poverty

work. One said “no” and two said they were “not sure.”

Of the 16 who either engaged in anti-poverty work or weren’t sure, nine agreed to be interviewed. Seven declined. Of those nine, seven were able to make an interview work logistically within the timeline we had. All told, I conducted 11 interviews representing 10 congregations for this project. Two pastors from the same large congregation participated due to their shared role. I chose to interview them both because one had multiple years of experience with that congregation and the other was new. I thought their different perspectives on the same group would be worth exploring.

I was pleased with the diversity of the sample for this project. The breakdown was as follows:

- Seven were male and four were female.
- Church size ranged from 40 members to over 4,000 members.
- Four were mainline denominations and one was non-denominational.
- Seven were suburban churches, two were urban, and one was rural.
- The 11 interviews represented 10 congregations from 10 different denominations.

Ultimately, I think this process worked well for me in getting a broad sample representative of the predominantly white churches in Lancaster County.

Summary Report

Before I discuss the patterns and connections I see in the interview responses, I’ll start with some trends:

- 10 of 11 referenced the teachings of Jesus. The one leader who didn’t referenced Paul.

- 5 of 11 referenced “the greatest commandment” or loving your neighbor as yourself. This was the most frequently referenced text. The second most frequent was Matthew 25:31-46.
- Two also referenced the poem attributed to Saint Teresa of Avila, *Christ Has No Body but Yours*, specifically referencing being the “hands and feet” of Christ.
- 8 of 11 spoke about their benevolence funds.
- 4 of 11 spoke about requirements to receive their benevolence funds, including two that require church membership to receive any type of aid other than gift cards.
- 5 of 11 shared that they believe their congregation members only consider people they already know to be their neighbors.
- 6 of 11 described a tension between grace and justice with two of those clearly falling into the grace camp.
- 7 of 11 have a focus on foreign missions.
- 2 of 11 work with refugees.
- 5 of 11 described their local response to poverty in terms of food, clothing, and Christmas gifts.
- 9 of 11 brought up wanting their congregations to build more relationships or be more “relational” with people living in poverty (it should be noted that the words “transactional” and “relational” were not in any of my questions).
- 4 of 11 shared that they believed “fear of the other” was a barrier to engaging with people living in poverty.
- 8 of 11 described working through other, secular organizations. Of those, three described relationships with their local elementary school.

The first thing I would note as I summarize the results of my interviews is that these churches clearly see a call from Jesus to engage in the challenges of the world, specifically issues of poverty. Matthew 25 came up multiple times, either directly, or indirectly. The idea that Jesus has identified himself directly as no different than “the least of these” is clearly a powerful driver for some. John 21 also figured in the answers, as respondents felt Jesus’s call to “feed my lambs,” and “tend my sheep.” More than anything, Jesus’s “great commandment” came up again and again; “love your neighbor as yourself.”

These “love” and “care” focused answers stood out in contrast against the answers that were more focused on evangelism. Those focused more on making disciples, and how the spiritual journey of the disciple would lead to them loving their neighbors. This tension seemed to materialize depending on whether they quoted Jesus or Paul, with the latter more focused on making disciples. The interviewee who directly cited Ephesians, for example, specifically talked about the tension between these two theological ideas. “The word of God changes peoples’ hearts,” he said, “hearts are then set to do Jesus’s work, or it’s just morality.” He went on to talk about the command for purity and command for justice, and that Christians tend to go one way or the other. “Integrity is doing both at the same time,” he concluded.

I resonate with the idea of doing both, but I clearly fall on the side of care and justice over grace and evangelism. I have no issue with secular “morality,” or care and justice without a church membership as the ulterior motive. I do, however, find evangelism or even personal spiritual journeys devoid of care and justice empty and damaging. I would argue that Christians who are reading the teachings of Jesus should indeed be focused on both at the same time, but in my view many have confused which of those is primary. Even more seem to confuse their physical church with “the” church.

It was clear that all the congregations were attempting to both serve others and build disciples, but most of them also made it clear that they were more focused on the individual “command for purity” than the communal “command for justice.” It was also clear that the majority of the congregation members served by these leaders were more comfortable with some distance between themselves and the people some of the leaders referred to as the “least of these.” In one case, the phrase “the least of these” was used so often by the interviewee I became uncomfortable.

A significant number of those interviewed made it clear their churches were more comfortable with, as well as more focused on, overseas mission support, or even mission trips. That showed up in the budgets of those who got more specific about how their congregations prioritize their spending. “We need to see local missions as equally valuable, important and necessary to invest resources in as foreign missions,” one respondent shared, “it’s easier to witness for Christ by giving money than it is by building relationships. We have an emphasis on doing the right thing, and less emphasis on what we need to do to reach the outsider.”

That idea of reaching the outsider was clearly a desire of nearly all the respondents. That said, only a few were actively seeking to find those in need rather than more passively addressing them only after they arrived at the church looking for help, whether independently or after being referred by a congregant. The vast majority had some sort of benevolent fund for these occasions. A few had strict guidelines on how this money was spent. One described a specific, progressive process.

“When we help the first time,” he said, “it’s just financial. The second request we get involved with teaming them up and making an inventory of need. They must agree to connection to the church with a mentor and accountability.”

An almost equal number left it entirely up to the pastor. In these cases, the pastors were also interested in moving from transactional “benevolence” to more relational models. “When people come in, we definitely connect them to programs,” one of these pastors shared, “but when I took over the program, I ran it as a relational program. I take them. I don’t send them. I drive them and talk to them.” Another of these pastors was passionate about how she saw this issue and connected it to the decline of churches in the country.

“I feel overall the church is failing to be the church. We are not who Jesus intends us to be. We’re not living as Jesus intends us to. The church has become so insular. And I think as it has shrunk it has become more insular. If the church is dying, there’s probably a reason why it’s dying. If it’s dying, let’s go out being the hands and feet.”

This was a minority voice in the sample. The vast majority felt that their church was doing well, but could, and should, do better. The idea of becoming more relational, however, came up again and again throughout the interviews. It was, in fact, the most consistent theme among all the respondents after referencing Jesus and the New Testament. That was a surprise to me. While I was looking for patterns in transactional and relational responses, those terms were nowhere in my questions, and my questions were limited to those shared earlier, asked as written with no follow-ups or ad-libs in each interview.

“I would want to see us outside of the building more than in the building. Doing relationships. Invite your neighbors over. Go to shelter more than once every three years!” This pastor then switched to the “voice” of a congregant. “You want me to go there for four hours with *those* people?” he said with a hint of fear. Then he switched back to his own voice. “You can almost build a relationship in four hours, and you might just want to go back,” he finished with a smile.

That fear showed up in other pastors' assessments of their congregations. "(I want) more of a focus on love your neighbor," another shared. "Sometimes I wonder if it's easier to go deeper into the books than it is to go deeper into your life and ask, 'how do I live out the love of Christ, live out serving one another?' I would have those uncomfortable conversations."

"I would have them be a little more courageous in what they're willing to take on," said another as she shared her passion for housing the homeless. Still another opened up about the fact that "there are still those who are scared of the city; scared of people who are different. So, it's heart change. That is happening, but there's still some resistance in our congregation."

For nearly one third of the respondents, one of their early steps outward included deeper partnerships with local elementary schools that were clearly very meaningful for them. All the pastors who had taken this step spoke of the move with great affection. While these relationships with the schools often seemed to involve more traditional and transactional relationships with the children and families served, such as feeding, giving Christmas gifts, or providing needed materials for the children's education or wellbeing, all the pastors celebrated this as their churches expanding their definition of who their neighbors were and becoming more relational. One pastor trying to make change shared candidly in his assessment, "We were our neighbors. Our biggest problem was the church only cared about themselves." For those working to expand the definition, starting with the professional caregivers of children was their strategy for overcoming fear of "the other." It struck me that those relationships, though, were primarily with people who were probably more like the congregants themselves.

One pastor described connecting directly to people living in poverty as the beginning of a "messy relationship" in a way that made it clear he saw that as a positive. "Someone from the city is like a foreigner to our congregation. If you want to build authentic and long-term

relationships, you have to come from a place of faith that God is calling you to be with that neighbor.” He was not the only interviewee who talked about “the city” when discussing poverty, despite the fact that at the time of the interviews approximately two thirds of the people living below the poverty line in Lancaster County lived outside of the city according to the US Census, with some of that population certainly in close proximity to the suburban and rural churches interviewed.³

Another smaller theme was one of working together. Nearly half of the respondents talked explicitly about the need for churches, government, and nonprofits to work together. One respondent decried the competitiveness between churches. Two others critiqued how some churches did good work just to get credit or gain new members. One respondent in-particular was not only passionate about bringing everyone together in the work, but also saw it as key to the church reclaiming its role in the world.

“I love the idea that the church really is the hope of the world, but I understand that all churches are not built the same. So, I understand the need for other organizations, and government, and state, and programs involved in meeting needs, but I feel we’ve gotten our toes away from the line of what our responsibility was; thinking it was all someone else’s responsibility. I believe we can have a beautiful thing in Lancaster if we can have all of those working together: more of a partnership. I believe if we hand all of those problems over, we’re only meeting a social injustice and not the spiritual injustice.”

While I agree with the premise that churches working together with other churches and their secular neighbors would be powerful, I confess I have no idea what the difference is between a social injustice and a spiritual injustice. In my mind, there is no difference. Every

³ Jurman and Smith-Wad-El, *One Good Job*.

social injustice is a spiritual injustice as far as I'm concerned, and harms both the victim and the perpetrator.

All the pastors interviewed were striving to answer Jesus's call on them and their churches, no matter how they saw it. Even the pastor who felt that poverty is "never going to be eradicated" was part of a congregation active in anti-poverty and social justice work. Overall, there was a lot of optimism shared among these 11 different church leaders. Whether irony or divine poetry, the most ringing note of optimism came in the final answer of my final interview.

"We all have our turfs," he said, speaking about the Water Street event, "But it was really helpful to bring churches and congregations together. I'm really optimistic and encouraged by the congregations wrestling with these challenges; being asked these questions." He went on to describe how he'd gone on a mission trip in college for a ministry that was helping people break the cycle of poverty through holistic approaches. "They were effective at breaking the cycle. It can happen, real community change after generations of community poverty. When you really focus and bring God's resources, He really does bring transformation."

Critical Assessment of the Process

On a personal level, I would have liked to have done all the interviews face to face. As it turns out, when I went back to listen to all the interviews again and gather notes and quotes from each, the quality of the interviews seems largely unaffected by this aspect. I could discern no negative affects to candor, depth of answers, or even length of interview based on that factor. I personally enjoyed going from church to church much more than conducting the phone interviews. Not always, but sometimes, seeing the physical space of each church shed additional light on the answers given. Visiting both the urban church with 40 members and the suburban

church with over 4,000 members were powerful experiences that I would have missed had those interviews been conducted over the phone.

My questions elicited rich and varied responses. I would also say that, while it would be difficult for me to prove otherwise, the respondents all seemed to have at least moments, if not entire interview sessions, where they were candid about what they would change in how their churches work in the world. I do think it was helpful that I chose from a sample of pastors who were at least familiar with me and my work in the community, but none who knew me well.

All the interviewees were white. That was partially just a factor of the overwhelming majority of churches in Lancaster County. Also, in my experience, most minority congregations do not seem to have the same barriers to being relational with people in poverty as do the white congregations with which I engaged in this study. While not remotely scientific, it has been my experience that African American and Latino churches are more often steeped in a theology of social justice and social action. Their relationships with their communities and their roles within them have also not been affected by urban flight in the same way so many majority white congregations have been. Later in this work I will share my interviews with two nonwhite congregations as a point of comparison.

Conclusions

I spend a good amount of my time vacillating between optimism and pessimism when it comes to poverty. I doubt you could be a true pessimist and last long doing anti-poverty work. Still, if you do this work long enough you see the kinds of things that at least develop a cynical side in you, even if it remains a small voice in the back of your head most days.

Through this study I found that there is more to be optimistic about in the church than I was expecting to find. I honestly expected most of these interviews to be incredibly frustrating, and at least one or two to break my heart. None of that was the case.

There were, of course, several times I disagreed with either the theology or methodology of some of my interview subjects, sometimes adamantly. Generally speaking, I came out of this process more hopeful about that question of “where is the church?” than I was when I started. I also find myself agreeing with my final interviewee when he said, “when you really focus and bring God’s resources, (God) really does bring transformation.”

So how was I transformed? What did I learn from these interviews? As I said, it wasn’t what I thought I would learn, and while I left the interviews more hopeful for the church, I also left the interviews with a clear view of a church heading down the wrong path. I now see a church that needs to make focused, intentional changes in order to put itself on a path toward transformation. I also found myself leaving those interviews with more questions, the answers to which were not to be found in more interviews. Those questions can be summed up in three key areas.

First, all the interviewees referred to, quoted, or cited Bible texts, more specifically New Testament texts, in justifying or explaining their work. Do those quotes and texts mean what they think they mean? Does it matter that they may be taking them out of context? While I, myself couched question number one in a New Testament context by asking about “Jesus’s call,” is it meaningful that the Old Testament never came up once? Does the Old Testament have as much to say about poverty and how to treat each other as the New Testament does?

The Old and New Testaments are a lot of landscape to cover, especially if you want to touch on the historical and cultural contexts that serve as the backdrop of those stories as well.

That being the case, I decided to narrow a theological and historical exploration to the areas I thought would be most telling: the law (specifically Deuteronomy), the prophets, the story of Ruth, and the parables of Jesus. I chose not to engage in scholarly debates around when any text was actually written or their core historicity but focused instead on the periods the texts and stories themselves report to cover. That engagement with the Bible, which I will detail in the next chapter, was a journey filled with revelations and new challenges.

Second, I'm not the first person to think the church needs to become more relational with the communities that surround it. In the third chapter I will look at two specific movements within Christianity currently active in Lancaster that strive to do just that. I'll discuss where they succeed, and where I believe they fall short. In chapter four I'll share the results of interviews similar to the interviews described earlier, but with leaders from two churches of color to examine any similarities or differences with how they engage with poverty in their communities. I'll then share the secular and theological principles that have guided me toward relational work over a period of twenty years in chapter five.

Finally, I'll lay out what I've learned (often the hard way) from 20-plus years of nonprofit leadership. I'll share five steps that church leaders can take to change the culture inside their congregations and five steps to change their actions out in their communities. As the quote often attributed to management guru Peter Drucker says, "culture eats strategy for breakfast." Culture change is possible. While the issues affecting culture are not exactly the same in a church as in a nonprofit, the two entities have many similarities. Culture change isn't easy in either setting, but it's worth doing. It may even be the only thing that will halt the church's decline.

Chapter Three: They Have Moses and the Prophets

Looking back at my interviews with church leaders, I was struck by the similarities in tone and substance, especially given the variety in the interview subjects. What was driving this uniformity of behavior? All of them held up or referred to Bible verses to undergird and justify their decision making. If that was in fact the source of their directives when it came to poverty, does the Bible call for the kind of transactional care I saw in the interviews and throughout my career? If not, were the church leaders to whom I spoke interpreting the Bible in such a way as to justify what they already felt comfortable doing?

As an MAR student my focus was Christology. Because of that, I felt comfortable telling that hospital in Florida that they were wrong to use Christianity as an excuse for their half-measures. A deeper theological and contextual examination of what the Bible says about poverty itself, though, is not something I'd ever done. Nor had I ever examined whether what I was doing in the secular sector was truly defensible as a ministry from a Biblical standpoint. For the purposes of this work, I felt it necessary examine what the Bible actually says on these issues beyond quotes that make us feel good. What do these laws and stories say about what God and Christ expect us to do?

I embarked on this examination to try to uncover what the Bible says on these issues, and determine if there is, in fact, more the church should or could be doing. Knowing that I entered this work with a bias toward relational work with people experiencing poverty, yet understanding the value of transactional help, I did my best to keep an open mind about what the Bible texts I examined imply, recommend, or demand. If I was expecting unambiguous clarity with no conflicting agendas or interpretations, I would have been greatly disappointed by what I found.

The texts I examined, Deuteronomy, Ruth, the prophets, and the parables of Jesus, are complex. Depending on your perspective, you can find harm or care, justice or oppression, and inspiration or affront in each of them. Those tensions are rife with pitfalls for anyone that would use any of these texts to justify their works in the world. As H. G. M. Williamson says in *He Has Shown You What is Good*, “A text or two taken out of context is used to brand one course of action, and before we know what is happening there is a temptation to criticize those who may see things somewhat differently.”¹ These complex tensions are at the heart of what I wrestled with and will examine in this chapter.

Historical Setting – The More Things Change...

An important thing for me to keep in mind during this work was the historical contexts of the biblical texts as compared to our modern context. Again, it’s complex. For the purposes of this work, I’m addressing the time periods these texts claim as context, not what modern scholars have determined is the likely time of authorship. I do this for two main reasons. One is that delving into the historicity of these texts could itself take up an entire book or more, and the second is that even if written at later times, the authors of these texts still placed them contextually where they were for a reason. Within that framing, not only is the world of Deuteronomy dramatically different from the modern world, it is also dramatically different from the world of the Prophets and Jesus as well. Contexts change. Israelites move from exile, to wandering, to an agrarian society, to a monarchy, to a conquered people in exile again, to a people living under the rule of a larger empire.

¹ H. G. M. Williamson, *He Has Shown You What Is Good: Old Testament Justice Here and Now* (Eugene, OR.: Wipf and Stock, 2012), 10.

For all this change, though, there are commonalities: human systems, structures, and failings that show up again and again, from the time of Moses to today. Harold V. Bennett states, “(t)here were strata in ancient Israel like today. Ruling class, governing, merchants, artisans, priests, peasants, and expendables.”² There is also a spirit of caring, of righteousness and justice, that shows up again and again despite the time or setting. Williamson points out that word pairing, righteousness and justice, shows up over 50 times in the Old Testament.³ For good or ill, regardless of setting, people are people.

Bennett and Williamson agree that the Ancient Near East had lots of codes to protect widows, orphans, and the poor independent of and prior to Israel’s. Williamson makes a point to show:

...the extent to which some of the issues which we think of as distinctively biblical were in fact shared by Israel’s neighbors, including those much earlier than her, so that we can learn to appreciate how much that we regard as the fundamental concerns of justice were not particularly Israelite at all but rather the result of much humane as well as pragmatic thinking in the ancient world.⁴

That said, Israel followed those laws not because of the dictates of a human king, but because of its covenant with YHWH. The one, true God demanded this behavior as a condition of receiving God’s blessing and the promised land. For Israelites, it is in the character of YHWH to enact justice, and the same is expected from those who worship YHWH.

Other things stand out in ancient Israel’s laws concerning the destitute and possessions. First, Israel is the only one of its neighbors to add “the stranger” to the list of widows and orphans. “(T)his new element in the familiar group of those who were stereotypically prone to

² Harold V. Bennett, *Injustice Made Legal: Deuteronomic Law and the Plight of Widows, Strangers, and Orphans in Ancient Israel*, 1st edition (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2002), 59.

³ Williamson, *He Has Shown You What Is Good*, 21.

⁴ Williamson, *He Has Shown You What Is Good*, 23.

being socially abused is without any parallel elsewhere in the ancient Near East; it seems to be characteristically Israelite or Judean.”⁵

Second, Israel seems more concerned with what is “enough for today.” In *Neither Poverty nor Riches*, Carl L. Blomberg describes the root of this concept in the manna the people of Israel received during their time wandering in the desert. “Individuals will collect varying amounts, based on their abilities, but God will ensure that no-one ever has too much or too little. Exodus 16:19-21 demonstrates that hoarding proves impossible; the manna simply spoils.”⁶

This philosophy continued upon entering the promised land. People were given land that met their needs and family size. Owning property was about having enough for your needs, not a means to gain more than you need. As Eberhard von Waldow, who is cited by Blomberg on this subject of “enough” puts it, “In such a society private property is never used to oppress the neighbor, or as is the case in a capitalistic order of society, as means to come to more property. Instead it is used generously to entertain guests and to help the poor.”⁷

Von Waldow sees oppression as a threat to peace within a nomadic, desert culture. Disrupting the peace is especially dangerous in that context because of the necessity of social cohesion to survival:

Due to the special way of life in the desert, a nomadic society is a community of its own kind. It is impossible for an individual to make his living in the desert alone. Apart from human community a single person would perish. For that reason people live together in natural communities of the families and clans which are established by common ties of blood, and these communities can unite into tribes.⁸

⁵ Williamson, *He Has Shown You What Is Good*, 89.

⁶ Craig L. Blomberg, *Neither Poverty nor Riches: A Biblical Theology of Possessions* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2000), 38, Kindle.

⁷ Hans Eberhard von Waldow, “Social Responsibility and Social Structure in Early Israel,” *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 32, no. 2 (Pittsburgh, PA: ATLAS Serials, April 1970): 186.

⁸ Von Waldow, *Social Responsibility*, 185.

Oppression, or even just taking advantage of a neighbor, could weaken the bonds that keep everyone together and alive. As such we see laws protecting the “poor” from the “powerful” in Exodus 23, the protection of justice for the “sojourner” and the “orphan” in Deuteronomy 24, and even the prohibition of charging interest on loans to the “poor” in Exodus 22.⁹ This analysis can feel less altruistic, and more attuned to the reality that the oppressed and abused may eventually rebel or leave a people if they are denied justice. Both outcomes weaken the tribe. In the same way that some now see the prohibition of eating pork and shellfish as pragmatic public health observations meant to protect the tribe from illness more than a true gauge of righteousness, the same might be said of these prohibitions of oppression.

Bennett, who sees more ill than good in the Deuteronomic laws surrounding the poor, also cites von Waldow in discussing the deeper ills brought on by the coming of the monarchy and the changes that made to the Israelite concept of “enough”:

...the Israelite monarchy created a new socio-economic milieu in the biblical communities, and that this development exacerbated the plight of widows, strangers, and orphans, personae miserabiles, in ancient Israel; consequently he declares that priests reinterpreted extant regulations regarding the presentation and distribution of tithes or produce, the celebration of agricultural festivals, and the allocation of grains, fruits, and other produce that remained in the fields, and reformulated these laws in order to ameliorate the plight of socially weak human beings in ancient Israelite society.¹⁰

This shift creates a significant change between the letter and spirit of the law in Bennett’s eyes.

“The question is not any longer, how to prevent people from being impoverished, but rather, how to ease the fate of the poor fellow citizen.”¹¹ In modern parlance, it’s not creating systems that prevent poverty, but merely making people living in poverty more comfortable where they are. I

⁹ Von Waldow, *Social Responsibility*, 183.

¹⁰ Bennett, *Injustice Made Legal*, 3.

¹¹ Bennett, *Injustice Made Legal*, 3.

would argue that shift greatly parallels the dynamic between transactional and relational responses we see today, but more on that later.

Blomberg sees the shift in culture during this time, from agrarian to urban, something that makes “Israel’s economic profile resemble the surrounding nations: a greater disparity between ‘haves’ and ‘have-nots’, with large amounts of wealth concentrated in the hands of the few and the majority of the people eking out a subsistence-level income.”¹² This level of inequity and injustice, along with a number of violations of religious observance, brings us to the time of the prophets, and their admonitions that the covenant has been broken and punishment is due. In *The Prophetic Literature*, Carolyn J. Sharp points out the special concern the prophets had with protecting the most vulnerable. “Especially important in prophetic messages across the centuries were faithfulness to Israel’s covenant with God and a deep and active commitment to care for the poor and marginalized, including sojourners, widows, and orphans.”¹³

Blomberg acknowledges this “deep and active commitment” as well. “The dominant thrust of the Prophets, however, is that God will judge the exploitative rich as part of his eschatological plan to create a perfectly just society and redeemed material world.”¹⁴ As conditions have worsened, we continue to move from prevention of inequity and injustice to God’s promised retribution for rampant inequity and injustice.

As we move on through the conquering and reconquering of Israel, we see the effects that the Greeks and then the Romans have on the world that Jesus will encounter. David J. Downs describes continued inequity in Israel. “With regard to the Palestinian economy, the claim is made that wealth and power, including land ownership, were concentrated in the hands of urban

¹² Blomberg, *Neither Poverty nor Riches*, 2000, 54.

¹³ Carolyn J. Sharp, *The Prophetic Literature* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2019), chap. 1, Kindle.

