

MCCORMICK THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

CONVERSATIONS THAT MATTER:  
SOUL-NOURISHING SPACE FOR MID-ADULT FAITH FORMATION (25-50 YEARS OLD)  
WITHIN THE CONGREGATION

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## ABSTRACT

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within the Congregation*

Within First Presbyterian Church of Bentonville, Arkansas, members 25-50 years old are increasingly under-represented in faith formation activities beyond Sunday worship. With no good analysis of this trend, nor a strategy for how to address it, the quest of this thesis was to understand what feeds the souls of mid-adult members. Through the provision of a unique space and conversation structure, they were encouraged to pause in their busy and stressful lives in order to gather, ponder deep questions, and talk with each other over a meal about matters of importance in their lives and faith journeys. I named these opportunities *Conversations that Matter*. The implementation and assessment of these events revealed a cohort of adults who hunger for deeper Christian spirituality, who are nurtured by relationships with one another, and who seek to live lives that count. Results indicate that this target group has been further anchored in the church through the experience of these peer-based conversation events.

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## Introduction

“What feeds your soul?” When I posed this question in casual settings to adults under 50 in my congregation, the responses included wide eyes, watery eyes, a slight gasp, or reflective silence, followed by hushed statements such as, “I think about this all the time,” or “My spouse and I were just talking about that the other night.” The sense that they don’t have time or a safe space to explore that question is profound.

When young families and individuals visit our church, they give feedback that this church is “authentic” and “solid” – just what they are looking for. Yet, engaging them beyond worship attendance is a struggle. While many of their children participate in our programming on Sunday evenings, the parents’ church-involvement is often limited to volunteering occasionally in that program. In contrast, the number of adults under fifty years old in adult Sunday School is typically one or none. Few families come to church-wide fellowship meals. Almost none of the young families sign up for in-home dinner groups, nor do mid-adults engage in Bible study opportunities. Yet we have dozens of adult members under 50 who attend worship regularly.

Joyce Rupp notes in her book *Dear Heart Come Home*, “Many people in midlife who appear outwardly successful, who seem to ‘have it all together,’ actually feel as though they have a wilderness within them.”<sup>1</sup> Additionally, these adults are so busy maintaining job and family in this context that there is little space to surface meaning, purpose, appreciation, joy, and other spiritual elements. Their desire to make a difference in the world is most readily fed through built-in charitable efforts at their work places rather than through the church’s mission projects.

As I speak informally with these adults about their faith journeys, they light up and talk at length about how glad they are to stop and give voice to their spiritual needs. They feel

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<sup>1</sup> Joyce Rupp, *Dear Heart, Come Home: The Path of Midlife Spirituality* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1996), 63.

overwhelmed by life, but have deep spiritual longings within their hearts. These longings are suppressed because of the pace of their lives and the façade of invulnerability that they feel they must protect. They are reluctant to call the church when they are in need; they don't have time to try out a program at church that might turn out to be too superficial; they don't want to admit that they don't know as much about the Bible as they feel they should (for example, some are hesitant to join Bible studies because they anticipate feeling inferior to life-long Christians or long-time church members in terms of familiarity with scripture and church history). If they are going to carve out space for spiritual nourishment, it had better be the real deal – cutting straight to the heart of life's issues, in an environment that is a pressure-free respite while at the same time a safe opportunity to learn how to be vulnerable in exploration of the soul. They do want to build authentic relationships, but they are not sure that church is the place to do that.

Perhaps the church has not been creative enough or listened deeply enough to the dreams and needs of these adults. We try to fit them into older ways of doing church, and then conclude that they are stubbornly driven by society's values, or aren't very committed to God, because they don't jump right into our traditional programs. But this is not simply a question of "How can we get them to attend the things that we do?" When young families join our church, older people express an urgency to "get them connected." But what is usually meant by that is to get these younger adults to fill committee slots and serve coffee and teach Sunday School. With the goal of engagement, we tend to give them assignments and pressure them to attend events. It is upon us to make a shift from "How can we use them?" to "How can the church be a rich presence in their lives?"

In consideration of stress levels that people face (young adults in particular), the ministry staff of our church has encouraged committee leaders, elders, and deacons to refrain from using "need" language in general. We don't want the church to be perceived as needy, and we don't

want it to be one more source of stress. The approach of attempted inclusion has often carried a sub-tone of guilt or shame for lack of involvement. To address that, how can we be *inviting* rather than *needing*? How can church involvement be life-giving rather than demanding or obligatory? And specifically, for this project, how can we live into a more positive approach for adults in this age bracket? This is the adaptive challenge of the context for this thesis.

## **Background**

When I began ministry in my current context approximately five years ago, I was told by the departing interim pastor that this was a congregation of “high-functioning” individuals. Indeed, in the personal lives of our non-retired adults, there is tremendous pressure to be self-sufficient, to succeed at work, to facilitate their children’s involvement in multiple endeavors, and to make things happen (and happen quickly). Adults between twenty-five and fifty years old seem particularly vulnerable to the pitfalls of these pressures.

I serve as the Associate Pastor in a congregation that is 97% white, primarily affluent, multi-generational, Presbyterian (USA),<sup>2</sup> with a membership of approximately 450 households, located in a small (but growing) town. The church’s history can be traced back to the mid-1800s, though few actual family lineages in the current congregation are tied to that history. The congregation is politically diverse; many come from denominational backgrounds other than Presbyterian; and a significant number of them are relatively new to church life.

In 2000, the church moved from the center of downtown to a new, larger building in a developing part of town. The growth of Bentonville is primarily due to the presence of the world-wide headquarters of Walmart. We have many young families, including teenagers, attending worship. Sometimes as many as 25 children come down front for the children’s message, out of about 150-200 people in worship. The church is financially stable, active in the community, and

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<sup>2</sup> Unless specified otherwise, ‘Presbyterian’ will refer to the Presbyterian Church (USA), also known as the PCUSA.

mission-minded (weekly food pantry, refugee ministry, interfaith activities, clean water mission projects in Honduras, sustainability efforts, etc.). Kristina Lizardy-Hajbi notes, “Congregations with young adults tend to be in areas where there was also a general population increase over the past three years.”<sup>3</sup> This is certainly the case with the Northwest Arkansas region, where current data indicates that on average we gain 34 new residents *every day*, and births significantly outnumber deaths.<sup>4</sup> Our town of Bentonville is one of the leaders of growth in the region.

It is important to note that the affluence of many of our members is tenuous. This is a corporate town, primarily due to Walmart headquarters and Walmart’s vendors. Jobs are abundant but unpredictable. Thus, though most families in our congregation have good incomes, with very little notice those jobs can be cut in “restructuring” or other business moves. Every year or two, a wave of layoffs hits our community and congregation directly. Stress levels run high. A community physician recently commented that stress-related digestive ailments are at epidemic levels in this town. Additionally, counselors have commented that the mounting political tension in the country has seeped into people’s psyches in destructive ways, creating a continuous sense of anxiety and separation. Family members, friends and neighbors are increasingly divided from one another, functioning within political bubbles, allowing differences of opinion to cause deeper divisions than in the past, resulting in a caution about “who you can trust.”<sup>5</sup> This has proven to be true within our congregation, as hurt feelings have erupted over

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<sup>3</sup> Kristina Lizardy-Hajbi, “Engaging Young Adults Today,” *American Congregations 2015* (www.FaithCommunitiesToday.org, Center for Analytics, Research and Data, United Church of Christ). Last accessed October 31, 2019. <https://faithcommunitiestoday.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Engaging-Young-Adults-Report.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Source: NorthwestArkansasCouncil.org, “Northwest Arkansas Joins Largest Metros in 2019,” March 22, 2019. Last accessed October 31, 2019. <http://www.nwacouncil.org/news/2018/3/22/analysis-northwest-bentonville-fayetteville-arkansas-census-top-100-population>

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Laurie Meyers, “High Anxiety,” *Counseling Today*, August 29, 2017. Last accessed January 30, 2020. <https://ct.counseling.org/2017/08/high-anxiety/>, and Dennis Thompson, “Stress of U.S. Politics Taking Mental, Physical Toll on Americans,” *U.S News and World Report*, September 25, 2019. Last accessed January 30, 2020.

deepening political divisions, resulting in more superficial discussions in order to keep peace with one another.

Mirroring national trends, secular youth and children's activities such as sports, marching band, etc., have expanded to fill seven days a week in our community. There is no longer a Wednesday evening free for church activities, and very often not even a Sunday morning available. Families often express that they have no down time, no time to just be together as a family relaxing at home. Church events, if not truly compelling, have moved to the expendable list. It is hard to fault those who make that hard decision.

Added to this challenge is the individualistic/consumeristic attitude of our culture that contributes to a menu-mindset of church shopping and church involvement. Increasingly, churches in our community have installed coffee bars, concert-style sanctuaries, and a slate of paid workers to cover all programming. There is a trend away from membership and volunteerism. It seems that some churches have addressed the stressed-out mentality of young- and mid-adults by providing more of an entertainment-based worship experience. While these dynamics are worth contemplating, the theological considerations of our denomination point us instead to a communal life of faith that includes mutual support and relationship building, as well as opportunities for outward, missional focus. And it seems that many in the mid-adult demographic are not actually wooed by the above-named trends. Blogger Jonathon Aigner recently wrote, "There is no silver bullet...Message to churches: Stop!...Most of us can't stand churches like that anyway...Though the generational stereotype is one of narcissistic individuality, we don't need you to engage it." Aigner encourages churches to be real and passionate about the Christian faith, while letting go of marketing strategies. Speaking of his

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<https://www.usnews.com/news/health-news/articles/2019-09-25/stress-of-us-politics-taking-mental-physical-toll-on-americans>

generation, he says, “We need a community of faith that reminds us who we are and Whose story we live out.”<sup>6</sup> Visitors and new members at First Presbyterian Church (FPC), Bentonville, report that we do this well, and that they appreciate the authenticity and solid content of the worship style and environment.

While the children and youth participate in programming for their age groups, the young adults/parents themselves are increasingly less visible in the spectrum of church life outside of Sunday morning worship.<sup>7</sup> The outside observer at Bible studies, retreats, fellowship activities and outreach (mission) opportunities might assume that this is an older congregation. However, we have families and individuals of all ages joining the church and attending worship. The over-fifty crowd laments the lack of younger adults at church events, but have no good analysis as to why there has been this demographic shift, or what to do about it.

The internal history of this scenario is revealing, as long-term members have resisted the shift from “family church” in which everyone knew everyone else to a “program church” in which relationship building must be more intentional. This older cohort has continued to communicate and function in a family church system that includes many working assumptions, and is difficult for new people to penetrate. Kyle Oliver writes, “There is a theory – probably more true than false – that churches led primarily by Baby Boomers are not responding well to the expressed needs and values of the younger generations.”<sup>8</sup> A challenge identified in planning

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<sup>6</sup> Jonathon Aigner, “Dear Church: It’s Time We Stop Idolizing the Millennials.” [www.patheos.com](http://www.patheos.com), Ponder Anew, February 20, 2018. Last accessed October 31, 2019. <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/ponderanew/2018/02/20/dear-church-time-stop-idolizing-millennials/>

<sup>7</sup> Robert Wuthnow observes that many parents aren’t sure about church for themselves, but want their children to have that foundation or exposure. Robert Wuthnow. *After the Baby Boomers: How Twenty-and Thirty-somethings Are Shaping the Future of American Religion* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), 56.

<sup>8</sup> Kyle Oliver, “Faith Formation with Young Adults,” *Lifelong Faith: The Theory and Practice of Lifelong Faith Formation*, John Roberto, Editor (Naugatuck, CT: LifelongFaith Associates: [www.LifelongFaith.com](http://www.LifelongFaith.com), Fall 2015), 4. Last accessed October 31, 2019. [https://www.lifelongfaith.com/uploads/5/1/6/4/5164069/seasons\\_of\\_aff\\_-\\_journal\\_special\\_issue.pdf](https://www.lifelongfaith.com/uploads/5/1/6/4/5164069/seasons_of_aff_-_journal_special_issue.pdf)

this project was how to minister effectively to, and with, these people whose lives are stressful and busy. This is a place of emptiness in our context that is worthy of attention.

In the context of FPC, the adults in this age range are mostly transplants from elsewhere. They came to our community because of a job offer. Thus, they are geographically remote from the support of extended family. They are also educated professionals, which has created within them a sense that they should be capable of “doing it all.” These dynamics result in pressure to be self-sufficient, not to ask for help, not to be vulnerable, and not to admit that they don’t “have it all together.” Whether that pressure comes from within themselves, from extended family, from society itself, or a combination, is not clear. These factors might be further complicated by the misguided notion that solid Christian faith is incompatible with mental health issues such as stress and anxiety.