¹⁴ Blomberg, *Neither Poverty nor Riches*, 2000, 82.

elites (particularly in Jerusalem), whereas the vast majority of the peasant population in Judea and Galilee worked the land and paid taxes that supported the comfortable lifestyles of the wealthy... Thus, the powerful kept peasants and villages under a constant barrage of demands and obligations—perennially in debt, if possible.”¹⁵ Everett Ferguson makes it clear that this is not happening in the agrarian society of Ancient Israel:

The Jerusalem of Jesus’s time was not some small, backwater society: Herod’s engineers constructed underwater breakers to create the largest harbor in the eastern Mediterranean, rivaling in size Piraeus, the port of Athens. In addition to the palace and the temple to Augustus with statues of Augustus and Roma, Herod’s builders constructed warehouses at the harbor, a theater, a hippodrome, and civic buildings (Josephus, J.W. 1.408–15; Ant. 15.331–41). Caesarea became a center of commerce and government during the NT period and for subsequent centuries.¹⁶

That said, Ferguson points out that Galilee did not experience the same level of urbanization as Caesarea. Still, “(t)he villages that have been excavated indicate that Galilee flourished in the first half of the first century AD.”¹⁷

With urbanization came greater poverty. Downs estimates that those living below subsistence levels at that time, “some farm families, unattached widows, orphans, beggars, disabled, unskilled day laborers, prisoners,”¹⁸ was as high as 28 percent. Another 16 percent to 20 percent were slaves. While such a large percentage of disaffected citizens may sound similar to modern circumstances, where in the U.S. wealth is concentrated in the hands of the few and the current federal poverty rate is 11.8 percent,¹⁹ the two contexts are far from the same.

¹⁵ David J. Downs, “Economics, Taxes, and Tithes,” in *The World of the New Testament: Cultural, Social, and Historical Contexts*. Joel B. Green and Lee Martin McDonald, eds. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), pt. 2, chap. 12, Kindle.

¹⁶ Everett Ferguson, “The Herodian Dynasty,” in *The World of the New Testament: Cultural, Social, and Historical Contexts*, Joel B. Green and Lee Martin McDonald, eds., (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), pt. 1, chap. 5, Kindle.

¹⁷ Ferguson, “The Herodian Dynasty,” in *The World of the New Testament*, pt. 1, chap. 5.

¹⁸ Downs, “Economics, Taxes, and Tithes,” in *The World of the New Testament*, pt. 2, chap. 12.

¹⁹ “U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: United States,” accessed August 23, 2020, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/US/PST045219>.

The leading classical economist sees limits in the comparison:

...in a traditionally agrarian context, economic activity was limited both by social values that discouraged practices such as lending, trade, and integrated market development and by technological confines that made interregional trade cost-prohibitive, apart from some items such as wine, oil, and certain luxury goods. Concentration of wealth in the hands of a small number of landowners stunted the growth of integrated markets, for the vast majority of the population lived at, near, or below subsistence level and therefore did not possess the buying power to stimulate large-scale market expansion.²⁰

Others see much more in common between modern economic expansion and Jesus's world:

Rostovtzeff, for example, declares, "The modern [economic] development . . . differs from the ancient only in quantity and not in quality. The ancient world witnessed the creation of a world-wide trade and the growth of industry on a large scale. . . . In a word, the ancient world experienced, on a smaller scale, the same process of development which we are experiencing now."²¹

In any case, by Jesus's time the idea that each person owns as much land as their family needs is long gone. Enough is no longer enough. Poverty is rampant and wealth and power are concentrated in the hands of a small percentage of the population. Coincidentally, given the discourse on income inequality in the United States today, the regional elites of Jesus's time made up about one percent of the population.²² These contexts may not be truly comparable, but they certainly rhyme.

The More Things Stay the Same

As we look more closely at today, globalism and greed have been devastating to concerns of equity and justice. In the United States, while the poverty rate is 11.8 percent,²³ nowhere near a historical high, the three richest Americans own as much wealth as the bottom 163 million

²⁰ Downs, "Economics, Taxes, and Tithes," in *The World of the New Testament*, pt. 2, chap. 12.

²¹ Downs, "Economics, Taxes, and Tithes," in *The World of the New Testament*, pt. 2, chap. 12.

²² Downs, "Economics, Taxes, and Tithes," in *The World of the New Testament*, pt. 2, chap. 12.

²³ "U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts."

people.²⁴ As greed continues to devastate individuals, communities, and the environment, the pain is always felt by those with the lowest incomes, and disproportionately by people of color. They have been shut out of wealth-building and the opportunity to build stable families by structural racism in the form of red-lining, the school to prison pipeline, and the disproportionate separation of families by child welfare departments and the juvenile justice system. While slavery has been outlawed, African Americans are incarcerated five times as often as whites for similar offenses,²⁵ even though we know that whites committed 69 percent of all crimes in 2018.²⁶ The righteousness and justice sought by the Old Testament are in short supply for many today.

The ancient identification of widows, orphans, and strangers as deserving of special attention was tied to their status as people without the social resources and the protective factors needed to subsist. In the Ancient Near East, that protective factor was primarily connection to land-owning men. That's not entirely untrue today. Land owning still means having wealth to pass to your children. Maleness is not as important as having two adult incomes to stay ahead of expenses, but the end result is the same today as it was in ancient Israel; few can make it alone.

We still have widows, orphans, and strangers today, but I believe we have to expand the definition for our circumstances. I would argue that the U.S. has been locking up strangers, widows, and orphans in prison camps at the U.S./Mexico border. Some of those were not widows or orphans until they came in contact with the U.S. government. Redefining these terms can go even further.

²⁴ Noah Kirsch, "The 3 Richest Americans Hold More Wealth Than Bottom 50% Of The Country, Study Finds," *Forbes*, November 9, 2017, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/noahkirsch/2017/11/09/the-3-richest-americans-hold-more-wealth-than-bottom-50-of-country-study-finds/#265193113cf8>.

²⁵ "NAACP | Criminal Justice Fact Sheet," *NAACP*, accessed May 18, 2020, <https://www.naacp.org/criminal-justice-fact-sheet/>.

²⁶ "Table 43," *FBI*, accessed August 30, 2020, <https://ucr.fbi.gov/crime-in-the-u.s/2018/crime-in-the-u.s.-2018/tables/table-43>.

At a time when our incarceration of men of color leaves women without the fathers of their children, we have created a new kind of widow. When our public assistance policies disincentivize marriage, we have created a new kind of widow. When single parents, who make up about a third of all households in poverty, must work multiple part time jobs and take long bus rides that leave their children home alone, we have created a new kind of orphan. When just being a foreigner has been criminalized, and we ostracize those who are outside the tribe of white, Christian America, we have created new strangers. Somehow, we have forgotten something fundamental in the law and the prophets.

In all these times there have been laws and religious dictates to care for those who are the most vulnerable. There are countless practices and stories of generosity and hospitality that are inspiring. Yet there is greed, corruption, and a slanting of the systems that govern toward those at the top in almost all these times as well. Despite the will of God, within human nature it seems enough is never enough. We did not listen to Moses and the prophets then, and we do not listen to them now.

Oppression or Care in Deuteronomy?

Biblical scholarship and its historicity is not the primary point of this work and going too far down that road might open up a rabbit hole down which I'm not inclined to go. That said, some of the scholarship around the intention behind the Deuteronomic Code can only be considered through the lens of when those scholars believe the code was written. For Bennett, there's a line to be drawn between the Book of the Covenant and the Deuteronomic Code in

terms of modifications made by later authors with their own agendas, which he sees as happening no earlier than the 9th century B.C.E..²⁷

While the protection of widows and orphans, and the addition of the stranger for Israelites, may have begun as reflecting God's concern for those who were most vulnerable, it is never that simple when human nature is involved. When systems are created to protect the vulnerable, they can easily be perverted to benefit those in power. Bennett sees just that in the Deuteronomic Code: a construct of the powerful interests in charge at the time he proposes they were modified.

Centralizing the collection of tithes gave the priestly class access to leftover food even while creating transportation and timing barriers for vulnerable widows and orphans. That does not feel like coincidence to Bennett. "In fact," he says, "it is possible that these moral injunctions protected the interests of power elites instead of diminishing the suffering and misery of these types of persons in the biblical communities – positioning intellectual elites to stave off potential uprisings by local peasant farmers in the North during the ninth century B.C.E."²⁸

Bennett has equal scorn for the practice of gleaning. "I maintain that having to scour the fields, orchards, and vineyards for gleanings contributed to piecemeal disintegration in the pride of this vulnerable social subgroup in ancient Israelite society,"²⁹ he argues. This echoes the critique of modern forms of charity that demean those in poverty. How many of the churches I interviewed and the nonprofits I've worked for and with over the years force people to come to them regardless of transportation barriers, force them to answer embarrassing questions, or force them to demean themselves by standing in a food line?

²⁷ Bennett, *Injustice Made Legal*, 135.

²⁸ Bennett, *Injustice Made Legal*, 11.

²⁹ Bennett, *Injustice Made Legal*, 124.

Again, I don't think there's anything inherently wrong with providing some form of transactional care to those who are without societal protective factors. That work can in fact be lifesaving. Regardless of that, how those transactions are conducted, and whom they actually benefit, are important points to consider. As Bennett asserts, some charity "confines categories of people to positions of socioeconomic inferiority, and it allows them to be taken advantage of and used for someone else's profit. Oppression therefore impedes one from gaining and maintaining personal dignity."³⁰ Recent popular books like *Toxic Charity* and *When Helping Hurts* have tried to wrestle with what happens when our good intentions do harm. Their sales numbers tell us we know something is wrong with the way we engage with those living in poverty, and yet very little has changed in thousands of years.

Beyond Deuteronomy - Is this the way it's supposed to be?

So many of the experts who analyzed the texts on which I focused have found a strand of thought in their analysis of text that I find somewhat disturbing as a social activist. That is the idea in multiple biblical texts that there is a hierarchy within all the societies we're talking about because that's how God wants it. To quote the popular song from the eighties, "that's just the way it is, some things will never change."³¹ These texts seem to claim it's not the hierarchical system itself that is an aberration, but rather it's whether those at the top care for the vulnerable in proportion to what they've been given. When they don't, the message some see is it's not for us to take matters into our own hands, but to wait for God's judgment on those who would oppress people living in poverty and injustice.

³⁰ Bennett, *Injustice Made Legal*, 110.

³¹ Bruce Hornsby and the Range, "The Way it Is," RCA, Recorded in Sausalito, CA in September 1986.

These themes come up again and again in the context of the Old Testament:

In my opinion there is no escaping the conclusion that both ideally and in practice society was hierarchically ordered, and although of course there can be (and is) much criticism of individuals at any level of the social pile, there is little evidence to suggest that the whole structure should be overturned. Rather, whatever abuses the later medieval feudal structure may have nurtured, in Israel the emphasis was upon the ideal that superior status implied enhanced responsibility to those lower down...³²

In the texts of the Old Testament:

Putting these sayings together suggests that underlying a concern for the poor in Proverbs are the views that (i) poverty is sometimes just one of those things, a part of the created order which there is no need to question in ultimate terms, that (ii) the proper response is, where possible, to imitate the creator who made things that way but who shows impartial care for rich and poor alike, so that (iii) generosity is natural and not itself impoverishing, since it fits with the created order that we find in God's world.³³

And in the New Testament texts:

Some passages, like Mary's song and Jesus's hometown sermon, sound revolutionary. Others seem more inclined toward charity rather than a restructuring of society. Some interpreters regard Luke as "the Gospel for the poor." More see Luke addressing believers who enjoy status and means with a warning. Their security is only temporary. It may well depend on how they relate to the poor.³⁴

Given that I recently served a community action agency founded by President Johnson's

"War on Poverty," I found PHEME PERKINS' take on this theme especially striking:

Neither Jesus nor Paul has a socio-economic project for taking apart the structures of society in order to "... bring down the powerful ... lift up the lowly; ... fill the hungry with good things, and send the rich away empty ..." (Luke 1:52-53). Only the final realization of God's reign at the end of days will accomplish that. No "war on poverty" is being declared in the Beatitudes. The moral imperative for God's people is to treat the poor, the disadvantaged, the resident alien, and the enslaved in their midst with justice because the God of Israel is the patron of such persons.³⁵

³² Williamson, *He Has Shown You What Is Good*, 41.

³³ Williamson, *He Has Shown You What Is Good*, 62.

³⁴ Greg Carey, *Stories Jesus Told: How to Read a Parable* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2019), chap. 6, Kindle.

³⁵ PHEME PERKINS, "The Poor in the New Testament," in *Poverty: Responding Like Jesus*, eds. Kenneth R. Himes, OFM and Conor M. Kelly, (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2018), 24, Kindle.

In some texts and interpretations, the people aren't called to take apart the oppressive systems of society because it is our punishment for our corporate sins. As Blomberg puts it, "God's people are never called to revolt, not even peacefully, against their foreign adversaries, but are warned about the violent ways in which God will use those nations to punish Israel for its sins."³⁶ Sharp points to the idea that it's for God to seek vengeance for injustice, not us. "Another proposal is that since the psalms call for God to wreak vengeance, humans are prevented from acting in vengeance themselves, thus this kind of material serves the helpful function of deflecting human aggression."³⁷ But helpful for whom?

If oppressed Israelites thought they just had to wait for God to bring retribution, I can see the benefit to the powers of that time. Oppressors have used that kind of device to quell potential revolution before and since. Why risk putting yourself in physical danger when your deity will eventually bring retribution for you? What's the point of fighting your lot in life when this is where God wants you to be? Slave masters in the American south, who were often outnumbered by their slaves, had no problem with their slaves having access to that kind of prophetic language if it quelled revolt. Society has long told the poor that the reward for their suffering will be in the next life.

As it turns out, there was quite a bit of that language in the texts of the Prophets as well as in Jesus's teaching. It is often expressed as the Day of YHWH or the Day of the Lord.

The idea, expressed both in historical terms and in eschatological terms that anticipate the end of history, is this: the LORD is coming to vindicate the righteous and punish those who have been exploiting and harming others with apparent impunity. The motif occurs no fewer than thirteen times in the Book of the Twelve, in four different prophets: Joel (1:15; 2:1, 11; 3:4, 14), Amos (5:18, 20), Obadiah (v. 15), and Zephaniah (1:7, 14).³⁸

³⁶ Blomberg, *Neither Poverty nor Riches*, 70.

³⁷ Sharp, *The Prophetic Literature*, chap. 3.

³⁸ Sharp, *The Prophetic Literature*, chap. 5.

With all of that said, there is still an imperative for the wealthy and powerful to act now, in this life, whether defended by the Bible or other authorities.

Carolyn Sharp sees this in Amos, who uses this tradition “to undermine the complacency of those within the covenant community who ‘trample on the poor’ and ‘afflict the righteous’ (5:11, 12). This catastrophic expression of divine justice will take them by surprise.”³⁹ This idea of taking those oppressors who ignore the law and the prophets by surprise shows up time and again in the parables of Jesus as well.

In *Stories Jesus Told*, Greg Carey shows us this through the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus. The Rich Man didn’t think it mattered that he ignored Lazarus’ need until his position after death made it clear to him that things had changed. Jesus ties this directly to the Rich Man ignoring Moses and the Prophets, showing that for him this imperative goes back to Exodus and Deuteronomy. Carey lays out a concluding argument for our action now when he says, “(l)et us simply consider the possibility that it matters what we do in this life - specifically, how we relate to the poor - and it matters more than we might be willing to appreciate.”⁴⁰ Carey also makes it clear in his work that we don’t have to wait for some future Kingdom of Heaven because “God’s kingdom happens when God’s will is done.”⁴¹

Catholic justice traditions take that even further, going beyond biblical authority and encouraging us to work for God’s Kingdom against the systems that perpetuate poverty. In *A Vow of Poverty* by Sandra Marie Schneiders, she discusses these systems as manifested evil in the world in contrast to those who see it as “just one of those things”:

Poverty, the evil which is eating up our brothers and sisters in so many places in the world, is not natural disaster nor merely the result of individual selfish choices. It is a systemic evil that must be dealt with systematically; it is institutional sin that must be

³⁹ Sharp, *The Prophetic Literature*, chap. 5.

⁴⁰ Carey, *Stories Jesus Told*, chap. 6.

⁴¹ Carey, *Stories Jesus Told*, chap. 2.

dealt with institutionally. Whatever poverty means today, it has to take account of these realities.⁴²

Of course, Catholicism allows for a continuing and changing locus of authority in the writings and the person of the Pope. Pope Francis in particular, as a Jesuit, has brought more weight recently to discussions of poverty, justice, and systemic change. In *A Church That is Poor and for the Poor*, he calls for “working to eliminate the structural causes of poverty and to promote the integral development of the poor, as well as small daily acts of solidarity in meeting the real needs which we encounter.”⁴³

I am struck by the Pope’s “yes, and” call to both meet people’s daily needs and attack the structural causes of poverty. While I have rarely encountered institutions interested in both, I firmly believe both are necessary to eliminate poverty. Himes, who names the first as charity and the latter as justice, highlights the lack of conflict in bringing these two ideas together:

The relationship of charity and justice is not one of opposition. There is a better way to think about these two virtues. In his social encyclical *Caritas in veritate*, Benedict XVI described the work of justice as the “institutional path—we might also call it the political path—of charity, no less excellent and effective than the kind of charity which encounters the neighbor directly.” In other words, justice can be seen as the political expression of charity, or the application of charity to the institutional and structural aspects of a society.⁴⁴

I would go a step further to say that if our acts of individual charity are to be meaningful, they *must* be combined with acts of institutional reform. What good would it do to save a person from drowning, and then set them in a boat headed for a waterfall? When I think about a text that brings home this point for me, perhaps none speaks to the struggle of individual charity without structural change more than the Book of Ruth.

⁴² Sandra Marie Schneiders, IHM, “A Vow of Poverty,” in *Poverty: Responding Like Jesus*, eds. Kenneth R. Himes, OFM and Conor M. Kelly, (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2018), 42, Kindle.

⁴³ Pope Francis, “A Church That is Poor and for the Poor,” in *Poverty: Responding Like Jesus*, eds. Kenneth R. Himes, OFM and Conor M. Kelly, (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2018), 114, Kindle.

⁴⁴ Kenneth R. Himes, OFM, “Poverty and Christian Discipleship,” in *Poverty: Responding Like Jesus*, eds. Kenneth R. Himes, OFM and Conor M. Kelly, (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2018), 19, Kindle.

Ruth – The Power of Luck in an Oppressive System

Ruth is a complicated story for me. She is clearly a hero; a woman of faithfulness and strength who risks everything to make a place for herself and her family in a world that sees no value in women who have no male prospects to whom to be tied. In the system within which they live, she and Naomi are essentially property without an owner. As Wil Gafney explains in *The Africana Bible*, “Ruth is multiply marginalized, socially and sexually vulnerable.”⁴⁵ It is clear that Boaz himself sees this when he warns her about the men in his fields and chooses to protect her. She could easily fall prey to someone who wants to take advantage.

In some ways I struggle with Naomi’s decisions as that seems to be precisely what she attempts to do to Ruth: take advantage. Sending Ruth to Boaz in a sexually vulnerable way as she does makes Ruth a utility toward Naomi’s scheme for reconnection to society. As Gafney points out, “[w]hen Naomi tells Ruth that Boaz will tell her what to do, what is left unsaid is that she should do whatever he says; it is certainly possible that he will demand sex.”⁴⁶ As distasteful as this seems to me as a modern reader, though, and possibly for ancient readers as well, this is literally about survival for these women. Certainly from a modern perspective, these women are not just living in poverty, they are destitute and even reviled:

On a cultural level, gleaning is associated with a particular subset of society. In our society, paying for groceries with public assistance (such as food stamps, WIC), working as a migrant laborer, or receiving welfare benefits are practices that are associated with, but not limited to, those who are brown, black, non-English-speaking, and single with children. Thus as we read the story of Ruth, we should consider the possibility that many

⁴⁵ Wil Gafney, “Ruth: Overview of the Book,” in *The Africana Bible*, ed. Hugh R. Page Jr., (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010), sec. 5, pt. 5, Kindle.

⁴⁶ Gafney, “Ruth: Overview of the Book,” in *The Africana Bible*, sec. 5, pt. 5.

of the people that she encountered would have viewed her with disdain because she was a gleaner.⁴⁷

That disdain, which I believe is at least partially born of people living in poverty serving as a reminder to the upper classes of their own vulnerability, is a powerful force.

With Ruth we see Bennett's criticism of gleaning given a human face. As if the humiliation of following behind workers and relying on what they drop is not bad enough, her place in society as a foreign woman with no family or status leaves her at risk of assault even as she does humiliating work to keep herself and Naomi alive. Her body, her spirit, and her faithfulness are all that she has, and she uses all three to escape from destitution.

The revelation for me in rereading Ruth through the lens of modern poverty is that this situation plays out again and again in present day America for millions of women. The opinion piece *Single Mothers Are Not the Problem* in the New York Times on February 10, 2018, set off a flurry of conservative opinion piece responses and blog posts to push the opposite, socially dominant point of view. Given that the *One Good Job* plan identifies that 48 percent of the people living in poverty in Lancaster City are living in single parent households,⁴⁸ and the vast majority of them are single mother households, this is a pertinent topic.

In my experience, when a woman living in poverty is unmarried and has children, especially if those children have more than one father, she is judged harshly even by the most liberal social service proponents. For me, however, I see the story of Ruth in the situation of these women. So often a relationship with a man represents very real protective factors for a woman living in poverty. Not the least of these is a potential second income.

⁴⁷ Fentress-Williams, "Ruth," in *Abingdon Old Testament Commentaries*, ed. Miller, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2012), 31, Kindle.

⁴⁸ Jurman and Smith-Wade-El, *One Good Job*, 23.

That said, we know from modern research on phenomena like Scarcity,⁴⁹ Toxic Stress,⁵⁰ Trauma,⁵¹ and Adverse Childhood Experiences⁵² that a life in poverty can lead to very real and dangerous dysfunction. According to Harvard's Center for the Developing Child, a stable relationship with an adult is the most important protective factor in the face of adversity.⁵³ For a young woman trapped in destitution and dysfunction, an intimate relationship with a man can seem like an escape route. Unlike Boaz, however, not all men live up to their responsibilities in these relationships. These women aren't usually as lucky as Ruth. When you add in factors like public assistance policies that dis-incentivize marriage and mass incarceration of men of color, you end up in a society that has, as I've said previously, created new categories of widows and orphans.

Ruth, a true widow, is the hero of her story, using what agency she had to escape her circumstances. Her escape, however, like the escape attempts of the women I've just described, shouldn't be necessary, then or now. Danna Nolan Fewell and David Miller Gunn's reimagining of Ruth's story in *Compromising Redemption* does a wonderful job of expanding the textual and contextual clues of the story to broaden our understanding and more fully show Ruth's agency. Even so, they acknowledge that something is missing when they say, "(s)he has striven with the patriarchy and wrought security out of insecurity; yet her action has been all along conditioned by the system which set her story going and which remains firmly in place as it ends."⁵⁴

⁴⁹ "The Scarcity Trap: Why We Keep Digging When We're Stuck In A Hole," *NPR.org*, accessed May 18, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/2017/03/20/520587241/the-scarcity-trap-why-we-keep-digging-when-were-stuck-in-a-hole>.

⁵⁰ Matthew S. Bennett, *Connecting Paradigms: A Trauma-Informed & Neurobiological Framework for Motivational Interviewing Implementation*, (Denver, CO: Bennett Innovation Group, 2017), Kindle.

⁵¹ Bessel van der Kolk MD, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*, 1 edition (New York: Penguin Books, 2014), Kindle.

⁵² "Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)," *CDC*, accessed September 8, 2020, <https://www.cdc.gov/violence-prevention/aces/index.html>.

⁵³ "Resilience," Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, accessed May 18, 2020, <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/science/key-concepts/resilience/>.

⁵⁴ Danna Nolan Fewell and David M. Gunn, *Compromising Redemption: Relating Characters in the Book of Ruth*, 1st edition (Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1991), 105.

Essentially, Ruth receives charity and relationship, but not justice and certainly not change for any woman who comes after her.

In some ways, pieces of the system that demeaned Ruth remain firmly in place to this day. Even worse, so often we vilify our modern “Ruths” for going to the threshing floor to find escape from despair instead of vilifying and changing the systemic forces that drive them there. To me, this emphasizes the view that charity is not enough. Himes shares this view:

One description is that charity is equivalent to pulling drowning people out of a river. That’s a necessary and life-giving service, to be sure. But justice goes upstream to find out why people are falling in the river in the first place and builds a safe bridge so that people can walk across the river. Therefore, charity becomes less necessary, less urgent.⁵⁵

This very “public health” view of justice dictates that we don’t just need metaphorical lifeguards for the drowning, but metaphorical swim instructors, bridge builders, and engineers as well. Unfortunately, in the church as well as in most secular social service organizations, we are equipped almost exclusively with lifeguards. We congratulate ourselves as saviors of the drowning even as we leave the tattered and dangerous bridges they’re falling from in place.

Ruth uses what resources and agency she has to work around an oppressive system. Essentially, she gets lucky. Her gamble might have ended very differently. As someone who has identified that I, myself escaped the cycle of poverty largely through luck, I know that luck is not a strategy. If people can escape this system created by men through luck, then people can change this system so that others can escape intentionally.

⁵⁵ Himes, “Poverty and Christian Discipleship,” in *Poverty: Responding Like Jesus*, 19.

Spiritual Poverty or Material Poverty? Recruiting Members or Fighting Poverty?