While these young- and mid-adults use social media with ease, many of them have shared with me that they emphatically do *not* want the church to pursue ministry to them through technologically savvy offerings such as on-line Bible study groups. Through feedback to the communication committee, they report a desire for the church to improve its sophistication and functionality with tools such as Instagram, website, electronic giving and registration, etc. But their hope is that these venues would primarily serve a *communication* role rather than function as a platform for *fellowship*. They take it for granted that social media connects us, but most have said that they would be unlikely respond to manifestations of virtual church. Such ministries are growing in other contexts,<sup>9</sup> but at this time does not appear to be a fruitful avenue for us to explore.<sup>10</sup> This could change in the years ahead, as the Millennial generation (currently 20 to 35

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<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Clint Schneklath’s analysis in *Mediating Faith: Faith Formation in a Trans-Media Era* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2014).

<sup>10</sup> It is worth noting that temporary exceptions have been made in 2020 to accommodate the social-distancing requirements of the COVID-19 pandemic.

years old) move more fully into the mid-adult range. This age group has a greater comfort level in on-line environments. For them, digital collaboration and on-line community-building is a natural inclination.<sup>11</sup> They have grown up in it. This is not as much the case for adults currently in the Gen-X category, 35-50 years old. As these older mid-adults make up three fourths of my target cohort, there would presumably be less enthusiasm, on the balance, for social media based interventions.

My hope is for the church as a whole to be active in supporting Christian faith formation in the lives of middle-adults (25-50 years old) in ways that are accessible and life-giving for them, while awakening and nurturing their sometimes-suppressed or postponed desire to make a positive difference in the world. Our church's mission statement includes the claim that we will walk with each other "through the mountains and valleys of life."<sup>12</sup> However, we are largely *responsive* or *reactive* in the implementation of this part of our calling, rather than being *proactive*. The youngest and oldest in our congregation receive the most care and attention because their mountains and valleys are more predictable and evident. Mid-adults are less likely to reveal their needs, as they are struggling to protect the expectation of self-sufficiency. I would like for us to address spiritual growth in this age bracket in ways that could help them now and in the future as they face life's joys, challenges, and dark valleys. This is not simply a matter of getting them more involved in the life of the church *as it is*. Rather, this is a hope for church-wide transformation in which this age group is vital in shaping the future for all of us in meaningful and surprising ways.

This vision incorporates elements of pastoral care, relationship-building, and nourishment of spiritual hunger. All of these are central to Christian faith formation for adults. The health of

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<sup>11</sup> See "Faith Formation with the iGeneration and Millennial Generation" in John Roberto's *Faith Formation 2020: Designing the Future of Faith Formation*. (Naugatuck, CT: LifelongFaith Associate, 2010).

<sup>12</sup> See Appendix A for the church's full mission statement.

the whole congregation, and indeed the future of the church is at stake. In addition, I suspect that these guiding questions are relevant to churches beyond my context:

- 1) How does faith formation happen in the current era for adults between 25 and 50 years old in our context?
- 2) How can the church *supportively* be a part of faith formation for these adults?

The interventions of this project have attempted to build a cohort of 25- to 50-year-olds whose Christian spirituality is explicit and vibrant, who view the church as an anchor in their lives (well beyond Sunday morning worship), who are nurtured by intimate relationships with their siblings in Christ, and who actively shape the life and mission of the congregation in meaningful ways.

This thesis topic does not focus on ministry to the children/youth in these families. We have strong programming for them, with good participation levels. The center of my concern is the spiritual nourishment of the adults themselves. While it certainly gives them peace of mind to know that their children and teenagers are able to connect in faith-anchoring ways, and that is no doubt essential to the parents' spiritual wellbeing, nonetheless we need to ask what the church might be missing with regard to the Christian faith formation of the adults. This is an area that we have neglected in our context.

### **Theoretical Framework**

My foundational theological assumption is that we all have a hunger for God. As James Fowler puts it, "As part of the planfulness and intention manifest in creation, human beings are genetically potentiated for partnership with God."<sup>13</sup> Further, community is a significant source of nourishment, and even joy, for most people with regard to this spiritual hunger. This second theological assumption finds root in Dietrich Bonhoeffer's persuasive argument for Christian faith as a community endeavor, "How inexhaustible are the riches that open up for those who by

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<sup>13</sup> James W. Fowler, *Faith Development and Pastoral Care* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 54.

God's will are privileged to live in the daily fellowship of life with other Christians!"<sup>14</sup> Fowler is a partner in this assumption, "The context in which we become selves and form stances and styles of faith is community."<sup>15</sup> While Fowler's conception of "community" predates the social media environment in which mid-adults presently percolate, his theory is nonetheless helpful.

Through a review of the literature, I have come to realize that mid-adults in my ministry setting are a bit "old for their age." That is, the professional pressures, time constraints, and lack of local family support have combined to push these grown-ups to be more *grown up* than their chronological peers in other contexts. Through informal conversations, I have heard from this cohort that it is not okay to ask for help, and that it is "all up to them" to make their lives work. They are physically remote from their families of origin, yet carry within themselves high expectations from those same families. These are educated, capable, and ambitious people. As I reflect on these characteristics in light of developmental stages described by John Roberto, James Fowler, and others, I lean toward placing them a little farther along on the developmental scale than what would ordinarily be ascribed to their age groups. This guides me in setting my own research parameters of 25- to 50-year-olds, even though that age range does not fit neatly into any one theoretician's or researcher's categories.

Contextual pressures of time, stress, and an expectation of self-sufficiency in my ministry setting, combined with the risks of societal individualism as noted by Fowler make for an enormous challenge for the church. As Fowler states, "It is imperative that we develop groups where persons who are susceptible to the pressures I have described can find trustworthy community with peers. We need to provide circles where the armor of their defenses can be ventilated and where they can stand to submit their images of self to one another – and to the

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<sup>14</sup> Bonhoeffer, Dietrich, *Life Together* (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1954), 20.

<sup>15</sup> Fowler, *Faith Development and Pastoral Care*, 55.

gospel...”<sup>16</sup> This is the heart of the matter. Among the mid-life members of my congregation, Fowler’s statement would be followed by a chorus of tearful “amens.” The next pleading question would be, “Yes, but *how?*”

In the middle of the gospel of Mark, the fast pace of Jesus and the disciples is brought to a standstill, a pause, when they literally stop walking and instead turn and look each other in the eye. It is a turning point. And it is a turning point facilitated by questions – meaningful questions posed by Jesus: “Who do people say that I am?” And then going deeper, “Who do *you* say that I am?” The disciples had made a decision to follow Jesus, and they were doing their best to keep up. But it was all happening so fast. Now they had a rare moment in time to reflect on what it all meant, through meaningful conversation with Jesus and each other.<sup>17</sup> If we substitute “mid-adult life” for “the middle of the gospel of Mark” in the above story, we begin to see a scenario unfolding that is full of potential. People are hurrying through life, hoping to do the right things and make their lives count, but they rarely have the opportunity for reflection with others on their faith journeys. They have grown weary of showing up for things that drain them further while remaining superficial. As John Roberto reports, “They care about who they are and what they’re becoming – ‘ankle deep’ doesn’t work for them. They told us that they’d rather be ‘in over their heads’ in life as opposed to kicking around in the shallow end.”<sup>18</sup> Although the conversation in the Mark passage starts off a little bit lighter and less personal, it quickly cuts to the chase and becomes serious – serious in life-changing ways. What if the church could provide a venue that does this? What if we could help busy mid-adults hit the pause button and turn toward one another in a safe space of fellowship, offering progressively deeper questions that take them to a

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 92.

<sup>17</sup> Mark 8:27-33, New Revised Standard Version.

<sup>18</sup> John Roberto, *Faith Formation 2020: Designing the Future of Faith Formation*. (Naugatuck, CT: LifelongFaith Associate, 2010), at 66% on Kindle.

place of transformation? This provides the foundation for my intervention strategy.

Peter Block explains his theory of belonging and community transformation this way, “Restoration is created by the kinds of conversations we initiate with each other. These conversations are the leverage points for an alternative future. The core question that underlies each conversation is, ‘What can we create together?’” He adds, “Convening, naming the question, and listening is restorative and produces energy rather than consumes it.” As if to prove Block’s point, in one of the post-event interviews for my project, an attendee commented, “People came tired, but then perked up; it became lively.”<sup>19</sup> As Block says, “The small group gains power with certain kinds of conversations. To build community, we seek conversations where people show up by invitation rather than mandate, and experience an intimate and authentic relatedness.”<sup>20</sup> It is Block and other authors’ consistent emphasis on connectedness and conversation as transformative powers that informs the intervention I have designed (see *Objectives and Strategies*, below).

The scriptures often include the element of food in such scenes, so that meaning is found through conversations over meals. In the Gospel of John, the disciples are hard at work, back at their regular jobs after the resurrection, when Jesus calls them away from their boats to a breakfast that he has prepared for them on the beach. In that deep encounter of hospitality, through questions and conversation (“Do you love me?”) Peter finds restoration.<sup>21</sup> In Luke, this happens to the disciples on their trip to Emmaus. On their journey, they don’t take the time to look right at the stranger who is walking with them. Yet, through questions and conversation, and finally a meal together, Jesus is made known to them through the breaking of bread, and they are

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<sup>19</sup> See Appendix E-2.

<sup>20</sup> Peter Block, *Community: The Structure of Belonging* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc., 2008), 47, 88, 93.

<sup>21</sup> John 21:1-19.

transformed.<sup>22</sup> The prophet Isaiah uses a gracious invitation to a meal as a metaphor for entering into abundant life. Those who are hungry and thirsty for meaning are invited to show up “without money and without price.”<sup>23</sup> In his recent book *A Bigger Table*, John Pavlovitz sums this up nicely:

What struck me when I began to read the Gospel stories was Jesus’ *table ministry*, the way he so often used the act of sharing a meal, the act of breaking bread, as a way of letting people know that they were seen and heard and known and respected... The table was an altar around which he welcomed the world to experience communion with God and with one another.<sup>24</sup>

My vision was to provide a unique space for mid-adult members of my congregation to pause in their busy and stressful lives to gather and talk with each other over a meal about things that matter to them in their life and faith journey. Mark Branson calls this “generative space.”<sup>25</sup> They would not be asked to bring anything but an open heart. This “gathering and discussing” is supported by Nancy Ammerman when she states, “Strong communities of faith, of whatever sort, need to encourage their members to talk with each other in terms that acknowledge and celebrate the particular spiritual presence they come together to celebrate... They need the social space in which to do it and the encouragement to risk new forms of conversation.”<sup>26</sup> Jim Merhaut brings optimism to this pursuit when he states, “Midlife adults will respond to any programs and initiatives that help church members become more authentic with each other.”<sup>27</sup> Ultimately, this

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<sup>22</sup> Luke 24:13-35.

<sup>23</sup> Isaiah 55:1-3 and following, New Revised Standard Version.

<sup>24</sup> John Pavlovitz, *A Bigger Table: Building Messy, Authentic, and Hopeful Spiritual Community* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017), 58.

<sup>25</sup> Mark Lau Branson, *Memories, Hopes, and Conversations: Appreciative Inquiry, Missional Engagement, and Congregational Change* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2016), 28.

<sup>26</sup> Nancy Ammerman, “Journeys of Faith: Meeting the Challenges in Twenty-First-Century America,” James L. Heft, editor, *Passing on the Faith: Transforming Traditions for the Next Generation of Jews, Christians, and Muslims*, (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), 49.

<sup>27</sup> Jim Merhaut, “Faith Formation with Midlife Adults,” John Roberto, Editor, *Lifelong Faith: The Theory and Practice of Lifelong Faith Formation* (Naugatuck, Connecticut: LifelongFaith Associates: [www.LifelongFaith.com](http://www.LifelongFaith.com),

vision is part of our commitment to live more fully into the historic *Great Ends of the Church* that our denomination holds dear, with emphasis here on “the shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship of the children of God.” This applies to the church’s call to “guide and nurture one another through all the seasons and transitions of life.” To hinder transformation on this front would be to fail in our quest to be “the church reformed, always reforming, according to the Word of God and the call of the Spirit.”<sup>28</sup>

### **Research and Literature Review**

Our situation is not unique. Nationwide, participation of young- and mid-adults in the life of the church has been trending downward. Holly Allen and Christine Ross observe that adults known as “Gen X” (which makes up three-quarters of my target cohort) are “the least represented generation in churches.”<sup>29</sup> Writing about the generations that come “after the baby boomers,” Robert Wuthnow states that “younger adults are currently less involved [in religion] than younger adults were a generation ago.”<sup>30</sup> Henri Nouwen voices a guiding concern here, “Most Christian leaders are used to thinking in terms of large-scale organization: getting people together in congregations...and running the show as a circus director. They have become unfamiliar with, and even somewhat afraid of, the deep and significant movements of the Spirit within.”<sup>31</sup> Nouwen addresses “midlife movements” of spiritual development that warrant special attention. As Janet Schaeffler points out, “The number one factor responsible for success in adult

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Fall 2015), 19. Last accessed October 31, 2019.

[https://www.lifelongfaith.com/uploads/5/1/6/4/5164069/seasons\\_of\\_aff\\_-\\_journal\\_special\\_issue.pdf](https://www.lifelongfaith.com/uploads/5/1/6/4/5164069/seasons_of_aff_-_journal_special_issue.pdf)

<sup>28</sup> *Book of Order: The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Part II*, F-1.0304, W-5.0203, F-2.02.

<sup>29</sup> Holly Catterton Allen and Christine Lawton Ross, “Millennials, Xers, Boomers and Silents: Generational Theory” in *Intergenerational Christian Formation: Bringing the Whole Church Together in Ministry, Community, and Worship* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012), 152.

<sup>30</sup> Wuthnow, *After the Baby Boomers*, 17.

<sup>31</sup> Henri J. Nouwen, with Michael Christensen and Rebecca J. Laird, *Spiritual Formation: Following the Movements of the Spirit* (New York: HarperOne, 2010), xix.

faith formation is attention to what is going on in the lives of the adults.”<sup>32</sup>

The assumption is often that young families these days are just too busy, don't make room for faith in their lives, and there is nothing we can do about that. I am not satisfied with that conclusion. I believe that everyone, at some level, desires the presence of God in their lives and wishes to make a contribution to this world that God loves. Robert Wuthnow reports that “75 percent of adults age 21 through 45 say it is at least fairly important to them to grow in their spiritual life.”<sup>33</sup> A recent Pew Research Center survey (2018), reported that 81% of adults who attend worship at least once or twice a month say that “becoming closer to God” is a very important reason that they go to religious services. This drops to 78% for the 30-49 year-old cohort, still revealing a highly ranked motivation.<sup>34</sup>

Busy young adults might be hurting more than others in this area of spiritual hunger because they are moving at such a fast pace that they cannot find peace or purpose. Many are focusing on their children's well-being and have little space left to nourish their own souls. This spiritual vacuum could then compound other stresses such as work and marriage. As James Fowler writes of adult faith development in general, “One must come to terms with being both old and young... This leads in the direction of a deepened quality of spirituality in which one hungers for ways to relate to the otherness in self, God, and fellow humans.”<sup>35</sup> Fowler's assessment here echoes what I have heard over and over from the mid-adults in my congregation

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<sup>32</sup> Janet Schaeffler, *Deepening Faith: Adult Faith Formation in the Parish* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2017), 59.

<sup>33</sup> Wuthnow, *After the Baby Boomers*, 128.

<sup>34</sup> Pew Research Center for Religion and Public Life, “Why Americans Go (and Don't Go) to Religious Services,” August, 1, 2018. Last accessed October 31, 2019. <https://www.pewforum.org/2018/08/01/why-americans-go-to-religious-services/>

<sup>35</sup> Fowler, *Faith Development and Pastoral Care*, 73-74. Fowler is referring here to Conjunctive Faith, which he assigns to “midlife and beyond,” (p. 93). As noted earlier in this thesis, mid-adults in my congregation often seem “old for their age” regarding certain life tasks and attitudes.

throughout this project. Their challenge is to find both time and venue for “deepening the quality of their spirituality.” The hunger is there; the pathways have been somewhat elusive.

In Mark Chaves’ book *American Religion*, he documents relevant trends, including looser denominational loyalty and lower engagement among younger adult populations. One survey indicated that “The percentage of friends who attended the same congregation as the respondent declined.”<sup>36</sup> This is echoed by Robert Wuthnow’s research regarding how often young adults relocate, with statistics bearing out that they have fewer friends in the congregation than in years past.<sup>37</sup> We don’t know each other as well as we used to within our churches. Chaves reports that “More extensive forms of involvement also have declined.”<sup>38</sup>

The Pew Research Center report cited previously indicates that 69% of adults in the United States who attend worship services at least once or twice a month say that giving their children a moral foundation is a “very important” reason why they go. This increases to 72% when considering only the adults in my target cohort (in the Pew report the category is 30-49 years old).<sup>39</sup> This statistic perhaps lends insight as to why adults in this age group drop their children and teenagers off at age-specific church events, but do not necessarily themselves then stay for the adult activities that are taking place at the same time. While faith is important to them, they are making strategic choices as to how to balance all the needs and factors in their full lives. If a church function is not going to be meaningful to them (as noted above), then they have other ways to be spending their time.

Nancy Ammerman speaks of diversity and skepticism as modern realities that greatly impact religious life in America. She notes, “The same forces of mobility and education and

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<sup>36</sup> Mark Chaves, *American Religion: Contemporary Trends* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017), 22.

<sup>37</sup> Wuthnow, *After the Baby Boomers*, 118-119.

<sup>38</sup> Chaves, *American Religion*, 52.

<sup>39</sup> Pew, “Why Americans Go (and Don’t Go) to Religious Services.”

commerce that have brought diverse people together have also dislodged people from traditional communities in the process... Faith, in this individualistic mode, is an internalized meaning system that may combine elements from a variety of traditions, but is accountable to none of them.”<sup>40</sup> This mindset, combined with the factors that many of these adults are juggling in terms of sick kids, extracurricular activities, and work schedules, all add up to a reluctance to commit to anything that takes place on a weekly or monthly basis. They tend to be more responsive to a “one-off” type of event, rather than an educational program in which one starts at the beginning, and each session builds on the previous one. Too quickly, mid-adults feel like failures because they have missed classes or gatherings, so it is easier not to commit in the first place.

Ammerman says that mid-adults are more comfortable using the metaphor of “journey” when talking about their faith, and that affiliation with a particular congregation and/or denomination feels more elective than in the past. Yet, she says, gathering for worship continues to be central. Ammerman’s comments quite accurately describe the mid-adult demographic in my congregation. Tobin Belzer and his colleagues support Ammerman’s findings when they report that mid-adults feel less compelled by tradition than previous generations, and “Many feel they do not have a strong foundation of knowledge about religion, especially with regard to religious texts and liturgy... Most are wary of their congregation as an institution, but are attracted to it as a community,” and “Relationship building was a fundamental aspect of young adults’ congregational experience.”<sup>41</sup> Our mid-adults are attracted to our congregation, but many have not found within it a venue conducive to relationship building. Sunday morning worship alone does not accomplish this. However, as Peter Block points out, “Belonging does not have to

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<sup>40</sup> Ammerman, “Journeys of Faith,” 40.

<sup>41</sup> Tobin Belzer, with Richard W. Flory, Nadia Roumani, and Brie Loskota, James L. Heft, editor, “Congregations that Get It: Understanding Religious Identities in the Next Generation” in *Passing on the Faith: Transforming Traditions for the Next Generation of Jews, Christians, and Muslims*, (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), 105 & 107.

be left to chance.”<sup>42</sup>

A broad shift taking place in Christian faith formation has to do with the way people access information. Typically, Presbyterian congregations (including mine) have a “Christian Education Committee” whose job has been to provide content-based curriculum for adult education classes that will teach and inform congregants about church history, doctrine, polity and Bible content. However, mid-adults increasingly access information on an as-needed basis through online resources. While *discernment of sources* is a skill to be honed, information is at everyone’s fingertips. Tom Zanzig’s reflects, “We think the key to nurturing [religious] identity is to teach people more content. But research suggests knowledge is secondary, not primary, to why people connect to a community and embrace its mission. We don’t form adults by just telling them what they should believe or do. We have to nurture their spiritual lives.”<sup>43</sup> John Roberto concurs, “Adult faith formation is person-centered, not content- or program-centered.”<sup>44</sup> Nancy Millner notes that for mid-life adults, rather than seeking information, “It seems that first and foremost they long for connection with God, and they want to be sure their lives have meaning. They long to see their congregations develop this third vocabulary, the language of emotive connection and heartfelt relationship with the transcendent.”<sup>45</sup> Lynne Baab adds to that by saying of the people she interviewed that their stories “emphasize the importance of establishing an atmosphere in congregations where questions will be asked honestly. This includes support groups and other small groups in which people can share their experiences honestly and with

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<sup>42</sup> Block, *Community*, xii.

<sup>43</sup> Tom Zanzig, “Rethinking Adult Faith Formation,” *National Catholic Worker*. Kansas City, MO: National Catholic Reporting Company, April 4, 2008.

<sup>44</sup> John Roberto, *The Seasons of Adult Faith Formation* (Naugatuck, Connecticut: LifelongFaith Associates, 2015), 144. Last accessed October 31, 2019. [https://www.lifelongfaith.com/uploads/5/1/6/4/5164069/seasons\\_of\\_aff\\_-\\_journal\\_special\\_issue.pdf](https://www.lifelongfaith.com/uploads/5/1/6/4/5164069/seasons_of_aff_-_journal_special_issue.pdf)

<sup>45</sup> Nancy Bost Millner, in the preface to Lynne Baab’s book *Embracing Midlife: Congregations as Support Systems* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 1999), xi.

vulnerability,” and that “reflection plays a large part in the midlife journey.”<sup>46</sup> Jim Merhaut echoes this as well.<sup>47</sup> Jane Regan highlights the mid-adult struggle to “make meaning of his or her life,” and concludes that “The opportunity for adults to be in conversation with other adults about this or that matter is at the heart of how adults grow in their faith.”<sup>48</sup> She develops this approach throughout her book. Carol Howard Merritt points out in *Tribal Church*, “With instant messages and e-mail, younger generations have learned to be concise, witty, and blunt. We can repeat soundbites with ease. But many people crave to have the time and space to draw out a story, to be able to tell the strange and wonderful ways that God has worked in their lives... Each testimony forms our worshipping community anew.”<sup>49</sup> Merritt was writing in 2007, so we would now add platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook to her list of what requires “concise, witty, and blunt” communication.

Terminology and age brackets tend to vary among authors and studies. Some research and literature categorizes adults by birth year (generational theory), while others categorize by age and stage in life (developmental theory). The first way of grouping adults applies a single label to them for their entire life (I have always been and always will be a *Baby Boomer* because I was born in 1962), while the second method looks at developmental stages that all adults tend to progress through regardless of what era they were born into (currently I am an empty nester, but that hasn’t always been the case). For example, “Generation X” (also known as “Gen X” or “Xers”) are those born between the mid-1960s and the early-1980s, whereas “Millennials” (also known as “Generation Y,” “Gen Y” and “Echo Boomers) are generally those born in the early-

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<sup>46</sup> Baab, *Embracing Midlife*, 24 & 98.

<sup>47</sup> Merhaut, “Faith Formation with Midlife Adults,” 22.

<sup>48</sup> Jane E. Regan, *Forming a Community of Faith: A Guide to Success in Adult Faith Formation Today* (New London, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 2015), 9 & 15.

<sup>49</sup> Carol Howard Merritt, *Tribal Church: Ministering to the Missing Generation* (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2007), 124-125.

1980s through approximately 2000. By these commonly used designations, my target group for this project (25- to 50-year-olds) includes older Millennials (25-35) and younger Gen Xers (those currently 35-50). Therefore, I have investigated and benefited from literature regarding both Millennials and Gen Xers. The second way of grouping adults, which is developmental and not tied to birth year, has limitations as well. For example, James Fowler and John Roberto each have their own parameters for stages of development. In some ways, this approach is timeless yet it also lacks a contextuality with regard to specific eras in American culture. John Roberto combines generational theory with developmental theory. Recently there has been a plethora of writing, brainstorming, and studying of “Emergent Adults” (ages 18-25, sometimes extending to 30). While I have skimmed the emergent adult literature, most of these sources are addressing concerns that aren’t applicable to my target population. Because of the frequent confusion with emergent adults, I use the term “mid-adult” to refer to 25- to 50-year-olds.

For the purposes of this study, I have not been concerned with *attracting* people of a certain age to church. My research project investigates the faith formation of the people that we already have. For that, the research of Tobin Belzer and colleagues has been helpful.<sup>50</sup> However, I imagined that a successful intervention on the topic of mid-adult engagement could have a ripple effect of attracting more adults in the same cohort. This has turned out to be true already (see notes in the evaluation section).