In “The Poor in the New Testament,” Pheme Perkins states, “Insofar as the figure of Jesus, not Torah observance, is the focal point of Christian piety, exemplary stories either about Jesus or told by him (parables) define how disciples should relate to the poor.”⁵⁶ While I agree that relational engagement with people living in poverty can be seen in stories about Jesus, I think Jesus’s parables are much more complicated. Just as Bennett saw a strategy of building up the cultic practice in Deuteronomy’s insistence that tithes be brought to places of worship for distribution, I see the same when I read the parables and the gospels in general. Are Jesus’s stories and the stories about Jesus primarily concerned with spiritual poverty in the world and building his number of followers, or are they guides for how to address material poverty?

Bruce C. Birch and Larry Rasmussen see this tension laid out starkly in the story of the woman who anoints Jesus’s feet with expensive oils from Matthew 26:6–13, Mark 14:3–9, and John 12:1–8:

Those who have defined the gospel solely in terms of individual and “internal” salvation use this text to justify a total lack of concern for the victims of poverty and the establishment of a just social order. They maintain that this text proclaims the futility of seeking to relieve the condition of the poor and focuses attention instead on the person of Jesus. To them this means the elevation of spiritual needs over material needs.⁵⁷

I find it interesting that this passage is not in Luke, the gospel many would say is the most focused on poverty and social justice. The application in the analysis above may well be why. A serving pastor once quoted that very text to me to justify why his ministry didn’t address poverty and why the class I was teaching on social justice, in which he was a student, was unnecessary in

⁵⁶ Perkins, “The Poor in the New Testament,” in *Poverty: Responding Like Jesus*, 22.

⁵⁷ Bruce C. Birch and Larry Rasmussen, “A Difficult Text: ‘For You Always Have the Poor with You,’” in *Poverty: Responding Like Jesus*, eds. Kenneth R. Himes, OFM and Conor M. Kelly, 30, Kindle.

his opinion. Lest you picture a stereotype in your head, it's worth noting that this student was African American.

Birch and Rasmussen tie this text back to Deuteronomy 15:11. That text states, "For there will never cease to be poor in the land. Therefore I command you, 'You shall open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy and to the poor, in your land'" In that context these authors see a different conclusion than those focused on individual spiritual growth. "(Jesus) is reminding them that the existence of the poor is a constant judgment against the whole covenant community. The woman is not to be self-righteously singled out; the poor are a corporate responsibility."⁵⁸

There is ample evidence for Jesus not having a problem with the wealth of some of his followers. We know he could enjoy a meal or banquet without demanding that the food be given to the poor. We also know this isn't the only example of something Jesus said being used in a way other than what he might have intended.

As I shared earlier, Matthew 25:31-46 was one of the texts directly cited or quoted/paraphrased as the justification for their engagement with poverty by the church leaders I interviewed. PHEME Perkins goes so far as to call that text, "(a) dramatic example of this expanded concern to alleviate the suffering of any person, regardless of whether or not the individual is part of our social network."⁵⁹ This view, however, doesn't track with what Blomberg sees in the text:

The majority perspective has understood Jesus's 'brothers' in verse 40 to refer to spiritual kin, as the term (*adelphoi*) does elsewhere in Matthew in every instance in which biological siblings are not in view (see 5:22-24, 47; 7:3-5; 12:48-50; 18:15 twice, 21, 35; 23:8; 28:10). The term 'little ones', of which 'the least' (25:40, 45) is the superlative form, also without exception in Matthew refers to disciples (10:42; 18:6, 10, 14; cf. also 5:19 and 11:11). This makes the point of Jesus's teaching closely parallel to

⁵⁸ Birch and Rasmussen, "A Difficult Text" in *Poverty: Responding Like Jesus*, 33.

⁵⁹ Perkins, "The Poor in the New Testament," in *Poverty: Responding Like Jesus*, 24.

Matthew 10:42: Jesus's itinerant followers (today we might call them Christian missionaries) must be cared for by those to whom they minister. Affording material help to those who preach in the name of Jesus demonstrates acceptance of the missionaries' message at the spiritual level (cf., e.g., Ladd 1974a; Court 1985; Donahue 1986). This view is almost certainly correct.⁶⁰

Many scholars regard this passage as addressing the need to care for other disciples, not for the needy in general.

Carey points out that much of Jesus's story telling came with an air of exclusivity. To be fair, many of those stories, like the Rich Man and Lazarus, depicted people excluding themselves by their own actions. Even so, Jesus himself talks of excluding people:

The disciples ask Jesus why he speaks in parables, and Jesus replies that he uses parables so that those outside will fail to understand. The parables, then, discriminate between insiders and outsiders. Insiders should understand what Jesus means, but outsiders will find the parables frustrating or confusing.⁶¹

While I agree with this assessment, I think there's still an argument to be made that the outsiders' own stubborn sinfulness is what keeps them from understanding. Their actions, choices, and attitudes are what keep them outside. We see this same theme in C. S. Lewis' classic *The Great Divorce*, where people choose to stay in Hell rather than embrace what it means to be in Heaven.⁶² Still, the idea that Jesus made it harder for some to be on the inside can be uncomfortable.

Carey contends the gospel writers were not all equally comfortable with this idea of active exclusivity either:

Mark is drawing from Isaiah: "Otherwise, they might turn their lives around and be forgiven" (see Isaiah 6:9-10). Luke omits this line, perhaps leaving open the possibility that even outsiders might find forgiveness. Indeed, the larger story of Luke's Gospel seems a little more open to that possibility than Mark does.⁶³

⁶⁰ Blomberg, *Neither Poverty nor Riches*, 126.

⁶¹ Carey, *Stories Jesus Told*, chap. 1.

⁶² C. S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce*, Rev. ed. (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2015), Kindle.

⁶³ Carey, *Stories Jesus Told*, chap. 1.

Blomberg sees this tension in the gospels as well. “Christ clearly concentrates on healing or exorcizing the physically needy. But this ministry always also occurs in a context of calling them to faith and discipleship, and he steers his audiences to the claims that in his miracle-working ministry the kingdom has arrived, and therefore the king, the Messiah, has come.”⁶⁴ Being a good person and helping people suffering in poverty is not necessarily the same thing as being one of the insiders.

This is a tension Blomberg sees in the Prophets also:

Clearly, ethical issues, including the use of one’s material possessions, rank among the major topics of prophetic rhetoric. But one has only to read in its entirety virtually any book of prophecy at random to see that at least as serious as the Israelites’ ethical sins was their idolatry. Theological and ethical defection from God’s will consistently go hand in hand.⁶⁵

Carey also dives into this tension between grace and justice in terms of different “camps” of modern interpreters of The Parable of the Laborers, where a landowner pays the same amount to workers who began at the start of the day and those who began later. “Both the grace camp and the justice camp agree that divine justice involves providing people what they need most. For the grace camp, what we need most is salvation, final deliverance from sin and entrance into eternal life.”⁶⁶ Jesus does teach us to ask God for our “daily bread,” another reference to manna, and what I refer to in this work as a theology of “enough is enough.” However, when the Devil offers Jesus food, he rejects it with the admonition that we do not live by bread alone.

So, which is it? Are the laws about tithing and gleaning in Deuteronomy, the condemnations of the Prophets, and Jesus’s stories primarily focused on recruitment to cultic practice and spiritual concerns, or are they primarily focused on helping those living in poverty?

⁶⁴ Blomberg, *Neither Poverty nor Riches*, 109.

⁶⁵ Blomberg, *Neither Poverty nor Riches*, 70.

⁶⁶ Carey, *Stories Jesus Told*, chap 2.

I believe it's both, but I won't be so wishy washy as to leave it there. I think it's complicated and I've become convinced that intention matters.

In 2018 I was a speaker at the “Compelled by Love” event I described earlier. Over 40 churches were represented at the event, which was focused on teaching church leaders to think differently about outreach. During a panel at the end discussing ministering to people living in poverty, a pastor asked, “but what about evangelism?” My response was, if you try to help people living in poverty because you want more church members, you'll likely achieve neither goal. If you try to help people living in poverty because you genuinely care about them in your heart, and you believe that their wellbeing is at least as important as your own, then you might just achieve both goals.

Intention matters. No one wants to be used by another person as a means to some self-serving end, whether that's growing your membership or trying to save your own soul. A desperate person might accept help from someone who was helping because they wanted to get into Heaven, or because they were recruiting for a church, but I don't think that's the kind of intention that leads to relationship or the transformation of either party. I think relationship springs from a genuine concern for and interest in the other person and a mutuality born of our shared humanity. Where I see a clue in this is the order of Jesus's action. He routinely tells people to follow him, an invitation to relationship, but he does so after he offers them physical healing, not as a condition prior to helping.

I believe the very idea that Christians are helping or saving people in poverty is actually upside down. To lean into the title of the event I just mentioned, I believe that if we are compelled by love to help someone, to share with them those things with which we've been blessed that are more than enough for us, it actually helps us more than it helps them. They get a

temporary bandage for a bad situation, but we get something permanent. If in helping another my own salvation is not my intention, if in fact I expect nothing for myself, my spiritual enrichment and betterment as a human being is still the result. When those self-focused outcomes are my intention, my own self-interest becomes a barrier and I actually do harm to myself.

I'm reminded of the story of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector, where the Pharisee follows the law and tithes as an expression of self-righteousness and spiritual condescension. One question I can't answer is how many of the church leaders I interviewed lead congregations that truly see people living in poverty as their equals versus seeing them as a box to check on their own spiritual journeys toward righteousness. The truth is the person living in poverty may not be the person who most needs help in these scenarios.

In examining the parable of the Good Samaritan, Carey points out that the vast majority of readers have that story upside down. He suggests most use the story as a guide for how we should treat the person who needs help when we come across them. "We assume the chair of privilege, assuming we are the ones who will decide whether to extend help or not."⁶⁷ He goes on to say:

To put it indelicately, the parable Jesus tells places the reader/hearer in the position of the help-ee and identifies the neighbor and the help-er. Our charitable interpretation, like the Good Samaritan laws, gets things exactly the other way around, turning ourselves into the Samaritans and the helpers. The parable begins by inviting readers to imagine themselves alongside the victim at the roadside, half naked and in desperate need of help.⁶⁸

In this interpretation, Jesus wants us to imagine ourselves not just as the ones who need help. He wants us to imagine ourselves as the ones who need help from the reviled "other" or the "stranger."

⁶⁷ Carey, *Stories Jesus Told*, chap. 4.

⁶⁸ Carey, *Stories Jesus Told*, chap. 4.

What if the church in its decline is actually the one bleeding and half naked in a ditch, spiritually if not physically? What if its members are the ones with their spiritual lives draining away within the gates of their insular, worldly clubhouses? What if only the unexpected stranger can save them?

Pope Francis also flips the script in terms of how we should think about evangelizing people living in poverty in a way that resonates with Carey's Samaritan conclusion:

We need to let ourselves be evangelized by them. The new evangelization is an invitation to acknowledge the saving power at work in their lives and to put them at the centre of the Church's pilgrim way. We are called to find Christ in them, to lend our voice to their causes, but also to be their friends, to listen to them, to speak for them and to embrace the mysterious wisdom which God wishes to share with us through them.⁶⁹

Checking our privilege at the door, then, seems to me an important aspect of doing this work. We should act out of love and leave our own salvation and the evangelization of others to God. As Carey points out in analyzing Matthew 25:31-46⁷⁰ as well as in *Stories Jesus Told*, there is an element of surprise in God's judgment. "In Matthew, goats don't know they're goats (25:31-46). But neither do sheep know they're sheep."⁷¹

In Carey's view, while there is an exclusivity inherent in the existence of those who "get it" and those who don't, privilege has no place in the kingdom Jesus describes. Divesting of your own excess material goods and helping those suffering in poverty does. As he puts it:

It's not simply that in God's reign everyone receives enough. It's that Jesus proclaims a world in which our assumptions about standing in God's dominion are flipped upside-down. Those who think they're first had better think again!⁷²

⁶⁹ Pope Francis, "A Church That is Poor and for the Poor," in *Poverty: Responding Like Jesus*, 115.

⁷⁰ Carey, "Commentary on Matthew 25:31-46 by Greg Carey," November 23, 2014, <http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentaryid=2209>.

⁷¹ Carey, *Stories Jesus Told*, aft.

⁷² Carey, *Stories Jesus Told*, chap. 2.

The first shall be last, and the last shall be first. If some think they're saving souls and evangelizing people through their outreach and ministry, they may just have it backwards. It may be that the people living in poverty are not the ones who need the saving and evangelizing. Those who walk around in confidence thinking they're sheep, may in fact be goats.

Enough is Enough

So, that leads to the question of how we use all of this in advocating for and assisting people living in poverty. What do the laws and stories of the Bible tell us to do about poverty? How do we apply texts and teachings from hundreds and thousands of years ago to an age of lightning-fast data, global capitalism, and growing oligarchy, plutocracy, kleptocracy, and authoritarianism? That too, like all the texts examined here, is complicated.

We have created a society where a few have an obscene surplus of material wealth, some have more than they need, and many don't have enough. This is not what God intended if Jesus and Moses and the early, agrarian Israel are to be believed. As Carey puts it, "(i)t seems noteworthy that Jesus pictures the reign of God through a world in which everyone receives what they need."⁷³ Blomberg concludes that, "it is important for professing Christians today to ask themselves how many unused surplus goods, property or investments they accumulate without any thought for the needy of our world."⁷⁴ It is perhaps telling that Americans spend more annually on the maintenance of their church budgets (\$127.37 billion)⁷⁵ or their pets (\$87

⁷³ Carey, *Stories Jesus Told*, aft.

⁷⁴ Blomberg, *Neither Poverty nor Riches*, 2015, 119.

⁷⁵ "2018 Online Giving Statistics, Trends & Data: The Ultimate List of Giving Stats," *Nonprofits Source* (blog), accessed September 7, 2020, <https://nonprofitssource.com/online-giving-statistics/>.

billion)⁷⁶ than they give to human service organizations (\$50.06 billion).⁷⁷ It may be even more telling how much of that human service money goes to the salaries and infrastructure of the organizations rather than into the empowerment of the people living in poverty. As long as we have a transactional anti-poverty system, that will remain a necessary evil.

I can imagine human services professionals recoiling as I describe what they do as any kind of evil, but what else can we call “help” that often keeps people stuck where they are while allowing the helper to feel good about themselves? If we’re only, or even mostly, transactional, we’re not helping anyone solve the core reason they needed help. Hunger is a symptom. Homelessness is a symptom. Those immediate needs absolutely need to be met, but if we never address the deeper, systemic and traumatic issues that caused the needs, then we have contributed to the systems of inequity and injustice that created them in the first place. We can contribute to those systems of oppression in a variety of ways. That conversation is an uncomfortable one.

Not only do people tend to see the need for salvation in the other, but they also tend to see the sin in others as well. Jesus says as much in Matthew 7:3-5 and Luke 6:42 when he admonishes us not to worry about the speck of sawdust in our brother’s eye when there is a plank in our own. This is confirmed by social psychologist Jonathan Haidt in his book *The Happiness Hypothesis*. In describing a series of experiments in which students predicted their own generosity along with the generosity of others, he concluded that we look at ourselves through a “rose colored mirror”:

In other words, subjects used base rate information properly to revise their predictions of others, but they refused to apply it to their rosy self-assessments. We judge others by

⁷⁶ Sarah Berger, “Americans’ Pet Spending Rose 50% from 2013 to 2018,” *MagnifyMoney* (blog), accessed September 7, 2020, <https://www.magnifymoney.com/blog/banking/pet-spending/>.

⁷⁷ “2018 Online Giving Statistics, Trends & Data.” *Nonprofit Source*, accessed September 7, 2020. <https://nonprofitssource.com/online-giving-statistics/>

their behavior, but we think we have special information about ourselves—we know what we are “really like” inside, so we can easily find ways to explain away our selfish acts and cling to the illusion that we are better than others.⁷⁸

It is the same when we’re talking about larger issues of justice and injustice, good and evil.

Someone else is creating the oppressive systems that perpetuate greed and poverty. We’re right with God because it would be too painful, or too hard, to imagine ourselves doing harm.

Haidt adeptly describes this dangerous inclination to avoid self-reflection and instead to choose sides:

We all commit selfish and shortsighted acts, but our inner lawyer ensures that we do not blame ourselves or our allies for them. We are thus convinced of our own virtue, but quick to see bias, greed, and duplicity in others. We are often correct about others’ motives, but as any conflict escalates we begin to exaggerate grossly, to weave a story in which pure virtue (our side) is in a battle with pure vice (theirs).⁷⁹

We don’t like it when the truth breaks into our imagined righteousness.

Despite this human proclivity, or perhaps because of it, H. G. M. Williamson holds up a mirror to our American, middle class complicity in the systems that create poverty. He highlights our sins of oppression in our behavior and consumption in that, “many of our western demands for cheap goods of all kinds often cause others in manufacturing or trade to oppress their workers on our behalf.”⁸⁰ Even if we’re not directly contributing to the problem, he still sees a demand for action:

If we adopt a legalistic approach to social justice, we may conclude that we have not ‘broken the law’; there will not be the breaking of any one biblical command that can be laid to our charge. But such an approach would exalt a passive life of self-satisfied pietism above the biblical trumpet call for justice and righteousness in imitation of the divine king, an abdication of Christian responsibility to love in a transformative manner, a denial of basic biblical principles on which our faith is supposedly grounded.⁸¹

⁷⁸ Jonathan Haidt, *The Happiness Hypothesis: Finding Modern Truth in Ancient Wisdom*, 1st edition (New York: Basic Books, 2006), 88–89, Kindle.

⁷⁹ Haidt, *The Happiness Hypothesis*, 95.

⁸⁰ Williamson, *He Has Shown You What Is Good*, 80.

⁸¹ Williamson, *He Has Shown You What Is Good*, 109.

This is in line with Haidt's premise that we tend to only be realistic about ourselves when faced with concrete traits. When there is room in our self-assessment for ambiguity, however, we over-inflate how virtuous or talented we actually are. "As with other kinds of social comparison, ambiguity allows us to set up the comparison in ways that favor ourselves, and then to seek evidence that shows we are excellent co-operators."⁸²

Himes takes involvement in anti-poverty work beyond the concrete feeding the hungry and visiting the prisoner. "Philanthropy and direct personal involvement are vitally important as disciples follow in the way of the Lord Jesus, but preventing further and future poverty through social reform is also a work of neighbor love."⁸³ In "A Vow of Poverty," Sandra May Schneiders affirms that, "(t)he first focus is the societal one and has to do with our individual and corporate impact on the institutional sins which are making and keeping poor the majority of the earth's people while the minority becomes progressively richer."⁸⁴ Within those bigger issues lies the kind of ambiguity that allows us room to convince ourselves that what we are doing is enough and we are certainly not contributing to the injustice, despite our consumerism or what harmful practices might be supported in our 401(k) portfolios.

Enough is enough. I think the canon, from the law through Jesus, is clear in this theme. Coveting more than is enough for you leads to sin and suffering and does not reflect the kingdom of God. It's a very Buddhist perspective in that desire for more is the source of both our own and others' suffering. Having enough for yourself should not be enough for a follower of Jesus, though. You must also have a desire for, and must work toward, your neighbors and even your

⁸² Haidt, *The Happiness Hypothesis*, 90.

⁸³ Himes, "Poverty and Christian Discipleship," in *Poverty: Responding Like Jesus*, 20.

⁸⁴ Schneiders, "A Vow of Poverty," in *Poverty: Responding Like Jesus*, 42.

enemies having enough for themselves and their families. If you have more, I think the canon makes clear that you have a responsibility to share and show hospitality.

Having more than enough isn't in and of itself a bad thing. More than one of the authors I've cited herein identifies in the literature a view of hierarchy as part of God's design. More than one of them points out that in the story of The Rich Man and Lazarus, the Rich Man doesn't get punished because he's rich. He gets punished because he has the means to help, knows Lazarus is there outside his gates, even knows Lazarus' name, but ignores his needs.

It is complicated, and amazingly simple. Christians should not assume, like so many readers of The Good Samaritan, that we're not the ones in danger. We should not, like the Rich Man, ignore the person suffering outside of our gates. We should not let the Ruths of our world keep scrounging for our leftovers or keep compromising themselves to save their families by going to the metaphorical "threshing floor" over and over, looking for security that may or may not be found there. We should not perpetuate a system that creates widows, orphans, and strangers, and then leave them to fend for themselves. The church must act. It must move beyond looking into the rose-colored mirror that allows it to pretend it is not a part of the poverty and oppression that surrounds it, or it deserves the decline it is currently experiencing.

Make no mistake, like with Carey's analysis of The Good Samaritan, I believe the church is the Rich Man, not Lazarus or some pious, third-party observer. The church has Moses, the Prophets, and someone who has risen from the dead, and the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus, and still it lets people living in poverty suffer outside its gates. How many will be surprised if in the end they find they belonged to a social club for goats? As many, I imagine, as will be surprised that despite never setting foot in a church they ended up as sheep.

Despite the fact that I do think many are using Matthew 25:31-46 too simplistically, I also still think it holds power and authority for the work to come. As I stated earlier, both Blomberg and Carey conclude that Jesus is referring to his followers as the ones who are hungry, sick, imprisoned, and strangers, and I agree with them. Their reasoning and analysis are solid. Jesus also points out, however, that both the goats and the sheep are surprised. The Pharisee thinks he's going to Heaven and the Tax Collector thinks he's going to Hell. Both are wrong.

If we never know who is following Jesus, or which person is or isn't doing God's will on Earth as if in Heaven, then isn't Jesus still calling us to feed, heal, visit, and welcome everyone? I think the answer is yes, and because of the rest of the canon I think we're being called to do that without an agenda or any sense of privilege or superiority. As I reflect on that, I can't help but recall the end of the film "Schindler's List," when the main character realizes that the watch on his wrist could have saved one more person, and he is wracked with guilt and shame as a result.⁸⁵ Enough is enough, and yet enough is never enough for those that have more than they need and want to do some good with it.

Finally, recognizing fully that it was my bias coming into this work, I'm still convinced that relational work is crucial to both charity and justice. An ancient Israel where everyone has the land they need is a relational community. Hospitality is relational. Visitation in prison is relational. Ruth and Naomi are saved by relationship, as is Boaz, who may well have had no lineage going forward if not for Ruth. Jesus works through relationship and invites everyone and anyone into that relationship, regardless of their origin or past behavior.

The very idea of Jesus is relational. An omnipotent God could by definition achieve anything through force: giving us something or doing something to us. To achieve God's ends,

⁸⁵ Steven Spielberg, *Schindler's List*, (Universal City, CA: Universal Pictures, 1993).

though, God chose to be in intimate relationship with us through Jesus. Why then is so much of what churches do to engage with poverty transactional, and how do we change that before it's too late?

Chapter Four: Blessed Are Those Who Hunger and Thirst for Righteousness

I am not the first person to recognize that the church has become insular and that insularity is at least hurting the church if not contributing to its decline. In this chapter I will work to refine my view of relational ministry models through the examination and critique of two models that are active locally and beyond. These models are spelled out in *Missional: Joining God in the Neighborhood* and *The Art of Neighboring: Building Genuine Relationships Right Outside Your Door*. Both are being actively used or considered by church leaders in Lancaster County, with a lot of energy invested into one in particular just over the past few years. In fact, both models and books were introduced to me by Lancaster County faith leaders, some for the purpose of seeing if this work could connect to my work in community action.

Their similarities are striking, as are their practical differences. Both speak into the theology and some of the key concerns of my argument, but both diverge from my path in subtle and very direct ways. It is perhaps a case of similar diagnosis, but different prescriptions. Here I will examine each model's identified problem, their suggested solution, and the theological defenses they make for their assertions.

The Missional Model Problem – An Insular, Self-Centered Church

We'll start with the missional model, a movement to get churches more focused on the people in their communities than their building, membership, or programming. In this case, I'll focus on the reforms to the movement championed by Alan J. Roxburgh in his book *Missional: Joining God in the Neighborhood*. The model is prevalent in Lancaster primarily through the

Mennonite/Anabaptist churches that are embedded in the culture and history of the area. Eastern Mennonite Missions, located in the City of Lancaster, promises, “to help you move in mission wherever you are.”¹ Roxburgh, who is writing from a Canadian perspective, sees the North American church in general, as well as the missional movement itself, as missing the mark. Despite describing the church in Canada, Roxburgh may as well have been describing any number of churches I’ve encountered in my twenty-plus years of serving vulnerable populations.

Roxburgh’s critique of the missional movement reflects my secondary experiences partnering with churches as well as frustrations I’ve had personally as a church member. He describes one especially frustrating conference he attended where everything was focused on the church itself. “The focus of the conversation became the church. I believe this took us into a cul-de-sac as a movement, and now many use the missional language to describe anything they are doing in the church.”² His exasperation centered on the empty attempts to reform the church:

Up to this point the church has dealt with loss of place and identity in the community by trying out better marketing, offering a coffee bar on Sunday morning, providing a greater variety of options in terms of meeting personal taste in worship styles—introducing videos rather than sermons and candles where there had been none before—establishing strategic planning, creating a multisite ministry, and deciding all we have to do is turn our attention from the inside to the outside. All of that is window dressing, offering little to a world that is rapidly losing its way, perishing in the midst of a sea of change none of us can begin to understand. And we are silent, complicit in the plan to do more window dressing.³

That window dressing only masks what Roxburgh sees as the core problem.