Finally, I have accessed information and resources regarding *general* adult faith formation that aren’t age-specific, even though my intervention is. James Fowler provides an overarching view of adult spiritual development that has echoes in conversations that I have had with church members in my target cohort. Fowler’s theory parallels that of woman I spoke with prior to this intervention. She emphatically stated, of people in her age group, “We want to know

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<sup>50</sup>Belzer, et al, *Congregations that Get It*.

that we matter, that if we consciously shape our choices, then our lives can have meaning in the eyes of God.” James Loder addresses this in deeply theological language as he explores two questions with regard to the various stages of human spiritual development: What is a lifetime? And, Why do I live it? Loder writes of the “crucial middle years” in which people of faith re-examine their “pact with God” which was to “permit God to complete his act of love toward his creation through them, for their redemption and for the redemption of the part of creation they influenced.”<sup>51</sup> This introspection, if done successfully, will free the individual for a more meaningful and vibrant relationship with self, God, and others. Loder calls this mid-adult process “unbuckling.” John Roberto says that these adults “are engaged in a theological reevaluation and reinvention...revising implicit beliefs in light of stepping out of their social system of origin.”<sup>52</sup>

Among the tasks of midlife, Raymond Studzinski includes, “Assessing the limits of achievement; standing up to an aggressive world; reevaluating life structure (making sense of the parts of his or her life); searching for the Other (‘perpetual longing of the human heart’).”<sup>53</sup> Joyce Rupp addresses the task of midlife transformation this way: “The life we knew and the person we thought we were must be examined, evaluated, and adapted to the path that lies ahead. Power, security, and all the things to which we cling, must be held out and examined. It is not easy, but it is essential if we are to grow.”<sup>54</sup> While many authors point to the interior work and self-analysis/self-reflection of the mid-adult passage, the more contemporary writers also note that these adults are often realizing that they have a need to do this introspection within a community. Studzinski says that it is a challenge for current midlife adults to recognize that their

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<sup>51</sup> James E. Loder, *The Logic of the Spirit: Human Development in Theological Perspective* (San Francisco: Jossey-Boss, 1998), 309.

<sup>52</sup> Roberto, *The Seasons of Adult Faith Formation*, 145.

<sup>53</sup> Raymond Studzinski, *Spiritual Direction and Midlife Development* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1985), 41 and following.

<sup>54</sup> Rupp, *Dear Heart, Come Home*, 113.

community of faith is a powerful resource for their introspective developmental needs.

In the 1980s and 90s there was a concerted effort to return attention to adult Christian education within the Roman Catholic Church, resulting in several guiding documents for adult faith formation.<sup>55</sup> This prompted a new wave of planning, writing, studies, experimentation with new approaches, and development of web-based resources, much of which is transferable to other Christian denominations. Thanks to this emphasis, the Catholic authors that I found to be most helpful are Jane Regan, John Roberto, Mike Hayes, Tom Zanzig, and Janet Schaeffler (see Bibliography).

Regan defines faith formation as “the wide variety of ways in which adults grow in their faith.”<sup>56</sup> Schaeffler adds that faith formation is “the intentional learning experiences that deepen, expand, and make explicit the learning in faith that is, hopefully, already a part of the believing community.”<sup>57</sup> Both Regan and Schaeffler describe the importance of *conversation* as an essential component of spiritual development in adults. As Regan says, “Adult faith formation in a post-modern context means taking seriously the present reality of lived adult faith and providing people with the opportunity to reflect on that and talk about it with other adults.”<sup>58</sup>

Richard Flory and Donald Miller combine Xers and Millennials under the category of “Post-Boomers.” They say that for mid-life adults, the church is often seen as an aid to their spiritual journey, but in a less essential role than previous generations. “While their pursuits are certainly individualistic, there is also at least an acknowledgement of the need for aspects of community, and that it has an important role in their spiritual lives, even if it is in the context of

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<sup>55</sup> United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, “Our Hearts Were Burning Within Us: A Pastoral Plan for Adult Faith Formation in the United States,” 1999. Last accessed October 31, 2019. <http://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/how-we-teach/catechesis/adult-faith-formation/our-hearts.cfm>

<sup>56</sup> Regan, *Forming A Community of Faith*, 45.

<sup>57</sup> Schaeffler, *Deepening Faith*, 2.

<sup>58</sup> Regan, *Forming a Community of Faith*, 8.

small affinity groups through which they share their experiences, needs, and desires.”<sup>59</sup> Flory and Miller report on research that indicates that post-boomers are increasingly seeking out intimate small groups within which they can explore their own spirituality. Mike Hayes, in his reporting on interviews with mid-adults, highlights this trend toward seeking intimate groups for spiritual support, and adds that both Xers and Millennials report an “overwhelming need” to process their faith journey under the question, “How does all of this make sense in the everyday?”<sup>60</sup>

Many of the authors mentioned here include Appreciative Inquiry (AI) as a useful tool in adult faith formation within the congregation (Tom Zanzig, Mark Branson, Janet Schaeffler, Tim Sensing). *Appreciative Inquiry* is a strategic approach to transformation within organizations that is based on positive, imaginative conversations. This method has been in play in all kinds of organizations for the past few decades. Although developed first at Case Western Reserve University in the 1980s, AI has spread broadly and morphed according to the context and views of various theorists. According to *centerforappreciativeinquiry.net*:

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) was pioneered in the 1980s by David Cooperrider and Suresh Srivastva, two professors at the Weatherhead School of Management at Case Western Reserve University. AI consultants around the world are increasingly using an appreciative approach to bring about collaborative and strengths-based change in thousands of profit and nonprofit organizations and communities in more than 100 countries.

Appreciative Inquiry is a way of being and seeing. It is both a worldview and a process for facilitating positive change in human systems, e.g., organizations, groups, and communities. Its assumption is simple: Every human system has something that works right—things that give it life when it is vital, effective, and successful. AI begins by identifying this positive core and connecting to it in ways that heighten energy, sharpen vision, and inspire action for change.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Richard Flory and Donald Miller, *Finding Faith: The Spiritual Quest of the Post-Boomer Generation* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2008), 158.

<sup>60</sup> Mike Hayes, *Googling God: The Religious Landscape of People in Their 20s and 30s* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2007), 124.

<sup>61</sup> Center for Appreciative Inquiry, last accessed November 1, 2019, <https://www.centerforappreciativeinquiry.net/about/>

In my research I have seen two pillars commonly utilized by practitioners of AI:

- 1) Begin with, and focus on, the positive.
- 2) Use *questions* as the tool for transformation.

A foundational question in AI strategy is, “What is life-giving?”<sup>62</sup> AI is, as Janet Schaeffler describes it, “a methodology that is positive and affirming, and moves individuals and communities forward.”<sup>63</sup> It involves a progressive series of questions that are open-ended and discussed in structured group settings. AI is intended to provide new life and transformation for the participants and the organization of which they are a part. Mark Branson describes how useful this strategy is in adult faith formation within the church. Branson states, “The thesis of Appreciative Inquiry is that an organization, such as a church, can be recreated by its conversations. And if that new creation is to feature the most life-giving forces and forms possible, then the conversations must be shaped by appreciative questions.”<sup>64</sup> AI taps into people’s imaginations and narratives with an eye toward transformation. Tim Sensing summarizes the basic premise of AI: “Change follows the type of questions you ask.” He lists some of the core principles of AI: “Inquiry creates change. Inquiry is intervention...Positive questions lead to positive change.”<sup>65</sup> I include AI strategies in my intervention plan (see *Objectives and Strategies* below). John Roberto gives several examples of forward-looking questions related to the mid-adult task of evaluating their lives: “What are we spending and being spent for? What commands and receives our best time and energy? What causes, dreams, goals, or institutions are we pouring out our life for? To what or whom are we committed in life

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<sup>62</sup> Zanzig, “Rethinking Adult Faith Formation.”

<sup>63</sup> Schaeffler, *Deepening Faith*, 26.

<sup>64</sup> Branson, *Memories, Hopes, and Conversations*, xvii.

<sup>65</sup> Tim Sensing, *Qualitative Research: A Multi-Methods Approach to Projects for Doctor of Ministry Theses* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2011), 169.

and death? What are our most sacred hopes, our most compelling goals, and purposes in life?”<sup>66</sup>

### **Objectives, Strategies and Implementation**

I designed this intervention plan to provide an opportunity for nourishing, group-fostered growth, healing, and wholeness for mid-adults who may have lacked the space for such meaningful engagement as they try to weave their Christian faith into their busy and stressful lives. As Sarah Drummond notes, “Programs that give participants the opportunity to explore their own experiences and testify to their own transformations are best able to help people welcome the Holy Spirit’s activity.”<sup>67</sup> It is my sense from pastoral care and conversations that mid-adults in my context have lacked such opportunities. Likewise, John Roberto’s perspective speaks to the individuals in my target cohort with whom I have had conversations when he says, “Programs and resources can help midlife adults reflect deeply on the path their lives have taken up to this point and about the goals they set earlier in life – career goals, community participation goals, intimacy goals, family goals, personal goals, and faith goals. These goals can be clarified and evaluated at midlife”<sup>68</sup> Two people, separately, each brought up to me the deep need they have to figure out if they are “on the right track” in trying to live as God wants them to, needing to know if what they are doing is meaningful. We read in Romans 8 that “all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.”<sup>69</sup> People in this cohort yearn to understand what it means for them, at this stage in their lives, to be called according to God’s purpose. I wanted to provide a setting in which they could gather with each other for intentional conversation around yearnings, purpose, goals, and meaning. Priya Parker

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<sup>66</sup> Roberto, *The Seasons of Adult Faith Formation*, 146.

<sup>67</sup> Sarah B. Drummond, *Holy Clarity: The Practice of Planning and Evaluation* (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2009), 115.

<sup>68</sup> Roberto, *The Seasons of Adult Faith Formation*, 163.

<sup>69</sup> Romans 8:28, New Revised Standard Version.

defines *gathering* as “the conscious bringing together of people for a reason” and notes that such gathering “shapes the way we think, feel, and make sense of the world.”<sup>70</sup>

Yet, I have learned that my mid-adult congregants don’t want to carve out time for a church event only to be disappointed by the lack of depth they experience there. Parker describes this disappointment well:

We spend much of [our] time in uninspiring, underwhelming moments that fail to capture us, change us in any way, or connect us to one another. Any number of studies support a notion that’s obvious to many of us: Much of the time we spend in gatherings with other people disappoint us...As much as our gatherings disappoint us, though, we tend to keep gathering in the same tired ways. Most of us remain on autopilot when we bring people together, following stale formulas.<sup>71</sup>

Older church-goers have spent decades gathering in traditional church potlucks and Bible study groups. I have been in countless committee meetings where members lament the absence of younger participants in these events. They are sad that “they” don’t come to the things that “we” plan. As John Roberto notes, “In the past churches have often chosen the ‘one size fits all’ mentality for adult faith formation...Adult faith formation is no longer about finding *the* program to attract all adults. It is about addressing the diversity of adult learning needs with a variety of faith formation activities.”<sup>72</sup> The intervention design of my thesis project addresses some of the legitimate reasons why “they” don’t come.

The greatest challenge of any strategy for this demographic is to craft it in partnership with the recipients so that the implementation of it connects with real (and realistic) space in their complicated lives and thereby draws participation. The last thing I would want is for this intervention to be yet one more demand on their already over-full lives. Even though their hearts search for meaning and they crave spiritual experiences, many of them have been explicit that

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<sup>70</sup> Priya Parker, *The Art of Gathering: How We Meet and Why It Matters* (New York: Riverhead Books), 2018, ix.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid*, ix-x.

<sup>72</sup> Roberto, *The Seasons of Adult Faith Formation*, 152.

they generally don't have the bandwidth in their daily lives to prepare a covered dish for a potluck, or to read through a Bible lesson in preparation for a gathering, let alone wrangle children while trying to pay attention to something deep. Furthermore, as mentioned above, they are reluctant to commit to a long-term program, such as a weekly or monthly Bible study. Their lives feel unpredictable, and they find themselves apologizing for missing so many of the gatherings that they are expected to attend when there is a series or on-going program.

Consequently, events were planned as "one offs" – not requiring on-going commitment. Participants in the meal conversations that I set up were asked to make a reservation (for planning purposes of food, childcare, etc.), and then just show up, bringing nothing but an open mind and open heart. The food was provided (we are blessed with an older couple in our church who love to cater dinners, and are very good at it) and the setting was carefully crafted to encourage relaxation and intimacy. Volunteers (who are over fifty years old) did the table settings, donated flowers, and helped clean up afterward. Conversation was facilitated at tables by members of the under-50 cohort who met with me ahead of time and received training in small group dynamics.<sup>73</sup> Childcare was provided at the church. Our Director of Children and Youth Ministries supported this project by providing a "popcorn and movie night" (for both events) for the children of adults who attend the events. Nursery care was also provided for the littlest ones by paid staff. We held two events, one each in May and September, timed to coincide with the end of the school year and the end of summer vacation. The first event was at a small museum that used to be a private home, with the rental of the space donated by a church member. The second event was at the home of a couple in the church, who themselves are over fifty. They did not mingle with the guests, but rather simply provided their home. All church members and

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<sup>73</sup> Both the setting and the approach of the facilitator follows the principles of openness, boundaries, and hospitality as outlined by Parker Palmer in "To Teach is to Create a Space" from *To Know as We are Known: Education as a Spiritual Journey* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1993), 69-87.

regular visitors between the ages of 25 and 50 were invited to both events. This meant an invitation list of approximately 100 people.

The plan for the invitation, the meals, and the conversation was shaped by theories and models of meaningful gathering from authors such as Parker Palmer, Peter Block, Priya Parker, Mark Branson, and others. The intervention was designed to address the gap between the current situation in our congregation and the vision for deeper engagement of the mid-adult demographic and included these steps:

- gather a planning team that included members of the target cohort as well as older members to help with implementation
- send out a carefully crafted invitation that clearly states the purpose of the event (see Appendix A)<sup>74</sup>
- host the first *Conversations that Matter* dinner event (childcare provided)<sup>75</sup>
- send post-event surveys to attendees (see Appendix D-1)
- conduct one-on-one interviews with three attendees (see Appendix E-1)
- reconvene the planning team for review and tweaking
- send out invitation to second event (with “save-the-date” etc. as noted in footnote 71)
- host the second *Conversations that Matter* dinner event (childcare provided)
- send post-event surveys to attendees (see Appendices D-2 & D-3)
- conduct one-one one interviews with three attendees (see (Appendix E-1)
- review all results
- debrief with planning team and church ministry staff for future planning

The invitation (Appendix A) was developed in consultation with mid-adults both within and outside of my church (“If you were to receive this invitation, would you come?”), and through the guidance of Priya Parker who asserts that “the first step in convening people meaningfully [is] committing to a bold, sharp purpose.”<sup>76</sup> These adults typically do not open

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<sup>74</sup> This was preceded by a “save the date” email that did not contain much information; we also sent out a reservation confirmation and a reminder a few days ahead of the events.

<sup>75</sup> Note that the invitation was for 6:30-8:00pm. This was designed not only to accommodate childcare needs, but to fit with John Roberto’s parameters as he states that “adults are motivated when programs are sensitive to their time constraints.” *The Seasons of Adult Faith Formation*, 157.

<sup>76</sup> Parker, *The Art of Gathering*, 1.

regular “snail mail” unless it is something they are expecting. They also don’t usually find the time to read a church newsletter. They reported to me that they respond to electronic invitations (email, Facebook, etc.), and they are more likely to respond if the RSVP opportunity is electronically embedded in the invitation. Therefore, we sent the invitation as an email with electronic response fields embedded through a link to *Google-docs*. Parker states, “The most important part of your invitation is what it signals to your guests about your gathering and what it asks of them. And one way to send your guests a signal is to give your gathering a specific name. To name a gathering affects the way people receive it.”<sup>77</sup> With that in mind, I named the gatherings *Conversations that Matter*. Parker refers to the invitation as essential “priming” or part of the “pregame” to an event, and therefore worthy of great attention.

Our planning team arranged the attendees in small groups for the meal and conversations. The ideal is six to eight per table (round tables). Parker says, “Groups of 6: Groups of this rough size are wonderfully conducive to intimacy, high levels of sharing, and discussion through storytelling... To make the gathering great, there’s more responsibility on each person... It helps make the church a smaller place.”<sup>78</sup> We prayed a lot about seating arrangements, and configured the place cards to balance the table groups into a mixture of introverts/extroverts, gender, age, single/married, etc.

The conversation followed a pattern that I adapted from the practice of Appreciative Inquiry as noted previously. Each course of the meal is accompanied by a question that is open to everyone at the table. Other than the first question (which is on the appetizer tables outdoors, and is for all attendees to mingle and answer at they feel led to do so), the other three questions are stacked as “tent cards” in the middle of the table, so that everyone can see only the first question

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid, 158-159. See also Block, *Community*, 113.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid, 51.

when they sit down for dinner, written on each side of the tent card.<sup>79</sup> The first question is an ice-breaker/get-to-know-each-other type of question. After initial introductions and chatting about the first question, the group moves indoors and each person finds his or her place around the smaller tables. The first question at the seated tables is a bit more serious and is discussed over salad. As salads are finished, the table leader lifts that card to reveal a question for discussion over the main course, and a final question with dessert. Each question takes the conversation to a deeper level.<sup>80</sup> Parker refers to this as a “conversation menu.”<sup>81</sup> Responding to any of the questions is always voluntary. The table facilitator’s job is to keep the conversation on track, invite further reflection, encourage sharing from everyone, and look out for those who might tend to dominate.

I structured the questions with the principles of Appreciative Inquiry in mind. AI is foundationally described as a way to change organizations. My premise for using AI principles in this intervention is that most of those principles can be applied to transformation within the individual as well. In this sense, conversations are collaborative ways to address personal life situations. As the core of AI is overlaid onto personal transformation, there is subsequently a ripple effect throughout the organization. Thus, introspection in group conversations builds toward group-fostered wholeness in individuals who are then more engaged and able to thrive in the faith community. In turn, they would better function as healing agents in the world. Tim Sensing notes that AI presents opportunities for people to be heard, to build relationships, to

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<sup>79</sup> See Janet Schaeffler’s book *Deepening Faith: Adult Faith Formation in the Parish* (Collegeville, Minnesota: liturgical Press, 2017). Similarly, Kendal Vanderslice describes “discussion prompts written on a chalkboard by the buffet” at a dinner-church worship service she attended in Massachusetts in her book *We Will Feast: Rethinking Dinner, Worship, and the Community of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2019), 6.

<sup>80</sup> Our volunteer caterers served the meal by plating and delivering the courses to tables, so as not to interrupt conversation by having participants go back and forth to a buffet line.

<sup>81</sup> Parker, *The Art of Gathering*, 217.

dream and to share their dreams.<sup>82</sup> Additionally, as Parker Palmer points out, “Questions create a space for truth.”<sup>83</sup>

The first event provided a baseline, following the theme of “What feeds your soul?” As Mark Branson notes, “One of the most remarkable instruments that congregations possess is conversation. And if conversations are to foster a life-giving organization, they must include good questions.”<sup>84</sup> Kyle Oliver supports this approach when he notes, “By contrast, ‘What do you need?’ smacks of consumerism and the notion that the church has the answers if young adults will only allow it to dispense them.”<sup>85</sup> The first event questions were:

- What is something that you witnessed or heard about in the past week or so that made you happy, joyful, hopeful, or comforted? (appetizers)
- Where/how do you find spiritual nourishment? (salad)
- What keeps you up at night? (main course)
- What is unfolding in your life right now that feels important? (dessert)

The invitation for the second event again went out to everyone in the age range, whether or not they had attended the first event. The content of the second event was not dependent on having attended the first. Nonetheless, the questions for the second event were crafted based on feedback from the surveys and interviews from the first event, and had the added element of supportive scripture passages on each card (again, based on feedback from the first event), and they were:

- Where have you found rest/peace in the past week or so? (appetizers)  
*“Come away by yourselves and rest a while.” Mark 6:31*
- How do you manage time? How do you wish you could be spending your time? How do you deal with demands and expectations on your time? (salad)  
*“For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven.” Eccl. 3:1*  
*“My times are in your hand.” Psalm 31:15*

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<sup>82</sup> Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, 171.

<sup>83</sup> Palmer, *To Know as We Are Known*, 83.

<sup>84</sup> Branson, *Memories, Hopes, and Conversations*, xvii.

<sup>85</sup> Oliver, “Faith Formation with Young Adults,” 10.

- How do you find harmony or balance in your life? (main course)  
*“I have seen the business that God has given to everyone to be busy with. God has made everything suitable for its time...It is God’s gift that that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil.” Ecclesiastes 3:10-13*
- How do you connect with God, hear from God, even in the midst of busyness, even though there is no audible voice? (dessert)  
*“Wherever I go, your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast.” Psalm 139:10*

The questions, the guided conversations in this setting, and the setting itself are intended to live into the safe space described by Parker Palmer, “Hospitality means receiving each other, our struggles, our newborn ideas, with openness and care.”<sup>86</sup>

### **Evaluation and Learning**

In keeping with Tim Sensing’s evaluation principle of triangulation (“multiple data-collection technologies designed to measure a single concept or construct”<sup>87</sup>), I employed three evaluative tools within the scope of this project, as well as bearing in mind a fourth measure that will aid with assessment in the future. Built into this project were: post-event surveys; post-event interviews; and raw data of event attendance. The fourth piece has to do with the evolution of the broader life of the congregation. Additional anecdotal responses have also provided meaningful content for reflection.

We administered three types of post-event surveys (see Appendices D-1, D-2, and D-3). The first was given to all who attended the inaugural event; the second was for first-time attendees at the second event (nearly identical to the first survey – see Appendix D-2); the third was sent to those who attended both events. All survey results are in Appendices D-4, D-5, and D-6. For purposes of simplicity in this report, results are combined when appropriate. All surveys were sent electronically by email, with responses received through Survey Monkey ([www.surveymonkey.com](http://www.surveymonkey.com)), and were anonymous. A total of 41 surveys were sent out

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<sup>86</sup> Palmer, *To Know as We Are Known*, 73-74.

<sup>87</sup> Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, 72.

(combining the two events); 32 were completed and returned (78%).

100% of the respondents indicated that their experience of the event was “positive” (30) or “mostly positive” (2), with no neutral or negative responses. When asked if they would attend a similar event in the future, the answers were “yes” (83%), “probably” (12.5%), and “maybe” (4.5%), with no one choosing “probably not” or “no.” The survey questioned respondents regarding their own level of participation in the conversations, with 54% describing themselves as “very active,” 45% as “moderately active,” and 1% as “quiet observer.” As far as the invitation to help plan future events, responses were 31% “yes,” 46% “maybe,” and 23% “no, thank you.” The surveys also included a number of questions with open response fields that are more difficult to quantify. All of these responses are included in the appendices. However, themes did emerge (as will be noted below).

After each event, I asked each table leader to send me a name of someone at their table, selected somewhat at random, for me to interview personally. This resulted in six personal interviews. The interview questions and format can be found in Appendix E-1, with results in Appendix E-2. Each interviewee received and signed a document of informed consent (Appendix C). The results of the surveys and interviews from the first event were utilized by the planning team as tools for shaping the second event. For example, several people stated that they felt they ran out of time. One table group said that they never got to the dessert question because the main course question was so provocative. The kitchen crew had to shoo people away at the end of the event because childcare was ending at the church. People just kept talking, which I took to be a good sign. Based on this feedback, we extended the second event by a half hour.

The third evaluative component is the raw data of the number of people who attended events one and two. Because the current level of participation from this cohort in church events outside of worship is near zero, I was eager to see if this new approach attracted participation.

Out of approximately 100 individuals who received invitations, 25 responded for the first event (of those, 3 ended up not attending due to illness or being called out of town, resulting in attendance at the first event of 22); 20 responded to the second event (one of those ended up not attending due to a death, resulting in 19 at the second event).<sup>88</sup> Of the 19 who attended the second event, 10 were repeats from the first event. I did receive emails from several attendees of the first event saying that they really wanted to come to the second one, but the date was not good for them. In all, a total of 35 people responded positively to the invitations. Our planning team hoped that at least 12 people would attend each event, so we were thrilled at the turnout. Of course, in all of these, it is important to bear in mind the possibility of the Hawthorne Effect (results that are skewed because subjects know they are being studied),<sup>89</sup> as the invitations and surveys contained the disclaimer that this was part of my Doctor of Ministry research. Due to that consideration, I did not actually attend the first event. I hung back at the church and helped with the childcare. I was concerned that my very presence might skew people's interactions with each other or enthusiasm for the process if they were trying to please me. The meal servers surreptitiously took pictures during the event, and texted me their impressions as to how it was going in real time. By the time we got to the second event, I was comfortable being present because the kitchen was more closed off in that venue and I was able to (mostly) remain hidden. I also attended the second event in order to thank the attendees personally and to describe hopes and possibilities for future events.

Some of the evaluative components are shaped by Appreciative Inquiry principles as well. The questions in the surveys and even more so in the interviews are crafted with AI trajectories in mind. That is, beginning with positive assumptions about what people want for

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<sup>88</sup> Attendance reached 27 at a third event that took place after the parameters of the thesis project, with many repeat attendees from the first two events and several new folks.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid, 82.

themselves and the organization, and focusing on future-oriented possibilities and dreams.