Roxburgh sees the church as losing its place in society, largely from its disconnection from both the culture of a rapidly changing world and from the gospel. Like Drescher and many

¹ Micah Brickner, “Missional Living,” accessed December 28, 2020, <https://www.emm.org/missionalliving>.

² Roxburgh, *Missional*, 53.

³ Roxburgh, *Missional*, 21.

of the nones she interviewed, he sees an exodus from the church. His words could have appeared in Drescher's book seamlessly:

I think "Christian but not churched" is the rapidly emerging "spiritual but not religious" for our time—and the ones I talk to about this are often those who are most, not least, serious about their faith. They read, think, practice spiritual disciplines and works of service and justice, but don't "go" anywhere.⁴

Roxburgh lays this decline at the feet of the church because of its singular focus on itself, more specifically, its focus on increasing the number of people sitting in its pews.

Roxburgh sees the church as being wholly concerned with the church. The other two entities he identifies, the culture and the gospel, are not seen by the church as equally important as the brick and mortar institution, but rather as a means to an end to serve and build the church. They are used, and thus disrespected. All things are seen through the lens of perpetuating and building the institution within the four walls of churches.

For Roxburgh, this perspective, or "language house," was established during the Reformation:

The sixteenth-century Reformation bequeathed us a set of questions concerning the Christian life that were largely church questions, and they still shape our imagination. Whether in a traditional denomination or one of the newer, supposedly more culturally sensitive groups—such as seeker or simple or emergent—the same basic question directs conversation and practice, namely, What kind of church do we need and how do we make that kind of church work? By centering on such questions we remain captive to an imagination that is the direct heir of a pre- and post-Eurocentric Reformation culture.⁵

I have seen this myself over and over again in nonprofit organizations. If things aren't working, or even when they are faced with catastrophe, it seems to be part of human nature to cling to what is known and comfortable. We tend to reorganize around the edges of the comfortable instead of building something new and unknown.

⁴ Roxburgh, *Missional*, 66.

⁵ Roxburgh, *Missional*, 28.

This “language house” concept seems to describe this phenomenon. Roxburgh concludes that “we are all born into some kind of story that already exists, one that shapes us from the moment of our birth.”⁶ He also sees this working communally as a “social imaginary,” or “the common understanding people have about the way things are supposed to work.”⁷ This, of course, leads to trouble when the language we use doesn’t match our actions and the stories we tell ourselves no longer match who we really are.

Many churches I’ve encountered use the words “community” or “outreach” in their mission statements, vision statements, strategic plans, and marketing, but often these statements seem to be utilitarian and focused on the church itself. Roxburgh also sees this dichotomy, and the mismatch between the church’s social imaginary and the actions it takes or doesn’t take.⁸ Community is seen through the lens of growing the community inside the church walls. Outreach isn’t about relationships. Its core focus is recruitment. This intention is incredibly important.

In an earlier phase of my career, I was in charge of fundraising to provide healthcare for people living in poverty. I was successful at raising millions of dollars for that cause, even during the Great Recession, because helping people, not raising money, was always my focus. While I needed to be concerned about goals on a practical level, I also had to do my best to push those concerns to the back of my mind if not forget about them altogether. If a potential donor ever felt I was trying to use them to meet a quota or as a means to an end, I am convinced they would have known the difference and I would have been politely sent on my way. Instead, I shared my passion for equity in healthcare and the opportunity for them to be a part of that. My training as a

⁶ Roxburgh, *Missional*, 58.

⁷ Roxburgh, *Missional*, 59.

⁸ Roxburgh, *Missional*, 192.

seminarian served me well because Luke 17:33 was always in the back of my mind. “Whoever tries to keep their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life will preserve it.”

Letting go isn’t something we do well, though, as churches, as humans, and certainly not as Americans. There seems to be a self-centered mindset in the church that won’t allow reaching out to be something done for its own sake. It’s hard to say if a scarcity mindset triggered by the decline of the church has caused this approach of treating the other as a utility, or if treating the other as a utility has led to the decline of the church. It is possible that both are true. In any case, the church appears to be trapped in a feedback loop: a circling of the wagons that leads to a smaller and smaller number of wagons over time.

For Roxburgh, the problem is ultimately the lopsided way we’ve approached church, focusing primarily on the four walls and the rituals, traditions, and people inside it. In that model, the gospel and the culture serve the church as means to the end of growing it, which disrespect both. Roxburgh sees and encounters the presence of God in the church, but he also sees God as equally present in the gospel and the culture, and thinks the church has to treat all three components as equal parts of the whole in order to thrive.

The Neighboring Model Problem – An Insular Church and Poverty

The neighboring model first came to my attention when I had the opportunity to participate in “Compelled by Love,” the event I described earlier in this work. Dave Runyon was the keynote speaker and shared the model he and Jay Pathak created in their book *The Art of Neighboring: Building Genuine Relationships Right Outside Your Door*. Several of the churches in attendance at the event began to follow the model after the event, and the host, Water Street Rescue Mission, has hosted subsequent events to keep the momentum going.

Pathak and Runyon largely agree with Roxburgh on the idea of the church being too insular even as they add social ills created by poverty to the problem. They call also call out evangelism as a flawed motive quite clearly right from the start:

We want to be clear about something when it comes to the art of neighboring. This is not an evangelism strategy. And if evangelism is your only motive, then you won't be a very good neighbor. However, if neighboring is done with the right posture, then people who don't know God will most certainly come to know him.⁹

A strong statement with which I vehemently agree. Unfortunately, there is quite a bit of equivocating from these authors as they try to clarify that statement through what they call “ulterior” and “ultimate” motives:

Ulterior means something is intentionally kept concealed. An ulterior motive is usually manipulative. It's when we do or say one thing out in the open but intend or mean another thing in private. Ultimate means the farthest point of a journey. An ultimate goal is an eventual point or a longed-for destination. Examples are when a person begins college hoping to become a physician one day or when a kid starts playing basketball with dreams of one day playing in the NBA. The ulterior motive in good neighboring must never be to share the gospel. But the ultimate motive is just that—to share the story of Jesus and his impact on our lives. There's a big difference. The “agenda” we need to drop is the well-meaning tendency to be friends with people for the sole purpose of converting them to our faith.¹⁰

I share this excerpt because I think it's an important departure from Roxburgh's work, and my own. Roxburgh thinks the church, the gospel, and the culture are equals. Pathak and Runyon still have an “ultimate” motive if not an “ulterior” one. To me it seems their words here mean they're still doing this work to share the gospel, and I would argue after reading their book that the gospel still “ultimately” leads to the front door of the church for them. While they try to avoid it, they can't seem to commit to the idea that God is active in the culture, and that the culture should not be used for ulterior or ultimate ends.

⁹ Pathak, Runyon, and Frazee, *The Art of Neighboring*, 99.

¹⁰ Pathak, Runyon, and Frazee, *The Art of Neighboring*, 101.

As I said, Pathak and Runyon also disagree slightly with Roxburgh as to the core problem they're trying to solve. Like the missional movement, their movement calls people out of their churches to build relationships with neighbors. Where Roxburgh is concerned with the power of both the gospel and the culture, the neighboring movement was born out of a concern for poverty-related challenges in the city of Denver, Colorado. A group of pastors met with the mayor to discuss the issues, which were "a laundry list of social problems similar to what many cities face: at-risk kids, areas with dilapidated housing, child hunger, drug and alcohol abuse, loneliness, elderly shut-ins with no one to look in on them."¹¹

What the mayor said next inspired their entire movement:

"The majority of the issues that our community is facing would be eliminated or drastically reduced if we could just figure out a way to become a community of great neighbors." ... Frie shared candidly with us that, in his opinion, government programs aren't always the most effective way to address social issues. He went on to say that relationships are more effective than programs because they are organic and ongoing.¹²

When the pastors left that room Pathak remembers saying, "here we were asking the mayor how we can best serve the city, and he basically tells us that it would be great if we could just get our people to obey the second half of the Great Commandment."¹³ While I find that a powerful revelation, I take issue with where Pathak and Runyon go with it.

Pathak and Runyon agree with Roxburgh that the church is too insular, but they do not share his concept of the trinity between the church, the gospel, and the culture. Instead, they are focused on poverty and the Great Commandment. For these authors, their starting point is what the church can do to alleviate social ills.

¹¹ Pathak, Runyon, and Frazee, *The Art of Neighboring*, 19.

¹² Pathak, Runyon, and Frazee, *The Art of Neighboring*, 20.

¹³ Pathak, Runyon, and Frazee, *The Art of Neighboring*, 19.

The Neighboring Model Solution - Meet Your Literal Neighbors (and Ultimately Get Them to Church)

Pathak and Runyon started with a question of how we can help people struggling with the social ills of their city and landed on encouraging church members to meet and build relationships with the eight neighbors that surround their homes as their solution. It is a simple and straightforward campaign. I applaud that effort generally. To be honest, I can only name the people in two out of eight of my immediate neighbors' homes, and only have a relationship with one of those households. I also don't usually know the names of the eight people sitting around us in the pews of our church, by the way. Being a better neighbor is a good goal that could lead to a lot of wonderful things. As a strategy to prevent social ills related to poverty, however, I find their concept fundamentally flawed.

We know that where you live has a huge impact on poverty and long-term outcomes for people. When I was holding public hearings on poverty in Lancaster City in 2016 a representative from Penn Medicine Lancaster General Health shared that our zip code is more important than our genetic code in predicting our health outcomes. Neighborhoods near each other can have life expectancies as much as 20 years or more different from each other based mostly on income level.¹⁴ When you examine maps with disparate life expectancies and poor health outcomes, they often have alarming overlap with maps of red-lining,¹⁵ a decades-old practice that created our financially and racially segregated neighborhoods and a massive wealth

¹⁴ Rita Giordano, "Where Do You Live? It May Give Clues to How Old You'll Grow, Federal Data Suggest.," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, updated December 18, 2018, <https://www.inquirer.com/health/life-expectancy-project-philadelphia-new-jersey-census-tract-20181218.html>.

¹⁵ "Philadelphia Redlining Maps - Sociological Images." *The Society Pages*, accessed October 25, 2020. <https://thesocietypages.org/socimages/2012/04/25/1934-philadelphia-redlining-map/>.

gap for African Americans. The practice largely continues today, if less overtly, as can be evidenced by President Trump's recent HUD rule changes.¹⁶

Essentially, white people in the middle class don't tend to live next door to eight people who are struggling with poverty-related social ills. This can be evidenced in Pathak and Runyon's own words when describing the mysteries of their neighbors:

Have you ever wondered about the invisible family that lives in your neighborhood? You've never actually met them but you know they exist because you've glimpsed signs of life around their house. There's the dad. You know him by the sedan he drives. When his garage door opens at 7:30 each morning, he's already inside his car. The motor starts. He backs out of the driveway and takes off down the street. Each evening he zooms straight into the garage again. The garage door opens and then shuts, and he's inside the house without a trace. Then there's the mom. All you've glimpsed of her recently is her minivan. She zips their kids around to a mass of activities, probably going to soccer, karate, violin lessons, and playdates. You know about these activities mostly because of the different uniforms that the kids are wearing as they pile into the car. The stick-figure decal on the window is also helpful, a kind of suburban map legend on the rear window that tells the neighbors how many kids the family has and what they like to do.¹⁷

This section, and frankly a lot of what these authors describe in their success stories are what I would describe as the definition of "first world problems." I'm not saying that soccer moms don't have challenges, including being over scheduled as a family. What I am saying is that getting to know the families these authors describe will do little to nothing to affect the challenges about which they approached their mayor.

The impacts of these middle class-created challenges, as well as their differences from those faced by families living in poverty, is spelled out well in Annette Lareau's book *Unequal Childhoods*. In addition to the location in the suburbs, the house with a garage, and multiple vehicles, even the children's activities are signs of deep privilege. As Lareau's research shows, "(a) \$25 enrollment fee, which middle-class parents dismissed as 'insignificant,' 'modest,' or

¹⁶ Kriston Capps, "How HUD Rewrote the Rules on Fair Housing - Bloomberg," Bloomberg, September 9, 2020, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-09-09/how-hud-rewrote-the-rules-on-fair-housing>.

¹⁷ Pathak, Runyon, and Frazee, *The Art of Neighboring*, 17.

‘negligible,’ was a formidable expense for all poor families and many in the working class,” let alone the cost of uniforms, travel, etc.¹⁸ In the neighborhoods that I’ve served throughout my career, “first world problems” are alien to the mothers who literally have third world outcomes, especially in their health. In the neighborhood I served in Tampa, Florida, the overall health outcomes were the same as El Salvador and the infant mortality rate was the same as Malaysia. I had the opportunity to meet Magic Johnson because our neighborhood had the highest HIV rate in the state, only slightly better than the HIV rate of Somalia. No one had stick figure decals on a minivan.

Given the description the authors use above, and the examples they give in their book, what these families are going through, while potentially serious and even life-threatening at times, are not the issues the authors described as their motivation at the beginning of their book. In a sense, even their most harrowing stories make my point: having a relationship with someone who has means when you’re in trouble can be lifesaving. Their parishioners may happen upon those issues from time to time, but essentially, they’re asking people to meet and form relationships with the people most like them. While I think there’s real value in that movement, it’s not what they initially “advertised,” and may even be damaging if the people engaging in that practice think they’re affecting poverty by doing so. Meeting your neighbors and building connections is valuable, but in my assessment will do little to nothing to reduce “social ills” related to poverty as a result.

If a person living in the middle class is not likely to have eight neighbors who are experiencing poverty, then a person living in poverty is equally unlikely to have eight neighbors who are more financially stable than they are themselves. In my experience, they’re not likely to

¹⁸ Annette Lareau, *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life*, 2nd edition, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011), 248, Kindle.

even have two or three unless their neighborhood is in the process of being gentrified and they're being pushed out of it. Additionally, I would argue that people living in high poverty neighborhoods are already more likely to know their neighbors, partially because they must in order to survive. Researchers at the University of California at Berkley and the University of Toronto worked together to prove as much in 2010.

These researchers examined three studies to illustrate how social class affects generosity and prosocial behavior. As a former fundraiser, I've known for years that Americans with lower incomes donate a larger percentage of their incomes each year than wealthier Americans do. In fact, a study from 2014 showed that, even though conservatives and liberals are equally generous in terms of philanthropy,¹⁹ conservatives living in poverty are more generous than wealthy liberals.²⁰ How would the researchers from the 2010 studies account for that? Two words: empathy and survival.

The very fabric of surviving poverty requires empathy and reciprocity. To make ends meet, people living in impoverished communities share resources with each other all the time. Someone watches your children after school. You loan them your car to grocery shop. When you're in trouble you sleep on a friend's couch until you're back on your feet. "There but for the grace of God go I" is alive and well in low-income communities. In fact, if you live in poverty there is a very real consideration that you will find yourself struggling at some point, and thus will need the same type of assistance. There's also a likelihood that you already have had that

¹⁹ Maria Di Mento, "Conservatives and Liberals Are Equally Generous, Study Finds," Chronicle of Philanthropy, October 24, 2012, <https://www.philanthropy.com/article/conservatives-and-liberals-are-equally-generous-study-finds/>.

²⁰ "Poorer Conservatives More Generous than Wealthy Liberals – New Study," RT International, October 7, 2014, <https://www.rt.com/usa/193952-charity-conservatives-religion-utah/>.

need at some earlier point in life, and the kindness of a relative, a friend, or even a stranger made the difference. Empathy abounds.

As the California and Toronto researchers put it, “Despite their reduced resources and subordinate rank, lower class individuals are more willing than their upper-class counterparts to increase another’s welfare, even when doing so is costly to the self.”²¹ While that in and of itself is striking, the differences go beyond just generosity and extend into general relationality with other human beings as well:

We speculate that, relative to upper class individuals, lower class individuals construe themselves more in terms of their relationships to others, and this self–other overlap may account for their heightened sensitivity to other people’s welfare... Although the precise nature of these patterns is unclear, we argue that prosociality among lower class individuals is inherently relational: It is rooted in a concern for others’ welfare and a desire to enhance social relationships.²²

Like any human behavior I would argue that this is not devoid of self-interest. The hope of reciprocity is key. “By behaving generously and helping those in need, lower class individuals may promote trust and cooperation from others, thus ensuring that in times of hardship, their needs will, too, be met.”²³

There are downfalls to this “self-other overlap” as well. For example, the oldest child in a family unit may be keeping their single parent and siblings alive through added income or providing tens of thousands of dollars-worth of childcare per year. Even four hours of childcare per workday for a single child could cost as much as \$10,400 per year. The gross annual income of a person working 40 hours at minimum wage is \$16,328. Raise that to \$10 per hour and the gross annual salary rises to \$20,800. Even at \$15 per hour, the total only goes to \$31,200. In any

²¹ Paul K. Piff et al., “Having Less, Giving More: The Influence of Social Class on Prosocial Behavior,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 99, no. 5 (Berkeley, CA: American Psychological Association, 2010): 10, <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0020092>.

²² Piff et al., “Having Less, Giving More,” 11.

²³ Piff et al., “Having Less, Giving More,” 12.

of these scenarios the loss of the eldest child's contribution is devastating, and that's just factoring for one younger sibling. The loss goes up exponentially with each additional child needing care.

My peers at nonprofits providing college scholarships or college preparatory programs have long lamented the persistence rates of the low-income, first-generation college students they assist. These students either drop out before graduation at four times the rate of their second-generation, higher income peers (89 percent drop-out rate)²⁴ or choose to stay close to home even if they have a scholarship to attend a more prestigious four-year college out of state. First-generation college students are in fact nearly twice as likely to choose a community college than their peers who have college graduates as parents.²⁵

While I have found no studies to cite, time and again in my career, either through a college preparation staffer or directly from students, I hear how students turn down free, four-year degrees to continue contributing to their family unit and community, or “take a break” (they almost never say they’re dropping out) of school to earn more money for their families or because their siblings back home are unprotected and need them. There is a great deal of guilt in leaving the fabric of a community built on shared resources for survival. It has long been one of my hypotheses that more first-generation, low-income college students would persist in degree attainment if they knew someone else was covering their contribution to their family units and communities.

Despite the potential for long-term negative outcomes from these attachments, the end results remain that people living in poverty are more empathetic, generous, and relational than

²⁴ “Eye-Opening College Dropout Rates & Statistics – (2020),” Admissionsly.com, November 21, 2020, <https://admissionsly.com/college-dropout-rates/>.

²⁵ Emily Forrest Cataldi, “First-Generation Students: College Access, Persistence, and Postbachelor’s Outcomes,” National Center for Educational Statistics, February 2018. <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2018/2018421.pdf>, 7.

their wealthier counterparts, regardless of political persuasion. Piff and his colleagues do not see this as a static situation, however:

That the compassion manipulation eliminated class differences in prosocial behavior suggests that upper and lower class individuals do not necessarily differ in their capacity for prosocial behavior. Rather, lower class individuals may be higher in baseline levels of compassion than their upper class counterparts, and it may be this differential that—unless moderated—drives class-based differences in prosociality.²⁶

This difference is more a difference of context than capacity and can therefore be “moderated.”

That moderation is precisely what I’m calling for in this work.

Within that call for moderation, I hear echoes of Jesus when he said in Luke 12:33-34, “Sell your possessions and give to the poor. Provide purses for yourselves that will not wear out, a treasure in heaven that will never fail, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also,” or in Matthew 19:23-24 when he says, “Truly I tell you, it is hard for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.” Is modern social science confirming what Jesus taught two thousand years ago: that wealth and possessions are barriers to empathy and relationship? I would say yes.

As Carey asserts, doing God’s will can allow us to participate in the kingdom of heaven or live into it in the here and now.²⁷ If entering the kingdom of heaven requires empathy and generosity, and Piff and his associates are correct, then their findings agree with Jesus’s teachings. Wealth is a barrier to empathy, generosity, relationship, and ultimately to the kingdom of heaven, but it doesn’t have to be. Jesus clearly sees wealth as a barrier to discipleship, but also has close relationships with people of wealth who support his ministry and eventually see to his burial. For Blomberg, it was less important to Jesus if someone had wealth than it was that

²⁶ Piff et al., “Having Less, Giving More,” 10.

²⁷ Carey, *Stories Jesus Told*, chap. 2.

“(t)hose who would follow Christ must be willing to risk whatever they have if the priorities of the kingdom threaten the security of their earthly existence.”²⁸ So there is hope, but not without intentionality and the willingness to at least risk of our material comforts.

Equally interesting to me is that Piff and his colleagues also confirm the sociological underpinnings of what von Waldow found in studying the community of the ancient Israelites. He described the function of the social justice laws in Exodus and Deuteronomy in terms of their importance to social cohesion in nomadic desert clans:

The clan guarantees to the individual security for life and limb. The clan is responsible for its individual members and the individual, in turn, is responsible for the clan as a whole. Each member of the community has equal rights and equal duties. There are no social differentiations in this kind of community. Either the whole clan or tribe is rich or all together are poor, depending primarily on the yields of the pasture land.²⁹

In a sense, people living in poverty today have more in common with the social cohesion of ancient Israelites and our modern, middle class churches have more in common with the individualistic people some of the prophets and Jesus railed against.

Even as Pathak and Runyon set out to solve “a laundry list of social problems similar to what many cities face: at-risk kids, areas with dilapidated housing, child hunger, drug and alcohol abuse, loneliness, elderly shut-ins with no one to look in on them,”³⁰ their baseline of empathy from their own context landed their efforts on people who had problems they could understand and didn’t require them to risk anything for the kingdom of heaven other than some social awkwardness amongst people to whom they were socioeconomically similar.

As I said, this playing around the edges can be dangerous if it gives people the impression that they’re doing something about poverty just by being more neighborly. In

²⁸ Blomberg, *Neither Poverty nor Riches*, 116.

²⁹ Von Waldow, “Social Responsibility,” 186.

³⁰ Pathak, Runyon, and Frazee, *The Art of Neighboring*, 19.

addressing his solution, Roxburgh is a vocal critic of these kinds of movements and would likely describe them as more “window dressing.”³¹ I would argue that as I was reading Pathak and Runyon, there were several times I thought all they were doing was offering a “coffee bar” at home instead of in the church. While they argued several times that recruiting was their “ultimate” motive and not their “ulterior” motive, “methinks they doth protest too much.”

The Missional Model Solution – Meet Your Culture (And See Where God Takes It)

While the differences between Roxburgh’s solution and that of Pathak and Runyon might seem subtle to some, I think they’re important. For one, Pathak and Runyon are calling on individual church members to engage with eight neighbors while Roxburgh is calling on church members to engage with the gospel and the culture. He doesn’t see the church as the “ulterior” or the “ultimate” motive. Instead, he sees the church, the gospel, and the culture as equal. He describes the focus on the church as “a problematic captivity that must be addressed if we...are to wrestle with the nature of the gospel in and for and with and, at times, against, our culture.”³² I believe that Pathak and Runyon, like so many church leaders and churches, are, “always holding up a mirror that reflects back its own image.”³³ That’s primarily because these efforts engage both scripture and cultural contexts in ways that aren’t dialogues. If anything, they are monologues with silent company. Pathak and Runyon are using their members’ neighborhoods and the gospel, barely in the case of the latter, to ultimately drive church membership.

What do we do to turn this around? For Roxburgh it’s back to Luke 17:33. “We have to stop talking about and asking church questions for quite a while. Only by doing this, as strange

³¹ Roxburgh, *Missional*, 21.

³² Roxburgh, *Missional*, 45.

³³ Roxburgh, *Missional*, 48.

as it sounds, do we have a chance of discovering a church that can engage our time.”³⁴ While Roxburgh does not pretend to be primarily focused on poverty in any way, shape, or form, he remains open to whatever we might find in the world and its culture. Like Pathak and Runyon, he calls us to come out of the sanctuary, and “to the place of making the church work again in the neighborhoods and communities where we live so we can ask what God is already doing ahead of us in these ordinary places.”³⁵

Still, Roxburgh’s examples tend toward his own socioeconomic context as well. He describes that instead of the church, he saw, “the real life of the city was not in the churches but outside at the garage sales, in the coffee shops, along the seawalls, and in the markets.”³⁶ In a passage eerily similar to the solution put forward by Pathak and Runyon, he asks, “can I provide the first and last names of the people who live beside (or above and below) me? What can I describe about their lives that can be known only by someone who has been inside their home? What are some of the God-shaping longings and/or questions that currently shape their lives?”³⁷

Obviously, for my purposes, Roxburgh has the same contextual problems as Pathak and Runyon. He wants the church to be the equal of the gospel and the culture, but the only culture he describes is one of garage sales, coffee shops, seawalls, and markets. Roxburgh may not be holding up a mirror that reflects back his church’s image, but it certainly reflects his own as a privileged member of the middle class. Interestingly, I think his locus of theological authority is in conflict with his own conclusions.

³⁴ Roxburgh, *Missional*, 56.

³⁵ Roxburgh, *Missional*, 71.

³⁶ Roxburgh, *Missional*, 23.

³⁷ Roxburgh, *Missional*, 183.

Theological Defenses of Missional and Neighboring Methods - Two Books of the New Testament and Two Jesus Quotes

Roxburgh uses Luke and Acts as his locus of authority. He lands on Luke not so much because of what it says, but because of his conclusions about its historical/cultural context and the people for whom he believes it was written. He describes what he sees as texts speaking to a community of Christians at the end of the first century who were anxious and confused:

Luke addressed people shaken out of settled assumptions about the Jesus movement and what God is up to in the world. These were men and women, much like many of us reading this book, who had been cast into a tumultuous, pluralistic world that turned settled assumptions upside down. Luke does not write a generic book but one that addresses specific, small communities of Christians who were struggling to make sense of their faith.³⁸

For Roxburgh, Luke takes the culture's disillusionment with a Messiah who hadn't returned yet to make the world right, and channels it into a call to head out into the world as it is. "He presents a language house that gives a theological and contextual description of what God was up to in the world through Jesus. He achieves this by reframing the story in terms of a missionary God continually calling people to go on disruptive, unthinkable, risky journeys for the sake of the kingdom."³⁹

His conclusion, though, like that of Pathak and Runyon, isn't the least bit risky or unthinkable, and it's only disruptive in an extreme interpretation of the word "disruptive." Likewise, he can't seem to walk away from his own "language house." On the one hand, his interpretation of Luke leaves him asking, "(w)hat if the life-giving Spirit is saying to us that nothing has gone wrong but that he is breaking apart the five-hundred-year-old boxes in which we have so conveniently placed the movement of God since the European Protestant

³⁸ Roxburgh, *Missional*, 30.

³⁹ Roxburgh, *Missional*, 72.

reformations?”⁴⁰ On the other hand, he states emphatically, “I don’t want what I’m saying to be misconstrued. I’m not saying the church is unimportant. Quite the opposite! The church is vitally important to the mission of God.”⁴¹

On that point he is again echoed by Pathak and Runyon, who, “believe that it’s vital for believers to be committed to a specific local church.”⁴² This stands out in sharp contrast to their point on the very next page of their book that, “Jesus uses the word church only 3 times in the Gospels; he uses the word kingdom 121 times.”⁴³ What’s more, those three uses of “church” occur only in Matthew, and in the Greek only twice.

Both models use the gospels to make the point that the kingdom is out in the community, and you should build relationships without any ulterior motives around evangelism, but neither of them are willing to accept that the bricks and mortar church itself may be something God has left behind, even as they both seem to hint at exactly that:

The subtext present (in Luke) is that God is doing something through Jesus that is much bigger than all the small, neat categories and boxes in which the movement of God had been placed, boxes such as Jerusalem, temple, synagogue, and Jewish followers of the fulfilled Messiah. These language houses had to be shaken and taken apart. So the Spirit came to break the boundaries.⁴⁴

I agree with Roxburgh’s arguments even if I find his conclusion just as flawed as Pathak and Runyon’s.

Like Carey, Roxburgh suggests the sending of the seventy and the story of the Good Samaritan have “a lot more to do with being the stranger and receiving hospitality than being in

⁴⁰ Roxburgh, *Missional*, 114.

⁴¹ Roxburgh, *Missional*, 54.

⁴² Pathak, Runyon, and Frazee, *The Art of Neighboring*, 179.

⁴³ Pathak, Runyon, and Frazee, *The Art of Neighboring*, 179.

⁴⁴ Roxburgh, *Missional*, 113.

control of the resources and the answers.”⁴⁵ There are also great parallel’s in Roxburgh’s analysis of Luke and the sociological work of Piff and his colleagues:

...people took in the stranger because they knew that at any time in the future they or their children might become strangers themselves and need to be taken in. There was a deep mutuality in this relationship to the stranger. It is important to understand what lies behind the allusion here if we are to have an idea of God’s intention. It appears there is a connection, a link between being in the place of the stranger in need and being able to discern God’s working in the world. The story is suggesting that the one is a precursor of the other.⁴⁶

From this spot-on revelation, Roxburgh lands on taking the breathtaking risk of asking you to cross your cul-de-sac.

While Pathak and Runyon land in the same place, instead of doing solid biblical analysis and then missing the landing, they force the Bible to fit their conclusion. Their locus of authority is the second half of the Great Commandment, “you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Unfortunately, they take a painfully simple and literal view of this line by asking, “(w)hat if he meant that we should love our actual neighbors? You know, the people who live right next door.”⁴⁷ The authors claim multiple times that this simplicity is part of Jesus’s “genius.” Given that Jesus himself didn’t stay home and just meet his eight neighbors, and was regularly asking people to follow him, I find their conclusion dubious at best. At worst, it’s self-serving eisegesis on steroids.

Unfortunately, with their interpretation of the Great Commandment as their starting point, they interpret other scripture, like the story of the Good Samaritan, through that lens:

When we hear the story about the good Samaritan, we are tempted to fall into a trap similar to that of the expert in the law. He wanted to define who qualified as his neighbor. And in looking for a loophole, he missed the lesson Jesus tried to teach. As we read this parable two thousand years later, it’s tempting to turn the story of the good Samaritan into a metaphor. If we’re not careful, we can become numb to the power of the Great

⁴⁵ Roxburgh, *Missional*, 123.

⁴⁶ Roxburgh, *Missional*, 124.

⁴⁷ Pathak, Runyon, and Frazee, *The Art of Neighboring*, 15.

Commandment. If we say, “Everyone is my neighbor,” it can become an excuse for avoiding the implications of following the Great Commandment. Our “neighbors” become defined in the broadest of terms. They’re the people across town, the people who are helped by the organizations that receive our donations, the people whom the government helps. We don’t have to feel guilty, we tell ourselves. After all, we can’t be expected to really love everybody, can we? The problem is, however, that when we aim for everything, we hit nothing.⁴⁸

This piece of their argument is critical to understand because the neighboring movement is alive and well and is active in some of the churches that took part in my initial interviews.

Remember that nearly two-thirds of my interviewees came to me through the “Compelled by Love” event mailing list. Most of them heard Dave Runyon speak and had access to the book. It shouldn’t be surprising that church leaders searching for ways to be more relevant and/or to reverse their decline would be happy to be handed a possible solution that asked them to do so little. I think this is dangerous in several ways.

First, Pathak and Runyon do define who their neighbor is, just like the expert in the law as they describe. They’ve defined their neighbor as people who live directly around them and are just like themselves in many ways, completely missing the stark differences between the Samaritan and the man in distress. Contrary to Carey and Blomberg’s reading of the Good Samaritan, it seems clear that Pathak and Runyon also only see themselves as the people giving aid. As such, they go out of their way to instruct their readers to accept the generosity of those they’re helping “out of the ditch”:

We want to be the capable ones who swoop onto the scene and do our good deeds. But when we receive something from somebody else, it forces us to admit we are in need as well. When we allow others to provide for us, we are forced to acknowledge that we are needy. This can be unsettling.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Pathak, Runyon, and Frazee, *The Art of Neighboring*, 34–35.

⁴⁹ Pathak, Runyon, and Frazee, *The Art of Neighboring*, 122.

Even more unsettling to them and their readers might be the idea that it is both them and the church itself that is “needy.”

Think about what I’ve already shared. Both Roxburgh and Pathak and Runyon entreat us to meet our literal neighbors. As I stated earlier, I think that would be a positive thing. Meanwhile, the people living in poverty that at least Pathak and Runyon stated they intended to help not only already know their neighbors, they are also statistically more generous toward them and more likely to be in real, reciprocal relationships with them. While people living in poverty definitely need resources and empowerment, one thing they do not need is people in the middle class telling them how to neighbor or be in relationship. So, while meeting and building relationships with our neighbors would be a positive thing and would undoubtedly lead to many wonderful stories of connection and even salvation, and not just of the spiritual sort, I would argue that its effect on poverty as per Pathak and Runyon, and its effect on the relevance of the church within the culture as per Roxburgh, would be negligible if not harmful.

Allow me to address the harmful part. If a middleclass congregation genuinely believes that just meeting their immediate neighbors will help with social ills and satisfy God’s call for social justice, that may well be where their efforts stop. I also don’t see anything in that call to neighborly action that would truly bring the church into the culture in a way that would halt or even slow the church’s decline. At their core, I think both movements can’t seem to let go of the church as their “ultimate” focus. Even Roxburgh, who I think gets the closest to letting go in his language, is ultimately unable to let go of his love of tradition and four walls even as he acknowledges that Luke at least demands just that.

Roxburgh says it clearly as he concludes, “(t)he Lord of creation is out there ahead of us; he has left the temple and is calling the church to follow in a risky path of leaving behind its

baggage, becoming like the stranger in need, and receiving hospitality from the very ones we assume are the candidates of our evangelism plans.”⁵⁰ I agree with him completely on this.

Where we clearly part ways is in the idea that the strangers who live around me represent either a risky path or where God is calling us to go without our baggage.

Assessing the Missional and Neighboring Models

The missional and the neighboring models are both distant cousins of the work I’ve been doing and would like to see in the church, but I believe both fall short and might even be harmful to the shift for which I’m calling. Roxburgh, and to a lesser extent Pathak and Runyon, make arguments that contribute to the power of relational work and getting out of our churches. Roxburgh goes so far as to support Luke’s call to, “have our worlds turned upside down.”⁵¹ To their credit, all these authors speak out against using people as a means to an end, even if they can’t step completely away from the idea of doing just that.

“(Jesus) did not turn people into objects he would use to achieve his goals. Rather, his stories invited people to let the drama of God’s working among them impact their own stories,”⁵² Pathak and Runyon declare. Roxburgh agrees, stating that Jesus didn’t help people “to make them objects of some new church. He was inviting them into the adventure of God’s story because this is where life is discovered.”⁵³

Because I have been so hard on them especially, I will give the final word on this idea to Pathak and Runyon:

⁵⁰ Roxburgh, *Missional*, 164.

⁵¹ Roxburgh, *Missional*, 90.

⁵² Roxburgh, *Missional*, 82.

⁵³ Roxburgh, *Missional*, 82.

We are called to love people—period. Whether those people ever take any steps toward God is beside the point. We are called to love our neighbors unconditionally, without expecting anything in return. The Great Commandment says, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” The commandment ends there, with no other expectations given. Thus good neighboring is an end in itself.⁵⁴

These authors make some wonderful arguments, but fail to take the next steps of risk, and recognizing that they, and their churches, are actually the ones in need of a good neighbor or Samaritan.

Indeed, Piff and his colleagues have told us who the good neighbors are in most cases. Based on their research, “(l)ower class individuals are more concerned with the needs of others relative to upper class individuals, and, guided by this concern, will act in a more prosocial fashion to improve others’ welfare.”⁵⁵ There is an art of hospitality, expected in the cultures and context of the Bible and the gospels, and carried out in low-income communities still today, from which the church, specifically white, more affluent churches, could and should learn.

The most stark, recent example of this that comes to mind for me is entirely secular in nature. In 2017 Matthew Desmond, author of the book *Evicted*, was in Lancaster to speak at a fundraising dinner for a local housing nonprofit. I had read *Evicted* and was so impressed I would soon use it as a required text for “The Church and Social Change,” a course I had begun co-teaching at Lancaster Theological Seminary later that year. I was also on the board of directors of the nonprofit in question, so I was not only attending the event, but was excited to hear Mr. Desmond speak.

Desmond’s book highlights the plight of people in low-income neighborhoods as related to housing and what has become an “eviction industry.” It also delves into the list of intertwined social ills that exacerbate both poverty and the housing situations of so many families and

⁵⁴ Pathak, Runyon, and Frazee, *The Art of Neighboring*, 103.

⁵⁵ Piff et al., “Having Less, Giving More,” 2.

individuals struggling with poverty. Desmond's material comes from embedding himself for equal periods of time within substandard housing alongside people living in an urban setting and people living in a rural trailer park.

During his speech, one of the stories that struck me the most was Desmond describing how the families he was observing would invite him to share a meal with them using what little food they had to show him hospitality. They knew he was a journalist writing a book, and that he had resources, but that wasn't the point. He was a stranger in need of hospitality, and they gave him a place at their tables.

In reading Runyon's examination of Luke, I couldn't help but think of Desmond. He really did take a risk and made himself a vulnerable stranger in a world not his own. He was there to listen and observe and learn from people, not to give them charity to make himself feel better. In fact, he shared at the event that the nature of his role made him feel worse at times. Regardless of that, he left that experience as a vocal advocate for the people he met along the way and raised the awareness of the challenges they face. Still, it's possible the most important thing he experienced never made it into his book and was little more than an aside in his speech. These people, for all their challenges and pain, were generous, welcoming, and relational.

In the next chapter, I will examine some of that character and culture through my interviews with two additional leaders from Lancaster churches, one African American and one Latino, serving low-income communities. I will compare and contrast their answers to each other and to those of the 11 white church leaders I interviewed. Are these churches, like those they serve, more relational? If so, what makes them that way and what can we learn from them?

Chapter Five: Heal the Sick Who Are There

My experience of doing relational and empowering work with vulnerable populations and people living in poverty for twenty years is that white churches and churches of color tend to engage with poverty differently, especially when those churches of color are located in low-income neighborhoods. While for this project I can only explore a tiny sample and my own experiences, one could easily do a major project just on the differences between white churches and churches of color, affluent and low-income congregations, and, as I'll briefly explore in this chapter as well, the differences between African American churches and Latino churches. While time, the pandemic, and the scope of this project kept me from exploring these issues further, what follows matches my experience of two decades. That's not to say that these interviews lacked new learning and surprises for me, however.

To draw a contrast from the first 11 church leaders I interviewed in this work, I spoke with two leaders within churches of color in the City of Lancaster, one African American and one Latino. These congregations were chosen because while their members travel from all over the county to attend their services, the buildings are located within low-income areas of the city. Also, I know both to have outreach programs with their neighborhoods that are deep and relational. For those reasons, I was interested in how they would answer the same questions I posed to the 11, predominantly white church leaders that were explored earlier in this work. I also added a question asking what in their history or culture informed the answers to my questions. Given that there are only two churches in this sample, I will be additionally vague about some details to protect both the identities of the congregations as well as the interviewees.

What stood out to me first was that, unlike the other interview subjects, these two did not quote or point to Bible verses to justify either what they were doing or what they hoped to be doing someday. Instead, it was clear that care for people in need was embedded deeply in their faith. Given the language they used, I was left with the impression of a very present and deep relationship with a God speaking to them in the here and now.

In speaking about the church's physical location, the African American leader said, "I think God has put us in those different segments of the city - led us to a place where we know (poverty) exists and we have to address it. That was God driven. We had to deal with poverty, work on the issues, and use our service to him in the community. Wherever you are, you're called to do something; to do what he's called you to do wherever he plants you."

The Latino leader saw the call on their work as a "response to what the community need is. (It's) how the church responds to widows, the poor, kids that are suffering. Through the work, that's the mission of helping the other and helping the poor. Part of our culture is service to others."

As I shared, both have robust programs to help those in need in their communities. Both efforts are varied to meet the specific needs of their neighborhoods, both are relational, and, to one of the core points of Roxburgh, Pathak, and Runyon, neither is geared toward recruitment or evangelism. In the Latino church, evangelism happens on its own regardless.

"[Community service and church have] blended together. It's magical. People would come for community service and then would start staying for [church] service. We don't make a big deal out of it. And [then] they're volunteering and they're in charge of a group. The power of evangelization through the program is pretty incredible, [but] programming is imperative. You just don't know who you're going to touch."

Interestingly, while the African American church's programming seems just as robust, it doesn't seem to have that evangelistic power. That leader shared that, "the church and the outreach are very separate." While they estimated that the congregation was 95 percent African American, the people they helped in their outreach were a vastly different, diverse population that represented every aspect of the community.

Even so, that separation between their parishioners and the people they serve in their programs hasn't diminished the relational nature of their work. "We have relationships with the people coming in. (Our staff) will put things aside for people because (they) know what they usually need and like." They will even go so far as to call people because something they know a family needs has been donated.

Their philosophy of giving reminded me of the concept of manna and everyone having enough. "We never make people feel like we're doing them a favor. It's not my food. It was donated. People have larger or smaller families. People take what they need. It's not policed like that. If someone takes more than they need that's their greed. That's not our business."

Both churches' method of receiving what they distribute also harkens back to Deuteronomic laws around tithing and gleaning for me. They receive donations from other churches from other, more affluent parts of the county, mirroring for me the ancient tithes that were sent to a temple in a central location. Some businesses donate leftover goods in a practice that mirrors gleaning. While Bennett was concerned that laws around tithing and gleaning made widows, orphans, and strangers seem like parasites within Israelite society,¹ the dignity of those receiving the donations is of clear importance to both of these churches. Likewise, while Bennett

¹ Harold V. Bennett, "Deuteronomy," in *The Africana Bible*, ed. Hugh R. Page Jr., (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010), sec. 3, pt. 6. Kindle.

saw the travel barriers inherent in tithes and offerings being centralized in the temple,² the donors to these two churches are locating their tithes where the people who most need them can most easily get to them.

Perhaps the most notable difference between these two congregations lies in both the culture of the people who make up the congregations and what that means for the dividing line between those providing services and those receiving services. The African American church is much more like the majority of white churches I interviewed in that their congregation members are primarily a different group of people than those they serve. The Latino church was quite different, with more of the people they served in their programs also being or becoming members of their congregation. The leader I interviewed tied that back to culture.

Describing life in the Latin American location where many of their congregants were born, they shared, “Even growing up...we had a barter system that we didn’t even know was a barter system. Someone would grow something. Once the crop was done, we’d share it in the neighborhood. Someone was cooking [and] the food would come down. We brought that over. The culture is all about service whether it’s a parishioner, a staff person, or someone who’s going there [for help].”

This pattern of bartering and sharing connects to the findings of Piff and his colleagues. That is possibly linked to the Latino church having much more blending between congregants and those in need. In fact, the movement between needing and helping is bilateral in the church just as it is within low-income communities themselves. “We don’t have any money. It just needs to happen. We need to come together. The same people who need the services are volunteering to help other people that are in the same position. Folks can’t support financially

² Bennett, *Injustice Made Legal*, 118.

but they can support through acts of service. Culture plays such a big role. Even if you're from a different background or don't understand poverty, you understand that culture. Some churches write a check. Here it's doing things and pulling people in to help; bringing the person in and including them."

She went on to say something that immediately made me think of the story of the loaves and fishes. "The need is much greater than the staff that you have and the funding that you have, but it always seems to work. It's beautiful. God's grace is great." Both of these congregations see God as an active, ever-present force in their lives and in their neighborhoods, not just in their sanctuaries. The African American leader used the phrase "God-driven" to describe the actions of their church and shared that they thought "God is talking to you directly." God is working shoulder to shoulder with them in an active mission inside and outside of their sanctuaries, not just absolving them of guilt or making them feel better for an hour or so once a week.

This is what Roxburgh and Pathak and Runyon seem to be getting at but fail to fully capture. As Roxburgh puts it, "If you want to discover and discern what God is up to in the world just now, stop trying to answer this question from within the walls of your churches."³ The problem is these authors think that's happening in their own neighborhoods, or among their neighbors who have the money and time to buy and read their books. They read Jesus's call to go to another town and put themselves at the mercy of strangers and interpret it as going across the street to talk to the soccer mom who drives a different brand of minivan than you.

Piff and his colleagues might have an explanation for this seeming inability to go far enough:

For example, whereas upper class individuals demonstrate greater impoliteness in interactions with strangers (e.g., in such behaviors as self-grooming, fidgeting with objects, or doodling on their questionnaire, all of which reflect less attention directed to

³ Roxburgh, *Missional*, 134.

the interaction partner), lower class individuals' nonverbal style involves more socially engaged eye contact, head nods, eyebrow raises, and laughs (Kraus & Keltner, 2009). Moreover, in naturalistic observational studies, lower class children played in closer proximity to other children, relative to their upper class counterparts (Scherer, 1974), and were more likely to smile (Stipek & Ryan, 1997).⁴

In reading their research it is fair to surmise that church members, and even authors, from higher socioeconomic backgrounds have lesser investments in the very idea of a relationship with a stranger and lower levels of compassion when they hear that stranger directly tell of their suffering.⁵ With that being the case, perhaps it is no wonder that these authors can only seem to go so far as to ask themselves, and all of us, to only reach out to the strangers whose challenges aren't all that unfamiliar.

Even within the examples of the two churches interviewed here, there are examples of people from other churches, neighborhoods, and socioeconomic strata who physically show up to be part of their relationships with those in need and experience that grace of working side by side in the presence of God directly. Even that can be a trap, however, if those helpers are not there with a spirit of humility and a genuine interest in relationship with "the other." Intention is everything.

If the intention is to help others in order to feel good about themselves, or to remind themselves or their children of how lucky they are, then I think they're engaging in a kind of cheap, poverty tourism. That kind of helping is hinted at, if clumsily, by Pathak and Runyon. "When giving is one-sided, it robs the 'needy' one of his dignity, because it makes him dependent. But when giving is two-sided, everyone feels a sense of worth."⁶ I would argue that part of that theft of dignity is using the predicament of the person living in poverty (I find the

⁴ Piff et al., "Having Less, Giving More," 2.

⁵ Piff et al., "Having Less, Giving More," 2.

⁶ Pathak, Runyon, and Frazee, *The Art of Neighboring*, 121.

term “needy” offensive on multiple levels) as a means to an end to serve themselves. Roxburgh describes this as an “ecclesiocentric obsession” that “means that primarily we mine both Scripture and culture for our own needs.”⁷ I would also describe it as an obsession with self that mines the church as well.

Pathak and Runyon also still imply a superiority on the part of their readers and themselves with which I take issue. When you look at the dignity-based philosophies of both churches of color studied here, and especially the model of those in poverty helping each other at the Latino church, they are free of condescension and self-interest. More importantly, given the research of Piff and his colleagues, those with means should perhaps actually feel inferior to their lower-resourced neighbors. This draws me back to our earlier theological analysis of the stories and teachings of Jesus.

If, in fact, “social class shapes not only people’s values and behavior but also their emotional responses that relate to sensitivity to the welfare of others,”⁸ then perhaps those with means are the “needy” ones. Let’s assume Jesus already knew what social scientists needed multiple studies to determine. Is that why he says in Matthew, Mark, and Luke that it would be easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God? Is that why Jesus asks the expert in the law to give away his possessions and follow him, because unless he learns to be dependent on others, he won’t have the empathy necessary to experience the kingdom of heaven?

Simple quotation cannot capture the joy in the voice of the Latino church leader as they described the experience of seeing people who were struggling giving what they could of their time to help someone else who was struggling, but it was tangible and left an indelible

⁷ Roxburgh, *Missional*, 48.

⁸ Piff et al., “Having Less, Giving More,” 10.

impression on me. I would go so far as to argue that in those moments of God's grace they were experiencing the kingdom of heaven on earth. They are the sheep from Matthew 25 who will have no idea when they fed Jesus because feeding the widow, orphan, stranger, and prisoner is just part of who they are. They or someone they love was the widow, orphan, stranger, or prisoner, and they would never dream of turning someone away who has suffered likewise.

Some of that pattern is clearly tied to history and experiences of oppression and poverty. Through centuries of slavery, to Jim Crow laws, to Selma, to George Floyd, African Americans have experienced trauma and oppression through discrimination that has shut them out of building wealth, disproportionately placed them in prison, and tiptoed around the border of state-sanctioned murder. For Latinos there are many complex stories and cultures tied to multiple countries of origin. For Puerto Ricans, who are Lancaster's predominate Latino cultural group, there is a complex history of natives, European conquerors, and the slaves they brought from Africa mixing to create the diverse island population we know today. Many of that population's most recent arrivals in the continental United States are refugees from devastating natural disasters that have forced them to start over here in abject poverty, strangers now if not widows and orphans as well. Both populations have held onto the importance of dignity and empathy in much the same way the ancient Israelites would not allow themselves to forget that they had been strangers once in Egypt. As social science now tells us, experiences of hardship have wired them for empathy and welcoming.

Even so, it struck me that the more established African American community that makes up the congregation I examined has more distance from the neighbors they serve, a trait they share with the white congregations I interviewed. They have empowered certain members with a heart for that kind of service to essentially run a separate side of the house. Meanwhile the less

established Latino community that makes up the other congregation leans on each other and on God for survival in a way that blurs the lines between church and neighborhood.