The themes as to what was important to participants that emerged through the open-ended response-fields in the surveys and the one-on-one interviews included:

- How relaxing the experience was
- The opportunity to build relationships
- The significance of being with their peer group
- The amazing feeling they got when they connected with another person in the midst of the conversation (that “Me too!” feeling, “I’m not alone in this,” etc.)
- The sense that things they typically hold inside, and the things that cause them stress, are shared by others in their peer group
- The importance of childcare at the church (“better than a babysitter,” “We didn’t have that guilty feeling we often have after getting a sitter,” etc.)
- That they would like these types of events to continue (some said, “At least quarterly,” while others mentioned “monthly”)
- That they appreciated the addition of scripture passages at the second event

Building relationships around the table as a church is what Kendall Vanderslice’s work is all about. She uses the word *commensality* to describe the social dynamics of eating together.<sup>90</sup> As she explores the ideas of hospitality, holiness, and experiencing pleasure together, I hear echoes of her values in the responses (interviews and surveys) of event participants in *Conversations that Matter*. Vanderslice describes what she calls “dinner-church” as a space that “beckons to all who thirst for companionship, for a space to ask questions, for healing from the pain of loneliness or rejection.”<sup>91</sup> Additionally, there was an element of confession in these conversations, as participants shared their fears, insecurities, and foibles. This brings to mind Bonhoeffer’s assertion that, “According to Jesus’ promise, every Christian [brother] can hear the confession of another,” regardless of ecclesiastical status.<sup>92</sup>

There are some in the church who highly value intergenerational activities and believe that all church events should be open to all members. As I anticipated pushback from these

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<sup>90</sup> Vanderslice, *We Will Feast*, 24.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid*, 159.

<sup>92</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 118.

members, I was encouraged by Priya Parker and her notion of “thoughtful exclusion.” She states, “The desire to keep doors open – to not offend...is a threat to gathering with a purpose... You will have begun to gather with a purpose when you learn to exclude with a purpose... Thoughtful, considered exclusion is vital to any gathering... Inclusion can in fact be uncharitable and exclusion generous.”<sup>93</sup> While there is a place for intergenerational fellowship, *thoughtful exclusion* serves a great purpose in this project. Indeed, many participants commented on how important it was to them that this was limited to their peer group (albeit a wide age span within that grouping).<sup>94</sup>

Anecdotally, there were a few post-event comments that stuck with me. One was a text I received from a participant the day after the first event which read, “Last night was really just great. I felt more connected to the church family than maybe ever. Just really fun and enjoyable. I was proud to be a part of it.” One of the people I interviewed in after the first event shook her head and said, “I have no words... This was so meaningful and unusual within the regular pattern of our lives.” After the second event, a participant came up to me at church and asked if she could bring her unchurched friends to the next one, saying, “The atmosphere is so comfortable and non-threatening - a nice entry point for people who don’t go to church.” How remarkable it is that the above comments were made regarding events that *did not take place at the church* and *were not led by pastors or other church leaders!*

There were some unexpected outcomes that are worth mentioning. The first is that many

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<sup>93</sup> Parker, *The Art of Gathering*, 35-36.

<sup>94</sup> One interesting twist confirmed for me the need to pursue events that have age-related parameters. The day of the first event, a man got called out of town on business. His wife emailed me to tell me, and said that her mother was visiting and could come in his place. Our team huddled quickly and decided that we needed to honor the woman’s request. However, participants at her table told me later that, while they had a great time and still got a lot out of the conversations, the presence of an over-50 person clearly changed the dynamic at their table. They had fewer of those cathartic moments when everyone suddenly says, “I feel that way too!”

parents commented that their children formed deeper friendships with other kids in the church while the parents were away at dinner. They noted that the kids tend to see each other in highly structured settings, so having a couple of hours of free-play, pizza-eating, and movie-watching was super fun for the kids. None of us had anticipated this kind of positive outcome for the childcare situation.

Another surprise that was especially dear to me was how many of the over-50 crowd, once they understood what I was up to and why, jumped in with “How can I help?” There were pockets of resistance, to be sure, but the ones who “got it” were all in, and helped tremendously in the implementation of the project events (providing fresh flowers to adorn the dining space, carting the church’s china plates to the event site, and back to the church for washing, and even offering their own homes for future events.). Many of them have pledged continued help as future events are planned. Another piece of feedback that I did not expect was that a couple of people did not appreciate being separated from the person they came with once they got to the tables. We remedied this concern in the second event by giving people the choice of whether or not to sit apart. All but one couple chose to be separated from each other, and the feedback on *not* being with the person they came with was overwhelmingly positive. An unexpected outcome of the preliminary planning is that people in this cohort preferred Friday nights for these events. It never would have dawned on me to plan a church event on a Friday evening, but not only did some ask for this in the beginning, the survey and interview results mostly confirmed this preference. They described getting to the end of the week and just wanting to relax, but not having the energy to get a babysitter or have friends over. The *Conversations that Matter* event seemed to hit the sweet spot for Friday nights.

The final element of feedback (the evolution of the broader life of the congregation) continues to unfold, beyond the time frame of the thesis project, and has several components.

This has to do with the longer-term health and future of the church, and includes such questions as: “Do events similar to *Conversations that Matter* get repeated, and are they well-attended?”

One significant result from the surveys was how many people said they would like to help plan a future event. This is key. These events will have to include some component of self-generation within the cohort in order to be sustainable. Another question that I plan to address beyond the scope of the thesis project (and more to the purpose of the intervention) is, “Are adults in the 25-50 year-old age range more engaged in the broader life of the congregation than they were before?” The fact that three attendees subsequently said “yes” when nominated to serve as elders or deacons is perhaps an indication of the beginnings of greater involvement.

Systemically, it would also be fair to ask, “Has the congregation as a whole shifted its vocabulary, fellowship life, and planning strategies to incorporate what was learned from this intervention?” These things need to be reviewed some time down the road, asking people in the target demographic, “Is your soul being fed in meaningful ways through the life of this church?”

Whenever I have discussed this project with mid-adults, there has been an immediate spark as they contemplate future possibilities. They envision these “one-off” events continuing, and taking on increasing specificity as people become accustomed to the format. Forthcoming *Conversations that Matter* events could each be shaped, they suggest, by a particular theme such as vocation, parenthood, prayer, community involvement, mission, etc. Although these future events are beyond the scope of the thesis intervention, the hope is that this new format would have staying power. In fact, participants from the first two events did plan and carry out a third event after my thesis project was complete.<sup>95</sup> Additionally, the *Conversations that Matter*

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<sup>95</sup> It is worth noting that the social-distancing measures of the COVID-19 pandemic led to a fourth *Conversations that Matter* event, taking place online through Zoom in March, 2020. This was specifically for parents/guardians of small children who were struggling to cope with the crisis and being confined to home. Thus, a thesis intervention project aimed at bringing people together continued in spirit at a time when people were unable to physically gather.

structure is presumably translatable into other age groups. This project could trigger a whole new way of gathering for everyone in the church. Furthermore, as Peter Block notes, “The right small group conversation releases aliveness and intention into the community.” He calls these discussions “Conversations that Count.”<sup>96</sup> This is what Mark Branson describes as “the rippling spread of conversations.”<sup>97</sup> A systematic approach to the challenge of more broadly engaging the mid-adult cohort in our congregation would include conversations with active church members of all ages (not just the target demographic) in hopes of reframing church language and encouraging outside-the-box programming and support beyond the *Conversations that Matter* events. Already, the planning, implementation, and evaluation has given the congregation (and particularly its leadership) a new way to think and talk about ministry.

## Conclusion

Priya Parker notes that the best gatherings “transport us to a temporary alternative world.”<sup>98</sup> My hope is that the “temporary alternative world” of the safe space created by *Conversations that Matter* events has engaged mid-adults in a way that is spiritually transformative for them, increases the role of the church as an anchor in their lives, and equips them for a stronger walk in their journey of faith as they seek to live lives that matter. Parker writes about turning outward at the end of the event, encouraging attendees to ponder, “What of this world do I want to bring back to my other worlds?”<sup>99</sup> As our congregation’s identity is mission-minded, the hope is that the adults under fifty would weave themselves more tightly into the church’s community outreach efforts as they themselves feel increasingly connected to, and fed by, the church.

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<sup>96</sup> Block, *Community*, 102 & 98.

<sup>97</sup> Branson, *Memories, Hopes, and Conversations*, 27.

<sup>98</sup> Parker, *The Art of Gathering*, 112.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid*, 261.

Not all congregations mirror FPC in terms of demographics. The greater challenge faced by most of my Presbyterian colleagues is simply how to attract people under fifty to enter the doors of their church at all. We are in the enviable position of having a countertrending presence of this cohort in our membership and Sunday worship. As the community of Bentonville and surrounding area is growing ever more rapidly, this is likely to continue. But for the mainline churches (Presbyterian and otherwise) who bear a similarity to our situation, the literature review, basic principles, and outcomes of the intervention here could be useful and perhaps replicated in some form. Some of my colleagues in the Presbytery of Arkansas have already requested that I share my results with them, as they say “nothing we’ve tried so far is working.” Indeed, if the shrinking vitality of church engagement for those under fifty years old is not impacted, the very future of the church is at stake.

We read in Ecclesiastes that everything has a season.<sup>100</sup> The mid-adult season of life has its own purposes. It is incumbent upon the church to minister in faithfulness alongside one another in seasonally appropriate, accessible, meaningful and transformative ways. My goal in this thesis project has been to do just that, and do it in a way that has life beyond the project parameters. Ultimately, as Kendall Vanderslice suggests, there is an aspect of “meeting the Creator at the table by communing with those made in God’s image.”<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Ecclesiastes 3:1-8.

<sup>101</sup> Vanderslice, *We Will Feast*, 167.

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## APPENDIX A Church Mission Statement\*

First Presbyterian Church  
Bentonville, Arkansas

### The Mission of First Presbyterian Church is to help people

- Come to trust in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord of their lives.
- Grow and mature in their understanding and experience of that faith.
- Care for one another, allowing Christ's love to live in them as we journey through the "mountains" and "valleys" of life.
- Serve the needs of "the least of these", our brothers and sisters, in the name of Jesus Christ.

*Trusting, Growing, Caring and Serving Together in the Name of Jesus Christ*

*\*As appears on the church website, in the weekly church bulletin, Session & Deacons materials, etc., adopted in 2000. [www.fpcbentonville.org](http://www.fpcbentonville.org)*

## APPENDIX B-1 Invitation to First Event

**“What feeds your soul?”**  
*Conversations that Matter*

**Friday, May 31, 2019**  
6:30 – 8:00pm



You are invited to participate in the first of a new kind of adult dinner fellowship!

*Conversations that Matter* is a way of exploring meaningful questions in a casual way over a meal together, in small groups of six to eight people. You can come just to listen, or jump into the discussion. Each table will have a discussion facilitator. We will be reflecting on questions relevant to our daily lives and our journeys of faith, as we navigate early- and mid-adulthood.

- **What to bring:** yourself and an open heart (meal is provided)
- **Cost:** none
- **Reservations Required:** deadline is May 15 to RSVP (see below)
- **Location:** at the church, or in homes near the church (depending upon RSVP numbers)
- **Childcare available by reservation** (childcare will be at the church)
  - Nursery care is available up to age 4
  - Activities and a light supper will be provided for ages 5 through 6<sup>th</sup> grade  
(*older youth can assist with children's activities*)

Electronic response fields:

Name(s)

Yes, I/we plan to attend

Not this time, but I/we are interested in the next opportunity

Childcare (names and ages)

Dietary restrictions (adults and children)

Best contact (cell and email)

Questions? Contact \_\_\_\_\_ (\_\_\_\_\_@gmail.com) or Pastor Georgia  
(\_\_\_\_\_@fpcbentonville.org)

*Note: This pilot event is planned in conjunction with Pastor Georgia's exploration of the engagement of adults in faith formation, which is a project of her Doctor of Ministry studies. As such, it is not promoted broadly to the whole congregation.*

## APPENDIX B-2 Invitation to Second Event

You are invited to another edition of:

**“What feeds your soul?”**  
*Conversations that Matter*

**Friday, September 13, 2019**  
6:30 – 8:30pm



A ministry of First Presbyterian Church

- New questions, new conversations
- Reservations Required by September 7 (see link, below)
- No cost (meal provided)
- What to bring: yourself and an open heart
- Dinner location to be determined by number of respondents (follow-up email will be sent)
- Childcare at church (by reservation); drop-off at 6:15pm
  - o Nursery care up to age 4
  - o Activities and a light supper will be provided for ages 5 through 6<sup>th</sup> grade  
(older youth can assist with children's activities)

*Conversations that Matter* is a way of exploring meaningful questions in a casual way during appetizers, followed by a meal together in smaller groups of six to eight people. You can come just to listen, or jump into the discussion. Each table will have a discussion facilitator. We will be reflecting on topics relevant to our daily lives and our journeys of faith, as we navigate early- and mid-adulthood.