My research is focused on a tiny sample in one county of Pennsylvania. Even so, I think it's worth mentioning that I've observed different degrees of separation between the congregations I've interviewed that correspond with factors like ethnicity, their socioeconomic status, and what might be called the "settledness" in American culture of each group. Given that, let's surmise for a moment that what Jesus thought was true of us individually, that we must leave behind our baggage and go to a place where we are vulnerable strangers, dependent on the kindness of others to experience the kingdom of heaven on earth, is also true of us corporately.

Coming from a place of theological reflection, what would it look like for our churches to "go and sell all your possessions and give the money to the poor" and follow Jesus into neighborhoods, trailer parks, homeless encampments, and prisons filled with widows, orphans, strangers, and prisoners? What would it look like to do that not because we feel we have something to give them, or teach them, or because we want to feel good about ourselves, but because we acknowledge that we are the needy ones? They have something to teach us about empathy, forgiveness, welcome, God's grace, and the kingdom of heaven that we can't learn while worshipping with (or drinking coffee with) people who are just like us. In so doing, can we share what God has given us in a way that more closely mirrors the ancient Israelite concept of "enough?"

In the following chapter, I will reflect upon my secular work throughout over 20 years of my nonprofit career and my work using relationships to help people achieve enough over the past decade, breaking down the core components and strategies therein. I'll also compare that to a vibrant church program model in Lancaster that shares some key tenets with that work and

might just be a bridge to the work I would prescribe for a church that would seek to halt its decline and become relevant again in the broader community as well as in the lives of its members. From this point on, we will stop discussing theory, and move into a deeper discussion of practice.

Chapter Six: I Was in Prison

Poverty is insidious. It is a trap. Each of its symptoms makes things worse and feeds back into poverty itself. It creates trauma and then feeds off the trauma it creates, growing stronger. It is a prison that turns people into thirsty, hungry, unclothed, sick, unhoused strangers in the midst of their own communities. Poverty is evil.

I have survived poverty personally. My stepfather's alcoholism and drug addiction manifested itself as domestic violence and financial turbulence from the time I was four until I was fourteen. We lost two homes in those ten years due to his addictions before he abandoned our family in my freshman year of high school, leaving my mother, my two half-sisters, and me homeless.

My mother had dropped out of school after getting pregnant with me as a teenager. She had gotten her GED, but that did nothing for her job prospects as a single mother with three children aged fourteen, ten, and one. We couch surfed with different relatives for six months before she was able to receive welfare benefits, food stamps, medical assistance, and rental assistance. By the time we had attained some semblance of stability I was in my third high school. While we were getting by, we were also completely dependent on "the system" for survival.

I would like to tell you that the programs and supports that gave us food and shelter taught my mother vital skills and helped her build a sustainable life, but that's not what happened. Instead, she was given things that made us more comfortable in poverty but never provided us the tools necessary to climb out of it. Just a few years prior to this writing my mother retired from Walmart making \$9 an hour after a lifetime of dead-end jobs that took more from her than they gave back. That I'm where I am is a story of luck and grace that could fill another

volume. To boil that down, though, takes us back to my introduction and the power of positive, stable relationships. While that is certainly a story I could tell through my personal life experiences, my professional experiences are a better illustration for this work.

In 1997 I had graduated from Rowan University and was struggling to find full time employment despite having graduated *magna cum laude* with a bachelor's degree in English Literature and a minor Creative Writing. As a first-generation, low-income college student I may not have picked the best major for career advancement. All sarcasm aside, after a brutally unsuccessful job search, I ended up taking a job with an eight-week, overnight summer camp for children and adults with intellectual disabilities through the ARC (Association for Retarded Citizens) of Gloucester County, New Jersey. A year later I had moved to Lancaster County, Pennsylvania and was able to turn that experience into a full-time job establishing and running a group home for three men with intellectual disabilities through Keystone Community Resources. It was there, in 1998, that I was first introduced to the idea of Social Role Valorization, or SRV.

As described by the International Social Role Valorization Association, SRV is “a powerful set of ideas useful in addressing the marginalization of people in society by supporting them to have access to the same good things in life enjoyed by typical people.”⁹ Essentially, people with intellectual disabilities were given very few if any choices in life. They were pushed into vocational programs and living situations without being asked what they wanted. In the worst cases, other people would even choose what clothes they wore and what food they ate all with no input from them. Social Role Valorization spoke to changing the paradigm of care by giving people their power back in both simple and major life choices. Something in my own life experiences of marginalization as a person of mixed ethnicity who had survived poverty and

⁹ “Social Role Valorization,” International Social Role Valorization Association, accessed November 28, 2020, <https://socialrolevalorization.com/>.

abuse resonated with this concept of empowering people and giving them choices in how they lived their lives.

Two years later I started my first Executive Director role for a tiny nonprofit organization called United Support Group. My work there was focused on social and recreational programs for adults and children with intellectual disabilities. SRV and personal choice heavily guided my work there as I conceptualized and launched new programming that would allow people with disabilities to build real, unpaid relationships and have more “normal” social experiences of their choosing.

That work got the attention of Shared Support, Inc., an organization that has contracted with Lancaster County to implement a pilot enacting the principles of Person-Centered Planning and Circles of Support for ten people with intellectual disabilities in Lancaster. I was asked to facilitate one of those Circles of Support for a young man we were already serving through social and recreational programs at United Support Group. That ground-breaking work led to amazing outcomes that proved most of the young man’s challenges and “behaviors” had nothing to do with his diagnosis and everything to do with his natural reaction to how society and “the system” were treating him. This pathway also turned out to be less expensive than the typical, cookie-cutter programs with which most people with disabilities were stuck. After a couple of years, those outcomes even made the front page of the Lancaster Sunday News.¹⁰

Ten years later, after seeing poverty through the lens of working in outreach and fundraising at two Federally Qualified Health Centers (FQHCs) in Lancaster County, one rural and one urban, I was the CEO of an anti-poverty nonprofit in Tampa, Florida. The University

¹⁰ Susan Lindt, “He’s Building a Life on a Foundation of Hope,” *LNP, LancasterOnline*, updated September 13, 2013, https://lancasteronline.com/news/hes-building-a-life-on-a-foundation-of-hope/article_7377e628-f335-5283-a4f0-ce2b102af6de.html.

Area Community Development Corporation served one of the most impoverished communities in the state. Bringing the lessons of two FQHCs with me from Pennsylvania, I began by looking at the patterns in the way poverty moved through and affected communities and its similarities with disease spread. That led to a partnership with the nearby University of South Florida College of Public Health and a more epidemiological view of poverty as well as an examination of core causes. While that work was leading to some exciting breakthroughs in building systems of poverty care that mirrored a solid health system (essentially specialists all working together in an integrated way on both symptom care and core causes simultaneously), something was still missing. I found the answer in the unlikeliest of places: over lunch in an all-you-can-eat Jamaican restaurant with a pastor who had become a friend and partner in the work.

The pastor had encountered a program called Circles in Denver, Colorado and thought it shared the principles he and I had been discussing in wanting anti-poverty work to have a different paradigm. I looked the program up later that day and was excited to see the principles of Person-Centered Planning and Circles of Support being applied to anti-poverty work. It made perfect sense. In Lancaster we had even been able to empower nonverbal people by showing them pictures of the types of homes they could choose from, jobs they could do, vacation spots they could visit, etc. with incredible outcomes. What psychiatrists were telling us were behaviors tied to peoples' diagnoses literally vanished when people were empowered and happy. In some cases, people were prescribed psychotropic medications with severe side effects or were punished because of those behaviors. We had taken the first step in showing those behaviors were tied to normal, human unhappiness and trauma, and were essentially born of people protesting the lack of choice in their own lives.

If a mostly non-verbal person with a diagnosis of Autism could have a much better life based on these principles of choice, empowerment, network-building, and life coaching, how much better would those principles work for someone who could communicate with us in a more full, complex way about both their dreams for themselves and the barriers that were in their way? After seven years facilitating a successful circle of support, I knew the framework well. My brain was on fire with the possibilities.

A month or so later, as if on cue, the local United Way in Tampa made a grant application available for innovative ways to address the needs of families and individuals in crisis. We pitched this concept of a relational model using Person-Centered Planning and Circles of Support concepts as a framework to help people build their social capital and climb out of poverty with servant-leaders climbing alongside them. We would stop telling people to choose from cookie cutter, band aid solutions where we told them what to do. Instead, we would offer people stable, long-term relationships to help them custom design and execute on plans built by them, harnessing their dreams and strengths.

One of our first customers was a homeless single mother with a four-year-old child. She had been disowned by her mother, and at times found herself in dangerous circumstances as a result of seeking shelter. By the end of her first year in the program she had built a circle of support, gained stable housing, enrolled in community college on a full scholarship, made the dean's list, reconciled with her mother, and had a full-time job in the medical field waiting for her after graduation. This was the full-blown manifestation of teaching a person to fish instead of just giving them a fish. Relationships within a circle of support were the key.

That first year we started with \$100,000 from the United Way and \$25,000 from the local foster care agency who wanted us to pilot this approach with youth aging out of foster care.

Based on the measurable outcomes of the year one pilot, United Way gave us a second-year investment of an additional \$100,000 and the foster care agency tripled their investment. It wasn't just anecdotes and warm and fuzzy stories that made that happen. We could show measurable increases in income and stability and decreases in harmful situations within a model that was less expensive per person than traditional, transactional case management.

In 2015 I had the opportunity to return to Lancaster County, Pennsylvania to become the CEO of the county's largest anti-poverty nonprofit, which at the time was called the Community Action Program, or CAP. Within a year we changed the name to Community Action Partnership and restructured the organization to work in relational models with both our customers and our community partners. By January of 2016 I was also leading the Mayor's Commission to Combat Poverty and made sure these same guiding principles made their way into that effort as well. The core concepts are as follows:

- people living in poverty are experts on their own lives and should be respected for their resiliency and resourcefulness;
- they should lead and we should support and follow them as servants helping them build stable relationships with higher-resourced people and networks;
- we should work together across nonprofit agencies, faith-based organizations, local government, and businesses to achieve shared goals; and
- we should take a public health approach that attacks core causes in addition to symptom care.

These concepts were key factors achieving in a 9 percent reduction in poverty for the City of Lancaster in 2017, the largest single-year poverty reduction for the city in recorded history.¹¹ That downward trend in city poverty continued right up until the beginning of the 2020 coronavirus pandemic and the economic devastation that followed.

Poverty is evil, complex, and self-replicating when left to its own devices, but it is also beatable. Now, as we watch vulnerable and marginalized populations bearing the brunt of a massive pandemic, it is even more clear that the inequity in our society is more of a moral problem than a political one. I sit writing this work with more than enough while my neighbor with less than they need is at greater risk of dying because of it. That was always true, but now we watch it happen under the spotlight of our television sets and social media every single day. We can't just drive by it and act like it isn't happening. Now there is a moral imperative to not just go back to normal when this pandemic is over.

In addition to that moral imperative, there is also the possibility to have a moment of great empathy through shared suffering during the pandemic. My current work in trauma-informed care and writing the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania's *Trauma-Informed PA Plan* led to this revelation. Chronic stress and trauma force the brain to go into survival mode, shutting down the part of the brain in charge of executive function, problem solving, critical thinking, and emotional regulation. That's why so many of us feel so horrible during the pandemic.

It can be hard to think straight. Our tempers are shorter. We feel exhausted and unable to work at our normal pace. At times it can feel like we're battling depression as the constant onslaught of stressors batters our mental health. This is all normal, as Matthew S. Bennet points

¹¹ Rachel Luehm and Ismail Smith-Wade-El, "Poverty Rate in Lancaster Sees a Significant Decline." *LNP, LancasterOnline*. December 23, 2018. https://lanasteronline.com/opinion/columnists/poverty-rate-in-lancaster-sees-a-significant-decline/article_2b076b30-0529-11e9-a850-e7a203ab009c.html.

out in his book, *Connecting Paradigms*. “While the person remains in such settings, traits such as hyperalertness, being quick-tempered, or the ability to shut down emotionally will help them to survive.”¹² Our tolerance for these stressors depends greatly on our resources, our social capital, and the amount of resiliency we’ve built up over a lifetime. 2020 was a hard year for almost all of us, independent of our social status. 2021, which began with insurrection and an attempted coup at the United States Capitol, promises more stress and trauma. As I’ve heard it wisely put, “we’re not all in the same boat, but we are all in the same storm.”

Therein lies the potential moment for empathy because those effects of chronic stress were what people living in poverty and victims of discrimination felt every day of every year prior to the pandemic. Those fears of not having basic needs met, of violence in their neighborhoods or households, of discrimination and marginalization, have the same effect on the human brain as fearing that a virus will take your livelihood, health, or life. The brain doesn’t care what the dangers or the stressors are. It responds the same way in all of us. That’s part of the insidiousness of poverty. It dampens the part of the brain its victims need most to get out of it. What Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs saw through observation¹³ we can now confirm through neurobiology. Reactivating that part of the brain requires a level of peace, safety, and stability that you can’t get from a handout. Building that kind of resilience capital requires relationships and time.

This makes a difference even during ordinary times in more mundane circumstances than international pandemics. While I was still at CAP a large employer reached out to me to talk about the retention problem they were having. They mostly hired people directly out of poverty

¹² Bennett, *Connecting Paradigms*, 24.

¹³ Saul Mcleod, “Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs,” *Simply Psychology*, accessed December 30, 2020, <https://www.simplypsychology.org/maslow.html>.

and paid a living wage with benefits and overtime. It was hard work, but there were opportunities for promotion and a clear path out of poverty. Even so, it had the highest turnover rate of any of this company's businesses.

We applied our program principles and worked with seventeen of their employees who had been red-flagged as high risk for termination or quitting. These employees were suffering from poverty-related symptoms either personally or within their households which didn't magically go away just because they landed living wage jobs. In fact, their new incomes had disqualified them from many programs that might have helped them before. After providing relational services to 17 of these employees during the pilot, the employer retained 16 of the 17 at the end of the year, a 94 percent retention rate. The national retention rate average just based on voluntary turnover is only 73 percent.¹⁴ Not only did that work keep the families from sliding back into poverty, it also saved the employer a large amount of money even after accounting for what they paid us to provide the service.

It doesn't take a sociological study to understand the difference positive, stable relationships can make, especially when those relationships don't just represent bonding social capital but bridging and linking social capital as well. According to Social Capital Research & Training, bonding social capital:

describes connections *within* a group or community characterised by high levels of similarity in demographic characteristics, attitudes, and available information and resources. Bonding social capital exists between "people like us" who are "in it together" and who typically have strong close relationships. Examples include family members, close friends, and neighbours.¹⁵

¹⁴ "Work Institute 2019 Retention Report," *Work Institute*, accessed December 30, 2020, 7. <https://info.workinstitute.com/hubfs/2019%20Retention%20Report/Work%20Institute%202019%20Retention%20Report%20final-1.pdf>.

¹⁵ Tristan Claridge, "What Is Bonding Social Capital?," *Social Capital Research & Training* (blog), January 5, 2018, <https://www.socialcapitalresearch.com/what-is-bonding-social-capital/>.

This is the social capital most available to people living in poverty, upon which Piff and his colleagues see them relying to survive. It is also the capital we often find within the walls of our churches and with whom Roxburgh, Pathak, and Runyon conclude we'll find opportunities to better serve God in the community.

Bridging and linking capital, however, start to break down both horizontal and vertical barriers. Bridging capital is defined as, "connections that link people across a cleavage that typically divides society (such as race, or class, or religion)."¹⁶ In this case, the social differences people have are overcome by some shared goal or experience. While those horizontal barriers coming down can be powerful, and I think connect more to the possibilities Roxburgh, Pathak, and Runyon see, I believe the elimination of poverty requires breaking down vertical barriers.

This is where linking capital comes in:

Some authors have suggested a third type of social capital is needed to capture the power dynamics of vertical associations. Michael Woolcock called this *linking* social capital and conceptualised it as a subset of bridging social capital. If linking social capital is included, then bridging social capital is an intermediate step between bonding and linking social capital...Michael Woolcock suggested that bridging social capital can be horizontal or vertical so a single category misses the important aspect of the exercise of power that is important in vertical associations. Thus linking social capital refers to relations between individuals and groups in different social strata in a hierarchy in which power, social status and wealth are accessed by different groups.¹⁷

In examining Mr. Woolcock's work directly, he points out that, "A defining feature of being poor, moreover, is that one is not a member of—or may even be actively excluded from—certain social networks and institutions that could be used to secure good jobs and decent housing."¹⁸

¹⁶ Tristan Claridge, "What Is Bridging Social Capital?," *Social Capital Research & Training* (blog), January 6, 2018, <https://www.socialcapitalresearch.com/what-is-bridging-social-capital/>.

¹⁷ Claridge, "What Is Bridging Social Capital."

¹⁸ Woolcock, Michael and Narayan, Deeta, "Social Capital: Implications for Development Theory, Research, and Policy," *World Bank Research Observer* 15 (2000): 226.

Transactional models within social services and churches do nothing to build any of these types of capital. As a pastor I once worked with in Florida put it, in what I found to be a brilliant parable for one of his newsletters, it's like finding a family that has fallen into a hole and tossing them some food and blankets so they can be more comfortable in the hole, then walking away, leaving them there. Relational models are conduits for social capital. They require climbing down into the hole with a ladder and helping the family climb out. The family members might slip or get tired before they reach the top. That's why relationships are so important. It's so much harder to climb when you're alone, especially if you don't have access to a ladder.

It was hard to change the models of the two anti-poverty organizations I led from transactional models to relational models. It required culture shifts in both nonprofits and the discarding of old, damaging habits, language, and policies. There were allies in both organizations who had always been relational because it was just who they were. They made the transitions easier by becoming champions of the needed changes. Many Lancaster County churches have these champions in place as well. Some have full-blown programming in place that is a perfect illustration of this kind of work, they've just never applied it to their anti-poverty efforts.

When I first moved to Lancaster my ex-wife and I stayed with her family until we could find a house and get settled. In the process, I got to meet their "adopted" daughter and her family. This woman had become connected to the family through their church's refugee resettlement work decades earlier. The church had helped her find housing and employment as she came to the United States fleeing oppression in the country of her birth, all while being supported by families like that of my ex-wife. The end result was a deep, mutual relationship that

went on for decades beyond the initial settlement or the refugee family's need for any kind of resource support. Both families were blessed in so many ways as a result.

Given that between 2013 and 2017 Lancaster County, Pennsylvania resettled 20 times more refugees per capita than the United States as a whole,¹⁹ and that this has been part of the county's historical and cultural identity for generations, I doubt the relationship story I encountered is an anomaly. Church World Service in Lancaster, which is a driving force in these efforts, puts its relational model front and center. Their resettlement service, "provides assistance with the purpose of easing clients' adjustment to their new community upon arrival to the US, and supports their integration process throughout the following 5 years."²⁰

Five years is enough time to build a real relationship, and to climb out of a pretty deep hole. Coincidentally, the program I described that was funded by the United Way in Tampa was designed to last up to five years. That's a real commitment. Interestingly, though, many local churches already either engage in this kind of relational work or financially support it. Church World Service reported to me that they have 126 churches, mostly in Lancaster County, that support their refugee work either through financial contribution, supplying volunteers, or, in much smaller numbers but more relational ways, through "welcome teams."

Churches appear to understand and value this kind of relational commitment. They just don't do it for the neighbors living in poverty who already surround them. In my thirteen interviews with church leaders, none of them said they engage with poverty by providing assistance with the purpose of easing their neighbor's adjustment to transitioning out of poverty and supporting their integration process throughout the following five years. That said, two of

¹⁹ "The Refugee Capital of the US," *BBC News*, January 27, 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-us-canada-38776233>.

²⁰ "Resettlement Program, CWS Lancaster," *Church World Service Lancaster*, accessed November 28, 2020, <https://cwslancaster.org/resettlement/>.

the white congregations involved in the interviews shared that they work with refugees and seven engage in foreign missions.

Why is that? How could churches that would welcome strangers from strange lands with foreign cultures and religions offer them holistic relationships that lead to self-sufficiency while they offer their neighbors struggling with poverty a benevolence fund transaction that can at times be filled with rules and suspicion? All eleven of the white church leaders interviewed mentioned fear as a factor in not doing more relational work, with some specifically citing fear of “the other.”

It seems that for some American Christians refugees and people in foreign lands are not as much an “other” as poverty-stricken or homeless Americans are. Is a person living with poverty without honor in their own hometown? Perhaps that phenomenon is connected to the attraction of the exotic versus the fear of the demonized other. Boaz’s eye was drawn to Ruth when there were surely women from his own community who were just as vulnerable and in need of protection gleaning in his fields. He presumably ignored those other women prior to meeting Ruth and continued to ignore them after that story ended.

Again, I find myself at the doorway to a topic that could be a study all on its own. What makes one “other” more palatable and less frightening than another? Perhaps the deep and pervasive demonization of people living in poverty in this country, especially for political and financial gain, plays a key role. One doesn’t have to look far to find tropes and stereotypes about laziness and “takers” in American culture. Like it or not, that culture has contributed to what Roxburgh would call the “language house” of some American churches.

As he describes it, churches throw around words like “community” in their mission statements and talk about outreach, but it is often an empty monologue. “We use this public

discourse as if it actually shaped our lives when, in reality, a whole other “operating” system of individualism is at work determining our choices and actions.”²¹ I would take that even further than Roxburgh. I believe many American Christians have an out-loud narrative about community and an inner monologue not just about rugged individualism, but also consumerism, capitalism, classism, and racism. As I write this work, nearly half of one hundred and fifty million voters essentially cast a recent vote to close our borders to refugees, and I assume many of those voters would classify themselves as Christians. Lancaster County, dubbed by the BBC as the “refugee capital of the US,”²² went for Donald Trump in the 2020 election by 27 points. Our actions don’t always match who we say we are.

In my interviews with the leaders of eleven, predominantly white churches it was clear that the leaders wanted to be more relational with people living in poverty, but the majority of their congregation members were afraid. Given the stat above, I would argue that fear persists. Fear is a powerful motivator, and cultures are hard to change. That makes a culture of fear especially hard to overcome.

How can we reduce the culture of fear that congregants feel around the subject of building relationships with people who aren’t like them? This seems incredibly complicated by issues of class and ethnicity as well as the sociological barriers uncovered by Piff and his colleagues. There is clearly a fear of “the other” that keeps people from venturing out of their churches, at least past their own neighborhoods. That seems reflected in the fact that so many wait for people in need to come into their physical space to receive aid versus going out into the world and looking for those who need them.

²¹ Roxburgh, *Missional*, 66.

²² “The Refugee Capital of the US,” *BBC News*, January 27, 2017. <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-us-canada-38776233>.

What would the world look like if church members could overcome their fear and venture into the unknown of their own communities at least as much as they do in foreign nations?

In thinking of this not just as a benefit to the world, but as a benefit of the spiritual journey of each congregant, I'm reminded of David Mellott's musing about the *penitente* he interviewed in his book *I Was And I Am Dust*. "In pushing himself to know his limits, he is given the chance to detach, to lose control, to lose himself. The paradox is that it is in this loss that he experiences life anew."²³

Would congregants experience "life anew" if they overcame their fears and built relationships with "the other?" Or, to turn what one of my respondents said on its head; do you have to change your heart through the Word to do Christ's work in the world, or does doing Christ's work in the world change your heart? Mellott's answer seems clear in dispelling the idea of a single pathway. "Feeding the poor, clothing the naked, forgiving our enemies, and loving our neighbor as ourselves are also examples of faith in action. They are theological acts that also transform us through our encounter with God and one another."²⁴

Mellott likewise seems to me to speak out against the idea of seeking to improve your spirit in balance with, or instead of, engaging with the world:

I am convinced ... that whether we know it or not—or, better, whether we remember it or not—what we'd most like to do is chuck the whole project of improving ourselves and with it our incessant and obsessive monitoring of our "progress" toward whoever it is we think we ought to be. That is to say, we long for a kind of self-forgetful yet fully engaged sense of immediacy, for a more graced and gracious way of being in this world, one that cuts deeper than the surface imagery sketched by our infernal preoccupation with some soon-to-be success or failure (financial, social, or spiritual).²⁵

²³ David M. Mellott, *I Was And I Am Dust: Penitente Practices as a Way of Knowing*, Illustrated edition, (Collegeville, MN: Pueblo Books, 2009), 28, Kindle.

²⁴ Mellott, *I Was And I Am Dust*, 4.

²⁵ Mellott, *I Was And I Am Dust*, 102.

The concept of finding yourself by losing yourself in the service of others for its own sake seems to be precisely the point for me and in my opinion is perhaps where so many churches and their leadership have gone wrong.

In the next chapter I will lay out a plan for creating churches brave enough to leave their power and sense of moral superiority behind in order to become the stranger themselves; a plan that puts the other first. Within this plan, I hope to realize Pope Francis' vision of finding "Christ in them, to lend our voice to their causes, but also to be their friends, to listen to them, to speak for them and to embrace the mysterious wisdom which God wishes to share with us through them."²⁶ Let's discuss how to move from a place of fear to a place of courage. As Mellott might say, let's "get off the 'tourist bus' and...allow ourselves to be caught up in the activities of the world."²⁷

We'll attempt to do just that based on my professional experiences of the past 20 years laid on top of the foundation of this research. Through this research up to this point we've:

- started with framing the question of why churches aren't more active in relational work to address poverty,
- asked several churches about their work, philosophies, and cultures when it comes to poverty,
- explored what the law, the prophets, and the stories of Ruth and Jesus had to say about poverty, as well as their literary contexts,
- examined two models that call for churches to be relational and two churches of color that are more relational, and

²⁶ Pope Francis, "A Church That Is Poor And For The Poor," in *Poverty: Responding Like Jesus*, 114.

²⁷ Mellott, *I Was And I Am Dust*, 105.

- explored why I believe relational approaches are the key to meaningful reductions in poverty.

In addition to building an argument for why a church in decline should want to make this paradigm shift, I've encountered many surprises and a great deal of learning along the way.

While I believed strongly in relational work, I didn't expect so many church leaders to want that as well. That inspired me to move forward. I thought of Jesus's ministry as relational but had never examined the exclusionary elements of his teachings. The idea of Jesus wanting us to see ourselves as the man in the ditch and not the Samaritan was a revelation that turned my work upside down and set it on what I believe is the right path.

Like those I interviewed, I rarely mentioned the Old Testament when discussing issues of poverty and social justice. While in my research I found elements in the Old Testament that mirror modern structural injustices, greed, and the darker side of human nature, I also found care for the widow, orphan, and stranger and the power of deep relational bonds enshrined in law, celebrated as salvific in story, and fought for by prophets. My deeper dive into models I had admired on a surface level revealed fatal flaws for their usefulness in both addressing poverty and halting the decline of the church.

I also found within Catholicism, a denomination I have criticized both theologically and practically over the years, social justice views closer to my own than I have seen in any other denomination. Perhaps most importantly, the revelation of the connectivity between ancient Israel, Jesus's teachings, and modern research from social scientists, social psychologists, and neurobiologists cemented my professional experiences both in traditions that go back millennia and discoveries that are on the cutting edge of neurobiology and social science.

For all those revelations and discoveries, I find myself coming back to my own experiences in the ministry I've conducted for over 20 years in the secular world of nonprofit social services. That world is also in what I would consider a decades-long decline, and mostly stuck in transactional models that are no more effective at reducing poverty than anything the initial 11 church leaders interviewed shared with me. Next, I'll share what I've learned, what's worked and what hasn't, in the hopes that any of it can be helpful to church leaders who genuinely want to be relational with people living in poverty; the people who might just have the power to end the church's decline.

Chapter Seven: Do You Want to Get Well?

I have been the Executive Director or CEO of four nonprofit organizations during my career. In three of those, I was the first Executive Director taking over from the founder or founders of the organization. In the fourth, I had a slate of middle management that had mostly been in place for 20 to 40 years. I learned some practical lessons in those situations that I would share with any pastor who wants to change the culture of their congregation.

Founders tend to surround themselves with their friends throughout the organization: staff, board, and volunteers. In their minds it's their organization, even though by law nonprofits belong to the community. They often recruit people who aren't going to disagree with them. When they're right, that makes things move swiftly in the right direction. It's kind of like a benign dictatorship. When they're wrong, though, there's no one in place to speak truth to power. When someone does, they're usually forced out by the majority. Many pastors may recognize these dynamics.

For both founder organizations and long-haul management staff "this is how we've always done it" syndrome can take root. They dig in and resist change and innovation, even sabotaging it in some cases. They can triangulate others in the organization against positive change, work to damage the CEO leading the charge for change, bully other champions of change within the organization, and spread rumors outside of the organization to try to poison the well more broadly. Does any of that sound familiar to pastors?

Culture change is hard. It can be incredibly painful. It can fail. When it works, though, it can be the most profound and powerful thing that has ever happened to an organization.

Organizational and management guru Peter Drucker is often quoted (possibly falsely) as saying, “culture eats strategy for lunch.” In other words, it doesn’t matter how many new mission statements and strategic plans you put in place if you haven’t aligned your culture with those items. Culture is what your team does when no one is watching. It’s embedded deeply in the imagination of each team member and drives behavior, not because someone said so, but because it has become who we are. It becomes a matter of pride, sometimes when it’s not working, and even when it’s harmful.

Changing culture and being relational is an art, not a science. Handing out clothing or benevolence money is a science. There’s no guesswork. You follow the rules, and it does what it does. If you want guarantees, transactional work is guaranteed to work as designed. It’s also guaranteed to do very little to impact poverty, and I believe strongly that it’s guaranteed to do nothing to stop the current decline of the church. If we want to end that decline, and have a real impact in the world, that will require risk. It’s the kind of risk Jesus knew a “rich” man was unlikely to take. Here are some uncomfortable truths about taking risks for cultural change.

First, it could fail miserably. We can do everything suggested here and more and still fall flat on our faces. If we’re going to do this work, we should know that. We’re going to have to decide if our careers are more important than changing our congregations and the world, and trust that God is with us if we take that risk. This is a false choice, at least in my experience. Every executive role I’ve taken has been a risk, and in each case, I’ve tried to place my career as a secondary if not a tertiary concern behind mission and principle. That has led to moving from an organization with 1.5 staff and a \$90,000 annual budget to an organization with 330 staff and a \$44 million annual budget and then to the Governor’s office.

There were multiple failures along that path, both large and small. Failure is inevitable. At least as many of these steps and the philosophies behind them are born of failures as successes. What is consistent in failures and successes is the presence of God, and the doors God opens when we stay true to our principles. As a figurine I once bought for myself during a particularly challenging stretch says on its inscription, “step forward in faith.” That figurine and its inscription have been staring back at me from my desk for nine years as a reminder to be brave.

Second, the people who benefit from the status quo (or who think they do) have something to lose, and they will fight like it. When Jesus worked to change the status quo, it was resisted fiercely. Those who had power because of the status quo had him killed. If we truly begin to serve the world by changing our churches, there will be people both inside and outside our congregations who will attack and seek to sabotage our efforts because we are threatening their power. Focusing too much time and energy on them is a trap. More on that later.

Third, if our leadership councils, trustees, boards of directors, sessions, etc. don’t have a strong block of leaders who support the change, it will likely fail. There is no escaping the reality that pastors, like CEO’s, have a board to whom they answer. As such, executives and pastors alike would do well to make sure we’re interviewing our potential employers when we’re being interviewed for positions. It’s our chance to make sure the people who have veto power over our vision share at least a reasonable amount of that vision. If we don’t, we’ll eventually find ourselves either miserable over the constant battles, looking for another job, or worst of all in my opinion, working in a way that is in conflict with our principles of what’s right and what God is calling us to do.

Does this journey sound horrible enough yet? If any readers have been scared away from this transformational work, that's not the intent. After 20 years doing this work, other than my wife and children, it's the most rewarding and worthwhile part of my life, even on the bad days. It is important, though, to be realistic about the pitfalls and reality of the work before we get started.

For the purposes of this work, we'll be specifically examining changing to a culture focused on working to eliminate poverty and to bring about social justice. That's not because those things would be nice to do in a secular sense, but because I believe strongly that what we see in the law, the prophets, Ruth, and the parables and actions of Jesus call us to do just that. They are precisely the actions that show whether we're "sheep" or "goats." They are also the actions that open space for the kingdom of heaven on earth. After all, every church leader I interviewed has a congregation that says the Lord's Prayer and asks for God's will to be done "on earth as it is in heaven."

Carey addresses this when he talks about Matthew's use of the kingdom of heaven in the parables he shares. After showing several examples, he cites the Lord's Prayer as the strongest argument for his conclusion. "God's kingdom happens when God's will is done. That can be on earth and in heaven, now or in the future."¹ When I call for a culture change, I'm calling for us to more fully and communally be the instrument of that will for the purpose of experiencing God's kingdom in the here and now. I am undoubtedly (and proudly) in what Carey would call the "justice camp."²

Based on my experience and reading in the field I have identified five steps that church leaders can undertake within their congregations to change culture, and five steps to enact

¹ Carey, *Stories Jesus Told*, chap. 2.

² Carey, *Stories Jesus Told*, chap. 2.

outside their congregations to live out the culture described above. In both cases, I will attempt to do so in a way that I believe mirrors the practice and teachings of Jesus, as well as the lessons of the law, the prophets, and the stories examined earlier in this work, even when I'm using those texts as an example of what I think of as harmful thinking. I will also attempt to reconcile these principles with the core principles of the neighboring and missional movements examined earlier. I use the word "attempt" because this work is not full of certainties and promises.

In my experience, it's not the challenges of this work that tend to do us in. It's surprises. So, no holding back. No secrets. What follows is what I believe it takes to change culture, innovate, and thrive at serving others even as other organizations around us are falling apart. Still reading? Great. Here we go.

Five Steps We Can Take to Change the Culture Inside Our Churches

Trust in Other Voices

"The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field."

Matthew 13:31

We are leaders in our churches, but a crucial part of leading is listening. Part of leading is also trusting in God. Trust that God has planted a seed in us, and that God has planted it in others as well. An important task in our work is to find those others and nurture those seeds so they bear fruit.

Through sitting down with people one on one or conducting surveys, we can get the lay of the land. Ask people what they think about the health and life of the church. Ask them what they think the church should be doing about poverty. Ask them if and how they'd like to see the church engaging with the world. As we analyze these conversations and survey answers, we can look for areas of hope and areas of concern. What repeating ideas can add fuel to our work? Where are the roadblocks? Who are the people connected with each?

We can also look through our organizational documents. Are there concepts in the mission and vision statements or current or older strategic plans that support our work? We can talk to any people or read any documents that can give us a greater sense of the history of the organization. Is there anything in the history, or in the vision of former, beloved leaders or founders that speaks to the culture we're trying to build?

Finally, think of the theological analysis I conducted earlier in this work. What does the Bible have to offer to the culture we're trying to build? Not in a surface, "making Bible passages fit my argument" kind-of-way, but through a deeper and contextual analysis that not only informs us but can be taught to parishioners.

While I lay this step out as a start, it isn't a one-time thing. Part of this new culture must be an ongoing dialogue between the people that make up our churches, the history and DNA of those churches, and scripture. Be intentional. After we talk to someone, read a document, or analyze a scripture, we can put a reminder in our calendars to do it again in six months or a year. We'll have different eyes and ears in another year, and so will any people to whom we talk. Dots that seemed completely disparate may connect. New patterns may form. We should be intentional in our prayer as well. Let's ask God to give us eyes to see and ears to hear new revelations.

As new connections and revelations appear, we shouldn't be afraid to keep evolving our strategies within the culture we're building. We must also be mindful not to let our new vision become a new "way we've always done it."

Trust in Your Critics and Outsiders

"And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that?" Matthew 5:47

It's not just our current congregants to whom we should be talking and listening. It's also our critics. We can interview and survey people who have left our churches as well as those who still attend. It may only be the angriest or most upset who will respond to a survey. Others may be more inclined to join us for a free cup of coffee, especially if we make it clear what we're doing in an unthreatening way.

Be careful in this work. This isn't just a cathartic airing of grievances by former members. We shouldn't go into problem-solving mode for every complaint or perceived wrong people share with us. Just like in the last point, we should enter into this intentionally and prayerfully. Again, look for patterns and revelations. Connect the dots between these conversations and what we've found in other places.

In addition to former members, we can set up conversations with leaders from other churches in our area. We should think ahead to where we'd like to engage with poverty. While I have pushed back against just meeting our immediate neighbors, I do suggest that the poverty closest to our churches is the best place to start. I know church ministries that drive past the

closest poverty to their church because they think poverty is a minority or a city problem. It's not. Poverty is a human problem, and it exists in almost every area that humans have settled. The people across from us in the cul-de-sac may have similar socioeconomic status to ours, but I'd be willing to bet there's a neighborhood or trailer park not too far away that has serious poverty issues.

Whether it is in fact a city neighborhood, an apartment complex in an otherwise stable school district, or a trailer park, talk to people who live there. As Jesus describes in Luke and Roxburgh emphasizes throughout his book, we should enter these conversations without baggage. Approach people with humility, honesty, and no preconceived notions of coming to anyone's rescue. Make it clear we want to learn. Talk to the leaders of other organizations already at work in these neighborhoods and communities. Talk to any church leaders who do their work right there. Again, we're no one's savior. We need their help. We should wear that on our sleeves with all the vulnerability of the man in the ditch who needs a good Samaritan.

Some of these conversations may be hard; brutal even. I was once in a community meeting where a well-meaning, mostly white organization was trying to talk to residents of a neighborhood of color about their community development plan. I remember one African American woman in-particular standing up and saying, "don't think you're the first group of white people coming in here telling us how you're going to make everything better!" Five years later I can still hear her voice clearly in my head. She doesn't know it, but with one sentence that evening she became one of my many teachers.

Wherever we go, we must remember that the people who live there are the experts on their community and its circumstances. They don't just know something we don't know. They know lots of things we don't know. They'll also likely say some things we don't necessarily

want to hear. Again, we should listen, pray, and look for connection points as we keep putting this puzzle together.

Build a Coalition of the Willing

“But the seed falling on good soil refers to someone who hears the word and understands it. This is the one who produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown.”

Matthew 13:23

It can be so easy to steer away from conflict and look for the easier path. That’s the attractiveness of “the way we’ve always done it.” It’s easier. It’s comfortable. Change, which almost invariably is accompanied by conflict, is neither easy nor comfortable. That’s why it’s so important not to go it alone.

Once we’ve found people who think and feel the same way we do about engaging with the community, potential allies both inside and outside of our churches, it’s important to be intentional about building what I call a “coalition of the willing.” Find ways to connect as human beings. Create regular opportunities to talk and strategize what change is going to look like. Break bread together. Build trust. Always be honest and straightforward. Say what we mean. Do what we said we were going to do when we said we were going to do it. These things may seem trite, but if someone is going to follow us into risk, a solid relationship of trust is crucial.

Make sure this coalition sits at a round table where every voice matters. God didn’t bring these allies into our lives so we could tell them what to do, but rather so they could bring us the pieces we were missing to move forward with a greater vision. We are each other’s missing

pieces in building a culture focused on the kingdom of Heaven on Earth. That culture, and that kingdom, are by their very nature relational. “For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them.” Matthew 18:20.

We should work with this coalition to create a culture that is visible in imagery, word, and deed at our churches. People should feel this new culture when they’re with any of us, or when they walk through our churches. Use words and images in our buildings to convey it. Preach on it. More importantly, live it out. Culture that isn’t lived out isn’t culture. At best it’s wishful thinking, and at worst it’s a lie.

So often we know we want to be better, but we’re frightened of change, so we use the language of change even as we do the same thing wrapped up in a different package. This can be seen in the churches I interviewed that reached out to school staff in order to give things to families and called that being more relational. They were actually taking a step further away from the families in poverty by working through an intermediary and labeling that as change. Fundamentally, they were also still providing the transactional food, clothing, and Christmas presents as well.

Culture change has to dig below the surface. It’s not cosmetic. It’s got to be fundamentally who we are and who we are trying to become. That’s why it’s so important to start by working with others who believe what we do. They aren’t going to say one thing in a meeting and do another thing in the community if it’s just who they are.

We’ll find that having the culture we’re trying to build very visible in word, image, and deed will attract more people who believe what we do. Our coalition of the willing will grow, and each new member will bring a new resource, a new perspective, new ideas, and new energy

to our work of culture building. When that happens, we should welcome it and make our round tables bigger.

If we look, we'll see God's hand in lining things up and placing opportunities to make an impact in our paths. People we don't know will find us when we declare ourselves. Things we couldn't have thought of or found on our own will appear. There's a momentum we'll encounter that feels bigger than us, because it is. Don't try to control it. Let go. Ride the wave and keep setting a larger table.

Be Willing to Leave Some People Behind

“New wine must be poured into new wineskins.” Luke 5:38

These next two culture change steps may seem like the harshest and hardest to do. They are perhaps harder for a pastor to do in a church than they are for a secular leader in the nonprofit world. While I fully acknowledged that, both are crucial in my experience.

Some people are never going to get it. They're just not. It won't matter how many wonderful things happen as a result of the new culture. It won't matter that the new culture could greatly benefit them personally. They won't have eyes to see it.

That may seem harsh for someone who has received pastoral training, but keep in mind that Jesus expected as much. As Carey points out in discussing the Gospel of Mark:

The disciples ask Jesus why he speaks in parables, and Jesus replies that he uses parables so that those outside will fail to understand. The parables, then, discriminate between insiders and outsiders. Insiders should understand what Jesus means, but outsiders will find the parables frustrating or confusing.³

³ Carey, *Stories Jesus Told*, chap. 1.

While I wouldn't suggest that we intentionally try to make sure "those outside" fail to understand, trust me when I say they will.

The same words, deeds, and actions that will draw others to us will seem like incomprehensible gibberish to them. What is obvious to us will seem opaque to them. That being the case, here's what I suggest.

By broadcasting our vision and the new culture in our buildings in every way possible, we are trying to reach them. We want to reach them. Even so, we can't wait for them and, if necessary, we must even leave them behind or let them go.

In the nonprofit world, this is straightforward. People who didn't feel like the new culture we were building was for them often resigned. They could read the writing on the wall, literally in the case of our organization's list of shared values.

Others would dig in and even try to sabotage the new culture or try to triangulate others to build a coalition of the unwilling. Our approach was to fire them. Part of our strategy as a leadership team was to make living up to our culture and values part of people's job descriptions and evaluations. We would write people up for not living the culture in the same way we might write them up for not performing a task well. The saboteurs would inevitably violate the culture no matter how much we wanted them to succeed, and we would let them go as quickly as we could because a culture of negativity can be a cancer in any team.

This isn't easy. Firing anyone is hard. Even firing people who have made us miserable or who we don't like can be agonizing. Some of the people fired filed lawsuits. None of them ever won, but it was frustrating. It was worth it, though, to not have people inside the organization trying to poison the culture we were trying to build. Poison is not an overstatement.

What happens to a nonprofit organization that doesn't fight to protect its culture and values is deadly. When a leader lets negativity and the status quo stay unchallenged, the champions of those forces stay, and the people who are hungry for change, innovation, and meaning in what they do are the ones who leave. By not being willing to leave those who don't get it behind, we will inevitably leave behind, or be left behind ourselves, by those who do. I would argue that is in fact one of the things that's happening within the decline of the church.

Some might argue that Jesus would be willing to leave the flock behind for one lost sheep, so we shouldn't leave anyone behind. I might have seen that passage the same way prior to doing the research for this work. Now, I would argue that the lost sheep should be seen in the same context of insiders and outsiders of so many of Jesus's parables. A lost insider is worth leaving the flock to find, but a lost outsider, especially one who could cause us to stumble ourselves, should be left behind.

I know how harsh that sounds, but is it any harsher than one of the passages some of my 11 interviewees shared with me? In Matthew 25:31-46 the goats are sent "into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels." Or how about the fate Jesus describes for the rich man who ignores Lazarus' suffering? Harsh? Maybe. If there's one thing I've learned in this work and my life, though, and which I think Jesus points out multiple times in the gospels, it's that we can shine a light for others to follow, but we can't force them to take a single step. We can never save people from themselves.

So, we should be clear about our vision and the culture we're trying to build. Do what we can to change hearts and minds by preaching about the path God is urging us towards. Live what we preach as best we can and be honest when we miss the mark. For all that, we shouldn't wait

for those who don't get it, shouldn't mourn when those who won't get it leave, and shouldn't be afraid to show the door to those who would destroy our vision.

Be Willing to Leave Everything Behind

“For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” Luke 12:34

Now for the second hard thing. Once we've set the path, we should be willing to go wherever that takes us. Shortly I'll be arguing that at the very least that should take us among people living in poverty in a humble, respectful, relational way. If that path also leads us to destinations we didn't expect, or even that we don't want, we should go there too.

I've left everything behind multiple times in my career, sometimes with the organization I'd been leading at the time, and sometimes without them. There have been moments where I'd worked with a coalition to change the culture and the organization has left its physical location, its old philosophy, or even its existence behind through a merger. There have been moments when I'd taken all the steps I've laid out here; talked to the people inside, talked to the people outside, built the coalition, and left behind the unwilling only to still fail and have to walk away.

At one organization where I was doing what I thought was the best work of my career, and where we were gaining attention and investment in what could only be called a success, the board of directors cut my legs out from under me. This board, which still had a majority of members recruited by my predecessor, ordered me to stop moving forward with new initiatives for the next five to ten years. If I had stayed, it would have meant not walking through any new

doors that Good opened before me unless I wanted to directly defy the board of directors. I decided to leave them behind.

That move felt like failure. It still does some days. I remember praying to God out loud in my car on the way home from the board retreat where they decided they didn't want to launch any new initiatives in the community for the next five to ten years. I asked God for a sign. It was given.

In fact, I received a whole string of signs over the next several months that led me back to Lancaster, Pennsylvania, and the most successful work I've ever done. Interestingly, I would never have had the experience I needed for that successful work had I not had that previous disappointment. The lessons I learned at that previous organization, including on doing intentional board development and recruitment as a core component of leadership, set the stage for something better; something I never would have experienced and work I never would have done if I hadn't been willing to read the writing on the wall and leave that other organization behind me.

So, what happens when we start changing the culture of our churches and we get fired? Leave them behind and "shake the dust off your feet." People can become invested in the status quo, and some of those people may have the power to fire us. As Roxburgh says of Luke, "Luke is helping his readers understand that opposition is the norm when the Spirit breaks the boundaries of expectations and predictable ways of relating to people."⁴ That's why I said we should make sure when we're getting interviewed by a potential employer, we should also interview the people hiring us. When they ask if we have any questions, we shouldn't just ask

⁴ Roxburgh, *Missional*, 122.

them about paid time off and insurance, we should ask about their culture and vision, especially the culture and vision of the people who can fire us or get in our way.

What happens when we start changing the culture of our churches and our board stops us? We should pray for guidance and be prepared if God opens pathways before us that have us leaving them behind. That can sound scary, but not as scary as what comes next.

What happens if we totally succeed? What if we listen and build our coalitions and communicate our culture and engage in poverty in such a way that is life changing for us, our communities, and our churches? Will we be willing to leave *all* the “way we’ve always done its” behind, possibly even the ritual, traditions, and the building itself, in order to follow the path God is putting in front of our congregations?

That’s likely a scarier question. What if the reason the church is in decline is partially because of the ritual, tradition, and even the physical building, though? I’m not saying it is, but I can easily think of denominations and situations where any one or any combination of the three may be exactly why the church is in decline.

Here I definitively part ways with Roxburgh who makes it clear how much tradition and ritual mean to him. Pathak and Runyon are doing their neighboring with the ultimate, if not ulterior, motive of getting people to go to church. I have no such motives. I am focused entirely on working to realize the kingdom of heaven on earth through service to the widow, the orphan, the stranger, and the person living in poverty. God will decide what happens to the church.

I know how that might sound. Please know I have had some of my best experiences in churches. As I shared at the beginning, I believe my life was saved in one. I would like there to be a strong church on the other side of this, but only if it is a church that is meaningful to building the kingdom of heaven on earth. I have no interest in a church that exists for its own

sake or that serves only as a membership club where individuals can gather to seek absolution for selfish lives and ponder pathways to their own individual wellbeing or salvation. If that's all there is to it, I'd be happy to let it die. Maybe that's what God wants.

I'll confess, when I read about Drescher's "nones"⁵ or Roxburgh's statement about "Christian but not churchd" people⁶ I can't help but wonder if the movement away from the church is actually a movement toward God. For all his inability to fully leave the church building and rituals, Roxburgh acknowledges that God is at work in the community, in the culture, and we should meet God there. He poses these key questions:

What is God up to in our neighborhoods and communities? What is the nature of an engagement between the biblical imagination and this place where we find ourselves, at this time, among these people? What then will a local church look like when it responds to such questions?⁷

I would implore anyone who is willing and eager to engage in the work I'm proposing to also allow for the probability that God's imagination is infinitely larger than our own. That said, the answer to Roxburgh's final question is likely, "that church will look like nothing we can imagine or have seen before."

Five Steps We Can Take Outside Our Churches to Bring the Kingdom of Heaven to Earth

Once we've begun the journey of changing the culture inside our churches, and perhaps at the same time, we must also wrestle with the question of what it looks like to live out that culture in the communities that surround us. In the introduction I told the story of the Christian hospital in Tampa that stopped talking to me when I reminded them that they weren't doing their

⁵ Drescher, *Choosing Our Religion*.

⁶ Roxburgh, *Missional*, 66.

⁷ Roxburgh, *Missional*, 44.

work in the way Jesus had. What I didn't share is that after that incident I turned that mirror on myself. I decided to take a closer look at how Jesus engaged in the community and examine if I was living up to the same standards I'd asked the hospital to follow when they threw their Christianity out as an excuse for what I saw as doing as little as possible.