Electronic response fields:

Name(s)  
Yes, I/we plan to attend  
Not this time, but I/we are interested in the next opportunity  
Childcare (names and ages)  
Dietary restrictions (adults and children)  
Best contact (cell and email)

Questions? Contact \_\_\_\_\_ (\_\_\_\_\_@gmail.com) or Pastor Georgia  
(\_\_\_\_\_@fpcbentonville.org)

*Note: This pilot event is planned in conjunction with Pastor Georgia's exploration of the engagement of adults in faith formation, which is a project of her Doctor of Ministry studies. As such, it is not promoted broadly to the whole congregation.*

## APPENDIX C Informed Consent

### **Informed Consent**

**Title of study:** “Let’s Do This Together: Soul-Nourishing Approach and Practice for Adult Faith Formation (30-50 years old) in the Congregation”

**Principle researcher:**

Georgia Senor, Doctor of Ministry student at McCormick Theological Seminary  
First Presbyterian Church, 901 NE J Street, Bentonville AR 72712  
479-409-4597

**Purpose of study:** To explore accessible and soul-nourishing ways in which the church can be active in supporting Christian faith formation in the lives of middle-adults (approximately 30-50 years old), addressing their spiritual growth so as to partner with them now and in the future as they face life’s joys, challenges, and dark valleys.

**Procedures:** The researcher will present follow-up questions to a sample of those who attended the *Conversations that Matter* fellowship event. This will take the form of a one-on-one interview at a later date, at the convenience of the participant. The researcher will ask a set list of questions, with some improvised follow-up questions. The interview will take no longer than one hour and will not be recorded. The researcher will take hand-written notes during the interview.

**Risks:** No specific risks are anticipated. It is possible that the participant might find some questions to be sensitive. The participant can choose at any time to decline to answer a question.

**Confidentiality:** Notes from the interview and identifying participant information will be kept solely within the personal possession of the researcher. Responses that may contribute to the final report will be detached from participant identification. When direct quotes would be useful to the report, the researcher will notify the participant; quotes will be used anonymously in the report. The interview will not be recorded.

**Benefits of participation:** Participant will benefit by having a direct impact on/contribution to the approach and practice of adult faith formation in the participant’s congregation. Further, the participant may benefit by deepening his/her personal commitment to the life of the church.

**Voluntary participation:** The participant may decline to answer any or all questions and may terminate involvement at any time. Withdrawing from participation will not affect the participant’s relationship with the researcher or with the church.

**Compensation:** There is no monetary or material compensation for participation in this interview.

**Questions:** If you have any questions about this study, you may contact the researcher at any time.

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**Consent:** I have read and understand the provided information and have had the opportunity to ask questions. I understand that my participation is voluntary.

**Printed name** \_\_\_\_\_  
(participant)

**Signature** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date** \_\_\_\_\_  
(participant)

**Signature** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date** \_\_\_\_\_  
(researcher)

You will be given a copy of this form for your records.

## APPENDIX D-1 Post-event Survey for First-time Attendees (first event)

Your feedback is greatly appreciated as we evaluate the church's recent *Conversations that Matter* dinner event. Please take a few minutes to fill out this brief survey. All responses are anonymous, unless you choose to include your name.

How would you rate your own level of participation in your group's conversation?

- Very Active
- Moderately Active
- Minimally Active
- Quiet Observer

Would you want to participate in similar events in the future?

- Yes
- Probably
- Maybe
- Probably Not
- No

How would you describe your overall experience at the *Conversations that Matter* dinner event?

- Positive
- Mostly Positive
- Neutral
- Somewhat negative
- Negative

What words would you use describe the positive aspects or benefits to you personally from this event?

What would you consider to be the drawbacks or negative aspects of this event?

Do you have suggestions for *topics* or *structure* of future events?

What are questions about religion/faith/life that you want to explore more deeply?

Anything else you would like to say about this event?

*Note: These pilot events are part of Pastor Georgia's project in her Doctor of Ministry studies at McCormick Theological Seminary. Your voluntary participation will help us discover whether such events would be meaningful to you and others in the future. Responses to this survey will be included (anonymously) in her research report to the seminary.*

**APPENDIX D-2** Post-event Survey for First Time Attendees (second event)  
*Questions about childcare & about helping to plan future events were added since the first event*

Your feedback is greatly appreciated as we evaluate the church's recent *Conversations that Matter* dinner event. Please take a few minutes to fill out this brief survey. All responses are anonymous, unless you choose to include your name.

How would you rate your own level of participation in your group's conversation?

- Very Active
- Moderately Active
- Minimally Active
- Quiet Observer

Would you want to participate in similar events in the future?

- Yes
- Probably
- Maybe
- Probably Not
- No

How would you describe your overall experience at the *Conversations that Matter* dinner event?

- Positive
- Mostly Positive
- Neutral
- Somewhat negative
- Negative

How important is it to you that childcare is available at the church?

- Very important
- Somewhat important
- Not important
- Not relevant

What words would you use describe the positive aspects or benefits to you personally from this event?

What would you consider to be the drawbacks or negative aspects of this event?

Do you have suggestions for *topics* or *structure* of future events?

Would you be interested in helping to plan a future event?

- Yes
- Possibly
- No, thank you

What are questions about religion/faith/life that you want to explore more deeply?

Anything else you would like to say about this event?

*Note: These pilot events are part of Pastor Georgia's project in her Doctor of Ministry studies at McCormick Theological Seminary. Your voluntary participation will help us discover whether such events would be meaningful to you and others in the future. Responses to this survey will be included (anonymously) in her research report to the seminary.*

### APPENDIX D-3 Post-event Survey for Return Attendees (second event)

As you have now attended “Conversations that Matter” for a second time, this survey is a little bit different than last time, though some questions are the same. We are hoping for feedback that will help our church to plan similar ministries in the future. All responses are anonymous, unless you choose to include your name. Your email will not be connected to your survey. If two of you attended together, you are encouraged to fill out separate surveys (just click on the link again to do a second survey). Thank you so much for being part of this adventure!

How would you rate your describe your overall experience a this second dinner event?

- Positive
- Mostly Positive
- Neutral
- Somewhat Negative
- Negative

How important is it to you that childcare is available at the church?

- Very important
- Somewhat important
- Not important
- Not relevant

Do you have suggestions for topics of future events?

What adjustments to the event itself would be helpful to you?

Would you be interested in helping to plan a future event?

- Yes
- Possibly
- No, thank you

Would you be interested in a more specific sub-set of this group for a similar event (such as “Conversations about Work” or “Conversations about Parenting,” etc.)?

- Yes
- Possibly
- No

What are questions about religion/faith/life that you want to explore more deeply, in the context of this type of event, or otherwise?

Anything else you would like to say about this event, or any other aspect of the church’s ministry and programs for adults 25-50 years old?

*Note: These pilot events are part of Pastor Georgia’s project in her Doctor of Ministry studies at McCormick Theological Seminary. Your voluntary participation will help us discover whether such events would be meaningful to you and others in the future. Responses to this survey will be included (anonymously) in her research report to the seminary.*

#### APPENDIX D-4 Post-event Survey Results – First time attendees (first event)

19 out of 22 surveys were returned; collected anonymously through *Survey Monkey*

How would you rate your own level of participation in your group's conversation?

Very Active	11
Moderately Active	8
Minimally Active	0
Quiet Observer	0

Would you want to participate in similar events in the future?

Yes	15
Probably	3
Maybe	1
Probably Not	0
No	0

How would you rate your describe your overall experience a this second dinner event?

Positive	17
Mostly Positive	2
Neutral	0
Somewhat Negative	0
Negative	0

What words would you use describe the positive aspects or benefits to you personally from this event?

- It was a unique opportunity to have conversations that were of substance and not work-related. It is too infrequent that I have a chance to conversations with adults that are not work-related. This was a rare opportunity to reflect and discuss hopes and concerns, with a group of my peers.
- Fun fellowship with other church members in a relaxed setting
- I found a greater sense of community within our church family! I really enjoyed the experience
- Great conversation and getting to know people
- Peaceful, interesting, forming connections with people from church who I had talk to before, but didn't know much about them because my children were always commanding too much of my attention during other church activities
- Thought provoking
- Felt heard Felt hopeful
- Felt spoiled, relaxed, together, connected
- Enjoyable, community building, easy, tasty, felt spoiled, relaxing
- I feel like I made friends who are or who have gone through current events in my own life. It was really inspiring to connect.
- Enlightening
- It was great being able to get to know other members of the congregation that I haven't really had the opportunity to interact and converse with
- authentic conversation in a warm environment
- It was really nice to meet different people in the church that I don't normally get to see.
- community, empathy, connections, relationship
- Fellowship, getting to know others
- The questions were thought-provoking, and everyone was very willing to share their thoughts. It was nice to have a time for conversation with people that went well below surface-level small talk. I'm not very good with small talk, and I am uncomfortable in situations where small talk is

expected, even if it is with people I know well. I was very happy that we were able to share on a very real level during the meal.

- We were able to connect, listen to each other, see things from a different perspective, and find similarities in what we're experiencing at this point in our lives.
- Nice to make connections

What would you consider to be the drawbacks or negative aspects of this event?

- I can't think of a negative from this. Perhaps that after having honest conversations sometimes I worry about how other's opinions of me might change
- None
- None
- Not being able to sit by my husband
- Done! I really loved it
- Nothing
- It was great but I think it was a lot of work to provide dinner. It was SUPER nice but I wonder if there is a way to continue so people feel safe to talk but without the extra work and expense for others.
- rushed
- I thought it would feel forced or awkward to have the table questions but the group I sat with were all very open to just jumping in and having conversation. It did not feel strained or forced. Once we got talking, it felt like a bummer to have to cut off the conversation at 8. It might have been nice to get to the dinner and conversation part sooner with a little less hors de ouvres and drinks on the patio.
- It should be less formal. Great location, loved the topics. In retrospect, I worry less formality we may not have covered the topics we did.
- Less formal, let more conversation happen organically
- Everything was great!
- I love to talk about "the big questions" about life and faith. So, this was good stuff for me -- nothing negative.
- none
- none!
- Not sitting with spouse, didn't have a clear understanding of the event before we arrived
- I didn't actually answer every question, even though I responded to others' answers. I don't know if I would actually consider it a drawback, however, because I truly enjoyed hearing everyone else's responses. We also had a table where everyone had kids, but the kids were all in different age brackets. So when the parents of the littles were talking about daycare and day camp, the parents of the teenagers were just sitting there - and vice versa. Once again, it may not necessarily be a drawback because it was also an enjoyable experience to visit with people who may not be exactly in our stage of parenting.
- There were no drawbacks.
- Compressed time

Do you have suggestions for *topics* or *structure* of future events?

- I found the space delightful. It was so beautiful & was a very inviting setting for people to mingle and initiate discussions
- Childcare was really helpful! We had a great discussion and could have stayed another hour
- The childcare was great. Food was delicious. It was nice to be pampered with a fancy meal
- Locations: Rent the upstairs space above Tavola. Picnic at Orchard Park? Topics: what are some of the ways your life has turned out differently from what you thought it would be when you were in college
- Liked weekend evening timing.

- Maybe the library has a room with a door.
- death and mortality, health and wellness, control and letting go, finding peace, mindfulness
- One person at my table mentioned they wished this were a monthly event. A monthly gathering would be nice. Even if everyone wasn't quite as fancy. I think a fun night, like a game night, could be alternated with conversations over nice dinner night. It was nice to not be at the church but also be at a private location.
- Parenting, dating, divorce, and more of what we want and expect from the church.
- More about real life topics that face our generation specifically
- Not at this time
- lovely setting, gracious hospitality, easy flow -- all good.
- I loved the location! Dinner is a good time, but I would prefer Thursday evenings
- loved it! thank you for providing a unique childcare experience too
- It was pretty heavily scripted. Would be good to have some flexible conversations vs always on a specific topic.
- Dinner seems to relax people for conversation. Even sitting around on couches drinking coffee would not have the same effect on true conversation as sharing a meal at a table. Saturdays might work better for some people since worknights are hard for a lot of families.
- Tables of six worked well. Everyone was able to participate naturally. The location, time, meal, etc. were ideal. Having childcare helped the parents relax. I thought the topics were well chosen. What keeps you up at night was deep and unexpected and ultimately revealed our similarities.

What are questions about religion/faith/life that you want to explore more deeply?