What started as an angry, knee jerk response turned into an important question about whether Jesus had given us a road map to do the kind of work I wanted to do in the world. As it turns out, I believe he did. As I shared earlier, I broke that down as going to where the hurting people are and accepting them as they are, asking them if they want to be made well and offering healing with no strings, and inviting them into relationship while also equipping them to heal others as well. That examination of Jesus's actions became the core of my philosophy for community work, and also found its way into the DNA of the "One Good Job Plan." Some of that examination has also made its way into the steps below.

Go Where the People Are (It's Not Necessarily the City)

When we look at Jesus's work, he turned the conventions of his culture upside down. He spoke to women, children, Samaritans, Greek soldiers, pagans, tax collectors, and prostitutes to name a few. He touched the untouchable, literally in the case of lepers. If there was somewhere he wasn't supposed to go or someone he wasn't supposed to engage, he did just that. He could have been the greatest teacher at a single base of operations, but he did not go that route. Doing the opposite was intentional.

The first step in engaging with those living in poverty is that we stop making them come to us. First, getting to our churches takes resources they don't have to waste. Many people living

in poverty don't have reliable transportation. Even if they do, it can still cost money and time to get to our churches, neither of which they have to spare. It's also humiliating.

If we have never had to show up in a neighborhood and culture other than our own and ask strangers for help, we have no idea how humiliating the experience can be. Sometimes there are questions or forms to fill out that make it worse. Sometimes there are looks, attitudes, or body language that make it clear "the other" is not really welcome, just tolerated, if that.

Harold V. Bennett pointed out two flaws with how tithing was done. The first was that the people without resources had to figure out how to travel to the temple. The majority of churches still enact that model today.

The second was that people were given items that made them dependent on the giver. Transactional items made them more comfortable in poverty for a moment in time but didn't solve their core problems. Tithes and gleaning kept them stuck in a classist system that didn't allow them to move up. As he explains it:

These laws demanded neither the distribution of seed, land, domesticated animals, and tools for farming nor the allocation of other items that would position these persons to become self-actualizing. These codes, accordingly, guaranteed that these types of persons would be unable to change their historical predicament. They relegated this vulnerable social subgroup to a position of socioeconomic inferiority, and this continued dependency clearly exacerbated the circumstances of this class of people.⁸

This feature is also still with us today, thousands of years later, not just in churches, but in most of the social service nonprofits across the country.

Neither of those flaws is likely to be overcome while church members stay in their buildings and wait for people living in poverty to come to them. This is the part the neighboring

⁸ Bennett, *Injustice Made Legal*, 121.

and missional movements get absolutely right. We must get out of our buildings and into the community.

This is the call Roxburgh sees in Luke, “to go on disruptive, unthinkable, risky journeys for the sake of the kingdom.”⁹ While I again disagree that the “risky” place we’re being called to is our own neighborhoods, Roxburgh’s argument lends itself well to what I’m suggesting and its consequences. “Those making this journey must understand how radical the transformation of imagination is that is demanded. It is a journey that moves from a primary focus on the church to the place of making the church work again in the neighborhoods and communities where we live so we can ask what God is already doing ahead of us in these ordinary places.”¹⁰ Substitute “neighborhoods and communities where we live” with “neighborhoods and communities where people in poverty live” and therein lies the argument.

So, we must go farther than our comfort zones. We must build relationships with the people who are struggling with poverty every day. We must engage with our modern equivalents of widows, orphans, strangers, and prisoners where they are. That said, *how* we get out of our churches and into those communities and spaces is incredibly important. For the work I would have us do, intention and style don’t just matter, they’re crucial.

Ask First

In my work I have been struck by Jesus’s question, “do you want to get well?” in John 5:6. This question is powerful to me in a couple of ways. First, it shows the son of God asking

⁹ Roxburgh, *Missional*, 72.

¹⁰ Roxburgh, *Missional*, 71.

the disabled man lying by the pool for permission to intercede. Second, it reinforces what we've seen in other gospels where Jesus has no power unless the people have faith and willingness, like Matthew 13:58, Mark 6:5, or Luke 17:19.

This equation where faith is necessary for healing to work speaks to my earlier point about leaving behind those who refuse to or who are unable to understand what you're trying to accomplish. It is the same for healing, or helping, people living in poverty. It is impossible to help people who do not want to be helped. We can't save people from themselves, which is a rule that applies to all of us.

What we can do is reach out and ask respectfully. That's where we get to intention. If we think that people living in poverty are people who need to be rescued by us, or we see ourselves as better than they are, or worst of all, if we think they have done something to deserve their lot in life, we should stay in our churches. If we believe any of those things, we will not be successful, and we may just do harm.

These damaging beliefs are not new. While they have gained a prominent spotlight because of the prosperity gospel movement, they exist within lots of mainline denominations as well, and have their roots in Deuteronomy and ancient Israel. Bennett points out this view of "blessings" as, "the typical Deuteronomic view that a relationship is present between obedience and blessings; conversely it lends support to the notion that a relationship is present between catastrophe and disobedience."¹¹ This is something we see again as a macro-opinion in the prophets in relationship to a disobedient king or a disobedient populace bringing catastrophe. Unfortunately, we have seen thousands of years of that opinion playing out at a micro level for

¹¹ Bennett, *Injustice Made Legal*, 99.

individuals. “Are you living in poverty? You must deserve it somehow. What’s wrong with you? What did you do?”

While I reserve the greatest level of vitriol for this sentiment, thinking that people living in poverty are somehow in any way less than we are, or that we are salvific figures in their lives, are sentiments that are equally toxic and self-defeating. If members of our churches have any of those beliefs, they will need to leave them behind before they embark on the kind of transformation I’m discussing. Those beliefs simply aren’t true.

Piff and his colleagues have already shown us that, generally speaking, people living in poverty have more empathy and more relational impulses than people living in the middle class and above. I would argue that both qualities are crucial to the kingdom of heaven that Jesus describes in multiple texts. As the sociological studies we’ve examined here assert, a person living in poverty is more likely to be a Good Samaritan than the average middle-class church member. That’s helpful because, as I’ve stated before, it’s not actually the community living in poverty that’s dying in a ditch, it’s the church.

I began this work thinking that the church could be perhaps the most impactful partner in the war on poverty if it shifted from transactional to relational models. In truth, if the church did this, I have no doubt it would mean the largest reduction in poverty in Lancaster County’s history. Even so, in flipping the power dynamic, I see now that my original premise was still true, but upside down. If people living in poverty allowed a humble church community into its own community in a relational way, it could mean the reversal of the church’s decline.

In examining this in my own context, I realized this was how I instinctively approached my work in Tampa and Lancaster. In both cases the organizations were at a point of decline. In Tampa it was financial and reputational. The organization had a singular, declining funding

source and every other organizational leader in the community told me my organization was “a joke” and “a fake vanity project” when I met with them to get their opinions. In Lancaster, the organization was financially stable, but wasn’t actually reducing poverty and had a negative reputation in the neighborhoods living below the poverty line.

What was true for Jesus was true for me. The people I needed to serve had all the power. If they did not want to get well or had no faith in our organization’s ability to help them, nothing would happen. In acknowledging that power dynamic, that our organizations were actually the ones in the ditch bleeding, and that only the people living in poverty in the community could help us achieve our mission, we had no choice but to approach them with humility. In both cases we acknowledged past mistakes, asked for forgiveness, and asked for those communities’ permission to help them achieve the things they wanted for their communities, not what middle class folks thought they should want.

When we were told, “no, thank you,” or even, “get lost,” we thanked people for their time and moved on. When we were welcomed, we asked questions and really listened to the answers. We did not make promises we couldn’t keep, but we did promise a relationship. We helped with the things with which they asked us to help and did what we said we were going to do when we said we were going to do it. It wasn’t without mistakes or conflicts, but what relationship is?

So, we should ask the same of churches. We don’t necessarily have to go to the city nearest our congregations to meet people and ask permission to be in community with them. In the “One Good Job” plan in Lancaster we pointed out that based on US Census data at the time two thirds of all the people living in poverty in Lancaster County lived outside of the city and two thirds of all people living in poverty in Lancaster County were white.¹² For many of the 11

¹² Jurman and Smith-Wade-El, *One Good Job*, 7.

white churches I interviewed, the city wasn't the closest location of poverty in relation to their church building.

Whether our churches are urban, suburban, or rural, we can find poverty that may be closer than we think it is. Every city has neighborhoods that seem trapped in cycles of poverty. That said, there are apartment buildings, rental units, and trailer parks in other areas that struggle with the same issues. If we don't know where they are, the question may be, "how do we get started?"

While I have shared my disappointment with the church leaders I interviewed who defined using school district staff as a conduit to children and families living in poverty as relational, they are actually on the right track. They just stopped too soon. I highly recommend connecting with people and organizations that already have relationships with people living in poverty, but not as intermediaries. I suggest asking them to be ambassadors who make introductions directly to the people whose permission we'll be seeking.

There are many organizations that can help bridge their relationships to our churches: not only schools, but nonprofit social service agencies, and our local health clinics or Federally Qualified Health Centers. If we don't know who the most trusted or relational providers are, our local community foundation or United Way may be able to help as they fund these organizations and may be able to tell which ones have the best relational models (assuming they have examined such things themselves). The goal is to find ambassadors that people living in poverty trust and with whom they have good relationships. That may take quite a bit of detective work on our part. It's already been shared that social service organizations are no better at this than churches are. In my experience, the best place to start may be with small, grass roots organizations that are embedded in the community or neighborhood we're hoping to reach.

There may be dead ends and frustrations. That's to be expected. We just need to put it out there that we want to talk, and more importantly, listen to the community. God will put connectors in our paths. Doors will open. First, though, we must step forward in faith.

Listen to What People Tell Us They Need and Provide Healing Free of Conditions

Time and again as people approach Jesus for healing, or when he approaches them, he listens to them describe their needs. Notice in each story that he doesn't preemptively tell them what they need. He doesn't stop them or interrupt them to tell them what they need, or to suggest that they'd be in better shape if they were more obedient. Instead, he listens, and then he offers healing without condition. Not everyone who is healed becomes one of his followers. Some, as we see in Luke 17:18, aren't even all that grateful. Still, the healing is offered freely to those who want to be well.

Once we find people who give us permission to be part of their lives, it's imperative that we listen to what they tell us and that we help in the ways they suggest. It might not be what we thought it was going to be, but that doesn't matter. One thing I've noticed both living in poverty for a time myself and working on behalf of others who live in poverty now is that poverty can take a person's voice. Most people don't listen to people living in poverty, much like the people with disabilities I once served. If we want to build trust, listening is an important step.

Years ago, in Lancaster, we hired someone who lived on one of the most impoverished blocks in the City of Lancaster to do door knocking and survey work with all the neighbors who lived there. Many of the neighbors identified the same lot that had been empty for decades, was

filled with garbage, and had attracted crime. As a result of their answers, we invited the residents and their children to come to a community meeting where dinner would be provided. We were excited when over 20 people took us up on the invitation.

At the meeting we just introduced ourselves and then listened while the neighbors talked about the issues. It got contentious at times. A few of the neighbors wanted the lot to be turned into a parking lot to help with abysmal city parking. In the end, the vast majority wanted the lot turned into a family park; a green space where neighbors and their children could relax and play together.

In the end, we worked with the neighbors to help them make their case to the city, which owned the lot, cleaned all the garbage out of it working side by side, and raised nearly a hundred thousand dollars to start converting the space into a park. There were a lot of proud moments along the way, but one of my favorites was standing with over 30 neighbors and their children when we had finished clearing all the garbage out of the lot together. I watched my daughter laughing and playing with their children and scanned the expressions of pride on the faces of neighbors, some of whom had been arguing with each other at the community meeting a few days before, some who hadn't known each other before that day.

We had listened and supported what they wanted. There was an inspirational redevelopment meeting where the city sold us the lot for \$1 even though they had an offer of \$13,000 on the table from an out-of-town developer. A reporter asked me if it was usual for a nonprofit to build a city park. My answer was no. We didn't know the first thing about building parks. All we knew was what these neighbors wanted for their families. If they had asked for something else, we'd have been supporting that.

That night was another proud moment as we watched a few mothers from the block convince the city to sell them a lot appraised at \$11,000 for \$1. When we left city hall together the look of pride on their faces was something I wish every person struggling with poverty and every helper could see. It was a mix of pride, self-esteem, and power that I can still feel in my heart to this day.

This same advice is good whether we're talking to a block of neighbors or just one family. Ask. Listen. Support. Ask again. Listen again. Support again. The organizations I've worked for have been part of getting people better jobs, safer places to live, degrees and professional certificates, and so much more. This was not because we told them they needed those things, but because we formed relationships of trust and they not only told us what their needs were, but what their dreams for themselves and their families were as well.

People living in poverty do have dreams. Sometimes they've become so buried in pain, trauma, and disappointment that dreaming itself becomes painful. Still, if we can build a little stability beneath a person's feet, enough so they can get past the bottom two levels of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (basic needs and safety), there can be room to dream again.

I remember working with a young man whom I'd spent months mentoring. He had gone to prison for dealing drugs and had been struggling upon reentry in the community. We had helped him secure an apartment and employment. I took him to lunch to talk about what might be next. I asked the magic question. "What have you always wanted to do?"

He responded, "you're going to laugh." Now this young man was nothing but muscle. He had biceps the diameter of my thighs. There's no scenario where I would laugh at him, ever.

He went on to tell me he'd always wanted to be an interior designer. The back-and-forth conversation that followed went something like this, starting with me asking a question:

“What would you need to do to become an interior designer?”

“I don’t know. Go to art school or something, I guess.”

“What’s keeping you from doing that?”

“I never graduated high school. I’d have to get my GED first.”

“What’s keeping you from getting your GED?”

“I can’t pass the math test. I’m no good at math.”

“Is there anything that would help you do that?”

“I guess if I could get a math tutor or something.”

“I can help with that if it’s what you want.”

“That would be great.”

I never assumed anything. I never asked a question from a place of condescension. I genuinely wanted to know the answer to each question. When we’d finished, he’d laid out a course based on his hopes and dreams, not mine.

Here’s another fact about that young man. To my knowledge he never got there. He violated his parole a few months later and ended up back in jail. It broke my heart. That’s the thing about real relationships, though. Sometimes they do just that. Transactions never break your heart, but they also never solve anything in a meaningful way. I gave what I had to offer without condition. It was not conditional upon what some might call success. God planted seeds in my heart as a result of that relationship, and I hope God planted seeds in that young man’s heart as well. I have faith that when and if he’s ready to get well, God will open a path for him.

We must ask humbly and listen like we really care about the answers. We must support as a servant, not as would-be heroes. The people we’re serving are the heroes of these stories.

We should offer what we can without condition or judgment. Trust God. Repeat. We might be amazed at what we learn and the blessings that abide there.

Start Small and Be Sensitive to Everyone's Fears

Several times in the Bible the disciples are afraid, and Jesus counsels them to have no fear. That can be easier said than done, however. Fear can be a powerful force. It can be a gateway to anger and hatred. As we've seen more than once in history, it can be weaponized. At the very least, it can keep us stuck where we are.

One of the consistent barriers to becoming more relational that most of the church leaders I interviewed shared was fear. Some of that was fear of change and some was fear of "the other." We should approach each differently, but with some common elements.

First, fear of change. This is a fairly typical human response, although some generational experts think the younger generations, whose technologies have changed more rapidly and dramatically than any previous generations' in history, are more accepting of change than their elders. Even so, most people struggle to change, especially when they've grown comfortable. That includes people living in poverty. To quote the old saying, "it's amazing what you can get used to."

I've seen people at organizations that were dying fight tooth and nail to resist change, as if there was a way to keep doing what they were doing and get a different result. It's not always a rational fear, which means we can't just tell people they're wrong, show them the facts, and expect them to suddenly stop being afraid. It's an emotional response.

As such, what I've seen work most often is helping people connect to emotions that are stronger than fear. Instead of trying to force people past their fears, we can try to inspire them to want to move past their fears. That usually means helping them think about what inspires them and may have brought them through the doors of our churches in the first place: love, hope, service to others. If we start with a coalition of the willing and build a vision, start showing people what's possible, we can plant a seed in them that can grow beyond their fears.

Isn't that what the kingdom of heaven is like? It's like a tiny mustard seed that grows into a sheltering tree, or a bit of yeast that can be worked into a disproportionately large amount of dough until it's all throughout. Plant seeds of inspiration tied to what brought everyone to church in the first place and God will work them in. Inspire people living in poverty and God will work in them as well. It won't mean everyone will overcome their fear of change, but enough will to make a start, and God will open more doors from there.

The second fear may be more difficult. Fear of those unlike us can be a powerful thing. Look at my analysis of Roxburgh, Pathak, and Runyon. I find so much of where they start on-target and inspiring, but then they stop short by asking their readers to engage those principles of relationship and neighboring with the people most like themselves. I don't think that's necessarily a conscious thing. Fear of the other can be subconscious and run deep.

In his piece, "Fear of the Other" in Existential Psychology, Michael Schreiner says:

Fear of the Other and all its destructive consequences had a life preserving purpose in our collective past. Fear of the other is clan mentality. It's human narcissism in its raw, unadulterated form. This sort of narcissism was, and in a way still is, an effective rule of thumb to remain safe in a tumultuous, often hostile world. But like all cognitive biases it often leads to catastrophic breakdowns, to irrationality, to inaccurate judgments, to flawed perceptions. Narcissism automatically labels as bad and wrong anything that seems different from us and good and right anything that seems the same as us."¹³

¹³ Michael Schreiner, "Fear Of The Other," *Evolution Counseling* (blog), February 1, 2017, <https://evolutioncounseling.com/fear-of-the-other/>.

While that may sound like a daunting condition to overcome, I've found the solution to it to be quite simple. To overcome fear of the other we must help seemingly different people see the things about themselves that are the same.

In my experience, there are a lot of options. Love of family. Pride in community. Struggle and suffering. Grief. Even fear itself can be something two seemingly disparate people can have in common.

As we seek conversations and connection with people living in poverty, I cannot state strongly enough that we must enter these from a place of vulnerability. We must share our fears openly. Share what's important to us openly. Share the things in our lives that have caused us pain openly. As appropriate, of course, and in the right moments. When there's an opportunity to be vulnerable, we should go first. This not only creates a safe space for others to share, but also lets those who share our fears, loves, and griefs know that we may be more like them than we first seemed. Then there is no need for fear.

Even so, given the power of fear, it is best to start small. Start with small changes and small introductions. Maybe one or two willing congregants engage with one willing family. Start with breaking bread and talking, sharing, and building trust. We should do this in places that feel safe for everyone involved and that are convenient for the families experiencing poverty. Leverage that conversation into another and another, bringing more people into that circle of trust on both sides, if, and when it seems appropriate. As Roxburgh says, "it's going to mean learning how to actually listen to people without making them objects of our ends. It's going to mean a readiness to enter into dialogue with the other, seeking to listen to their stories and conversations in a genuinely human engagement."¹⁴ It's also going to mean working together on

¹⁴ Roxburgh, *Missional*, 141.

our shared dreams and needs. Eventually, what we'll find we've built is a relationship on a foundation of trust and common ground.

This may appear to be a small thing. In a culture where we always seem to want quantity quickly, spending weeks, months, or even years building a relationship with one family might not feel like much. However, consider this. Which has more impact, feeding one hundred families and leaving them in poverty or supporting the dreams of one family in a way that helps them leave poverty behind and breaks the cycle of poverty for their children and grandchildren for generations to come?

I would argue that one relationship can be more powerful than a thousand transactions.

Offer Real Relationships

Jesus was routinely inviting people to follow him and be in relationship. He had relationships with people who were wealthy and people who were living in poverty, teachers, fishermen, tax collectors, prostitutes, Jews, and Gentiles. He offered relationship to a wide array of people. I have already gone so far as to say his presence on Earth was itself an offer of relationship from God to humanity. That an omnipotent God would choose relationship to bring about change is a powerful statement to me.

This brings us full circle to my foreword some 150-plus pages ago. I believe relationships changed my life. Many programs and transactions helped me here and there, but relationships changed my trajectory and are the reason I'm writing these words instead of working at a dead-end job, hiding in a bottle, or lying in an early grave.

I'm not alone in thinking that could have been my outcome. One of the tools that I use when I'm teaching people about the context of poverty is a list of the elements of my life on a slide as an anonymous case study and ask them how they think it turns out.

- Latino
- Born illegitimate to a 16-year-old single mother
- Born in a family with no college graduates
- Grew up in a home plagued by substance abuse and domestic violence
- Homeless for 6 months
- Received welfare, food stamps, and Medicaid
- Multiple addicts and drug dealers in his family

There are sometimes optimists in the audience, but usually I get answers like, "he's a drug dealer," "he's in jail," or "he's dead." Statistically, they're more on target than "he's a doctoral candidate and adjunct professor who works for the Governor." Relationships don't care about statistics. They can turn the world upside down.

It's not just me. I've seen it time and time again. With someone in their corner, someone who isn't going anywhere and who doesn't judge them, I've seen people start to believe in themselves and defy the odds. That's why at the end of the day the work of the church must shift from member recruitment and spiritual self-help for individuals to true relationship building if it's to be a transformational church that brings about the kingdom of heaven on earth.

In the Book of Ruth, Ruth's relationships with Naomi and Boaz are both transformational. Her relationship with Naomi shows others her character. Her encounters with Boaz begin as transactional, but become relational, not on the threshing floor, but when he

decides to redeem both her and Naomi within a broken system that had stripped them of resources, dignity, and value. The result was a bloodline that led to King David and Jesus.

The church too could choose to be a redeemer, offering relationships to people within a modern system just as broken. We could offer that relationship without them having to offer themselves to us on some metaphorical threshing floor. We could walk alongside people who have also been stripped of resources, dignity, and value. We could sit down and break bread with widows, orphans, strangers, and prisoners instead of giving them a bit of food and sending them on their way. We could walk a different path that might give them the tools they need to never ask another for food again.

That is the cliché, isn't it? "If you give a person a fish they'll eat for a day, but if you teach a person to fish, they'll eat for a lifetime." We say it all the time, but we don't live it. That saying is literally the entire point: the difference between being transactional and relational. Teaching a person to fish requires a relationship.

My grandfather loved to fish. I sometimes think he only worked so he could afford his fishing habit. He had three daughters who weren't so interested in it, so when I was born, his first grandson, he was determined to teach me how to do it.

He started when I was around nine. He'd get me up at some ridiculous hour of the morning and we'd head out. Then we'd sit on a boat and watch our fishing lines sit in the water and mostly do nothing for hours. I hated it. I'd often try to bring comic books along for something to do, but he'd insist I focus. Even without the comics I'd let my mind drift off and wouldn't pay attention.

Nine times out of ten, while I wasn't paying attention, my line would get all tangled up into a bird's nest on my reel. My grandfather would get frustrated and hand me his rod to hold

while he worked on untangling mine. Several times I'd catch a fish on his line while he was untangling mine. I'm fairly sure I did my best work using his line.

One time we went on a charter boat and there was a pot for whoever caught the biggest fish of the day. Everyone threw in a dollar or two and the winner got the pot. I won that day. I caught the biggest fish of the trip...on my grandfather's line while he was untangling mine. I was 22 years old at the time.

My point is this; we must not only be in relationship to teach someone how to fish, but we just might have to love them as well. It's hard work. They may not want to learn. They may not see the value in it. In order to not give up, the person has to mean more to us than any particular goal. Reaching the original goals may never happen, but that doesn't mean that nothing is happening. God can work all sorts of wonders through relationships that we may never see.

I never learned how to fish. Not really. That doesn't mean I never learned anything out on those boats. I learned about patience, and generosity, and having a good sense of humor when things don't work out. I also had the gift of time from someone who genuinely wanted to spend that time with me. That's a powerful gift. If we give someone our money, we can go earn more. If we give someone our time, we've given them the most finite, precious gift we have to offer.

I know this way of relationships is harder than transactions. Relationships are messy. They don't always work out. They take time and patience. Of course, isn't that true of almost everything that's worthwhile? Isn't that what Jesus offers us?

In my faith tradition I was taught that Jesus meets us where we are, takes us as he finds us, and walks with us on our way. We may disappoint him, or even break his heart as we go. It seems to me that some of his own disciples did just that. Even so, he thinks we're worth it.

Should we do any less for our neighbors, especially when we have so much, and our neighbors struggle outside our gates with so little?

True relationships are mutual, however. As we have seen and research studies have shown, our neighbors who struggle with material needs are in some ways richer than we are. Perhaps our poverty is deeper than theirs, especially through the lens Jesus gives us in the gospels. They have something to offer in the relationship that is powerful on a spiritual level, perhaps even powerful enough to quench the spiritual thirst of all of those “nones,” “spiritual but not religious,” and “Christian but not churched” people who are currently walking away from the church.

There’s only one way to find out what that something is. Let’s step forward in faith. We may just find that God will be waiting there ahead of us.

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