- How do you approach or reconcile when life is not fair? What role does religion play in "fairness"? How does religion/faith help you through when life is not fair?
- Would like to hear other people ideas on some of those religious questions everyone gets asked in their faith. We are all part of a church so I'm sure we have gotten through them I our own ways but it would be interesting to hear other people's thoughts. Why does God allow bad things to happen? How do you know God is real if you cannot see Him? How does God speak to you if you cannot actually hear him?
- How to discuss intersections of faith and social justice. Also, faith and children
- I don't know
- What would Jesus say about what humans are doing to the environment?!
- What can I do daily to feel closer to God.
- Being Presbyterian in the Bible belt...reading now...has some very helpful history...helpful to adults and gives ways to approach topics with youth
- Easy/quick ways to connect to God, strategies for making prayer more of a habit
- What does obedience to Christ look like in our everyday experience? How do I balance my vocational calling with my relational calling and responsibility to those I love? How does my faith influence my marriage? What does Christ-like-ness look like in my relationship with my spouse? How do I reconcile God's love, plan and sovereignty with the heartache, destruction and suffering I see in the world?
- Heaven/hell, sexuality & sex, races, inclusiveness, etc. More controversial.
- Race, prejudice, bias
- How do you incorporate faith or be more mindful of your faith in your career?
- how do we define a secular world view compared to a sacred world view-- and then, which world view do we most closely identify? And how does that primary identity impact our decisions?
- I can't think of any right now but I enjoyed the ones from the dinner.
- when someone says "have a relationship with God" what does that look like/ what does that actually mean?
- How do you draw from your faith during a difficult time?

- How have you been successful in keeping your faith during challenging periods of life?  
Forgiveness - Is it always possible?
- How to manage work and life commitments in addition to being active in church community

Anything else you would like to say about this event?

- Kudos for creating this. It will benefit the relations among those who participate, and strengthen our church family. The opportunity to have meaningful discussions is so rare, it took me a while to get fully into sharing mode.
- Thank you so much. It was truly a pleasure. I loved that there was no pressure to participate, and that relaxed attitude actually made it to where everybody participated. It was great to know my kids were well cared for and having fun. I appreciated being assigned to a table and not having the stress of having to decide
- No, good event
- Thank you!
- It was wonderful, and a much-needed event in my life. I felt so connected to everyone at my table, and in turn, felt more connected to my church. THANK YOU
- Thanks, Georgia. This was a lovely event that felt like being spoiled. Even just the time set aside to just talk with other adults in a lovely setting was a luxury. It was a gift of "making space". Space for conversation. Space for fellowship over food. Space for relaxation. Everything was thought of and taken care of (a huge luxury in our lives as people mostly taking care of lots of little people). Thanks for seeking to find ways to nurture the spiritual lives of busy parents/working mid-life adults.
- I had a wonderful time. It was so nice to be around people of our own age at something just for us. I met people who I've seen at church but had never met, even feel like I made friends.
- Loved the child care, venue and menu
- This was an awesome idea and I'm so glad I was able to participate. Big thanks to everyone that helped to make this happen! The food was great and the conversations were so meaningful and uplifting. Thank you! Thank you! Thank you!
- Thanks!
- Loved it! Thanks for putting it together!
- I appreciated being apart from my significant other to get to hear from more perspectives and learn to know more people.
- This was a great evening, and I would love to be a part of more groups like this.
- I enjoyed getting to know other members of our church - beyond small talk. It was meaningful and a wonderful opportunity to build relationships.
- I think it was a great idea and executed well.

- **APPENDIX D-5** Post-event Survey Results - First Time Attendees (second event)

5 out of 9 surveys were returned; collected anonymously through *Survey Monkey*

How would you rate your own level of participation in your group's conversation?

Very Active	1
Moderately Active	3
Minimally Active	0
Quiet Observer	1

Would you want to participate in similar events in the future?

Yes	5
Probably	0
Maybe	0
Probably Not	0
No	0

How would you describe your overall experience at the *Conversations that Matter* dinner event?

Positive	5
Mostly Positive	0
Neutral	0
Somewhat negative	0
Negative	0

How important is it to you that childcare is available at the church?

Very important	2
Somewhat important	0
Not important	2
Not relevant	1

What words would you use describe the positive aspects or benefits to you personally from this event?

- Being around people of similar age to me and building relationships
- Pausing to think & talk about things outside daily immediate life
- Listening and learning from other people. I honestly do not have much to offer in philosophical or reflection type conversations but I enjoy hearing others speak and learning from them. You realize many other people are dealing with the same issues or concerns and there is comfort in hearing people's solutions
- Sense of community and fellowship. Great honest conversation
- Good conversation guiding my thoughts toward God in a positive environment

What would you consider to be the drawbacks or negative aspects of this event?

- None
- NA
- This even there were no drawbacks. However, if this turns into a regular occurrence, then it will need to be able to accommodate people who doesn't RSVP or want to come at the last second. I loved the sit down dinner aspect but that might be challenging to do on a continual basis
- Having to be willing to talk openly about yourself. Not that that's a negative thing, just challenging
- I am typically anti-social so making myself go was rough

Do you have suggestions for *topics* or *structure* of future events?

- Interacting with others, relationships with other people
- Friday nights are really good, being restful & in the moment
- I actually really liked the Friday night timing. However childcare is critical for us, so whatever day is better for the folks who watch the kids is best with us. I do not have suggestions on topics or format
- Location and timing were great. Having it in somebody's home made it very personal and eliminated distractions. Topics that might be interesting could be things like finding a sense of fulfillment, ways we view our relationship with God, parenting challenges, etc.
- No

Would you be interested in helping to plan a future event?

Yes	0
Possibly	3
No, thank you	2

What are questions about religion/faith/life that you want to explore more deeply?

- How to connect with /make new friends as an adult, basic faith formation
- Scripture, ancient Christian practices
- I'm sorry but I am the wrong person to give feedback on this. Whatever others want to discuss will be perfectly fine with me.
- The ways in which our faith can be translated into action. How to talk to "evangelize" other people (especially other Christians)
- I don't know

Anything else you would like to say about this event?

- It would be nice to have a devotional bible study type of time in the evenings rather than just during the day when people are working
- This was a welcome event
- I do agree there should be some program for that age group and I think dinners like these could be a good model to build on. Again, I'm sorry but I really don't have any good suggestions to offer. Thank you for inviting us, it is always good to meet other members of the church outside the Sunday service
- I don't have much to offer since I don't make it to very many events besides regular church services
- I think it is great you are trying new things to get us more involved

**APPENDIX D-6** Post-event Survey Results – Return attendees (second event)

8 out of 10 surveys were returned; collected anonymously through *Survey Monkey*

How would you rate your describe your overall experience a this second dinner event?

Positive	8
Mostly Positive	0
Neutral	0
Somewhat Negative	0
Negative	0

How important is it to you that childcare is available at the church?

Very important	5
Somewhat important	1
Not important	0
Not relevant	2

Do you have suggestions for topics of future events?

- How to seek support from friends
- Letting go, worry, anxiety
- Maintaining a healthy relationship with your family
- Recognizing God in uneventful, every day, yet busy life
- Vocation, What does it mean to “follow Christ”? Are Christians called to be “counter-cultural”?
- How do you avoid comparing to other people’s “perfect” lives; how do make God a part of your daily life – not just on Sunday morning

What adjustments to the event itself would be helpful to you?

- At the beginning I felt a little less comfortable in the Breshears’ home (out of my concern for burdening them, their hospitality was exceptional), but that eased away quickly
- None
- None!
- None, it was wonderful
- I find the set up to be just right. The timing works well and I love having questions to discuss – this makes the event comfortable for everyone, whether they are easy conversationalists or not.
- Nothing, it is so planned and thoughtful, it feels like being spoiled. However, I may be interesting to consider an occasional less formal event. A more casual gathering may spark different sorts of conversation.
- It may not be practical, but it could honestly be long. I feel like we had more to say.

Would you be interested in helping to plan a future event?

Yes	4
Possibly	3
No, thank you	1

Would you be interested in a more specific sub-set of this group for a similar event (such as “Conversations about Work” or “Conversations about Parenting,” etc.)?

Yes	4
Possibly	2
No	2

What are questions about religion/faith/life that you want to explore more deeply, in the context of this type of event, or otherwise?

- Connecting with God, letting go of control
- Staying engaged as our life journey continues
- How do you reconnect with God when your attention has been elsewhere?
- Vocation, following Christ, marriage
- How do we show God's love to everyone in the face of so much hate and violence in the world?  
How do we take a stand of love and inclusion that makes an actual difference

Anything else you would like to say about this event, or any other aspect of the church's ministry and programs for adults 25-50 years old?

- Very beneficial. Wonderful chance to get to know others better. Lovely to have an evening without catering to kids. Please continue
- I love how you attached scriptures to each question
- It is wonderful and such a treat!
- Would be great to invite friends from outside the church
- I appreciate being able to meet and connect with others in this age group. During this particularly full time of life, having an event that you can just show up to without any effort other than putting it on your calendar feels like a miracle
- I think it would be awesome to have as a quarterly event or even more frequent. I have had so many more conversations with my peers at church on Sunday morning because I know them better through these two events' conversations. Thank you!!
- This actually works for our age group in this day and age. I am uncomfortable in larger groups and don't like making small talk, but the smaller tables with discussion questions makes everything better. More relaxed. I feel like more people share than one would expect, and people get involved who would never attend a Sunday School class.

**APPENDIX E-1** Post-event Interview Guide (small sample of attendees)  
**“What feeds your soul?”**

*Conversations that Matter (participant post-event interview)*

Interview parameters:

- scheduled at the participant’s convenience (time and location)
- one-on-one
- interview lasts no longer than one hour
- one-on-one
- participant reviews and signs *Informed Consent* form before interview begins (*see Appendix C*), and is given a copy
- no video or audio recording
- interviewer/researcher takes written notes
- participant would be contacted later if researcher would like to use direct quotes, but no names will be used

Initial questions:

1. Why did you choose to attend the dinner event?
2. What was most meaningful to you about it?
3. Did anything change within you/your perspective or thought-process due to the event?
4. Would you say that this event “fed your soul?”
5. What would you have changed about the event?
6. What else do you want to say about the event?
7. What do you personally hunger for, in terms of what would feed your soul, that you wish you had more of an opportunity to explore?
8. Is there anything else that you want to share regarding meaningful engagement in the life of this congregation, or how you might envision shaping the future of the church as an anchor in your life and your spiritual journey?

Follow-up questions as discerned in the moment

Invited participant to ask questions of the researcher

## APPENDIX E-2 Post-event Interviews (6 total) – Summary of Responses

### 1. Why did you choose to attend the dinner event?

- Thought it would be a treat & a nice use of my time; healthy exercise for my social life
- Opportunity to meet people from the church in a non-church setting (this was important to me)
- Anticipating it would be fun
- Have wanted to participate in the church's "Dinner with Friends" program, but it hadn't worked out
- To get to know people our age at the church
- To go below superficial (like at coffee hour)
- We did "Dinner with Friends" which was enjoyable, and this sounded similar, but with our age group
- To get to know people
- Being new to the church, I wanted to connect with people in my age group
- We were invited, and it sounded interesting, even though we didn't know much about it; wanted to try something new
- Wanted to meet new people

### 2. What was most meaningful to you about it?

- People shared similar views that you didn't expect; unexpected topic of what a sacrament is; people talking about what fills their souls; I had more fun than I expected
- People came tired, but then perked up; it became lively
- Connecting with people, having the conversations
- Having set questions were good – it was not too structured
- Realizing what you have in common
- Good to not be with my spouse at the same table
- Talking to men at my table was a good experience (I don't have many conversations with men other than my husband)
- To be able to commiserate or get an idea about our life stage
- Solidified that these people, this church family, are "my people"
- It was more comfortable to me the second time; overall, it made me comforted to hear that others felt the same way I did (politically, about the environment, and things like that)
- Making connections, to know that others struggle with the same things
- Relaxed setting
- Meeting new people in a great environment (great opportunity)
- Seeing people that we know only on a Sunday morning basis; connecting with existing friends
- The intentional focus of creating a peer group
- The generosity of those involved in planning and implementing it was impressive
- The setting was beautiful

- The focused discussion was unique

### 3. Did anything change within you/your perspective or thought-process due to the event?

- Surprised at getting to know these cool people that in other settings I might not have gotten into conversations with (would've held back)
- It humanizes everybody (people opening up about their struggles)
- It's comforting to hear different perspectives; every time someone talked, I was open to their perspective, and then I could see how it aligned with my own
- All questions began with worldly responses and led back to our kids eventually
- "What keeps you up at night?" was the most provocative
- Hearing someone describe how she handles diversity of religious views in the public sphere was meaningful, & how she talks to her kids about it
- Validation – of not being the only one struggling with the concept of time, and how to find peaceful time; someone made the suggestion of time in the car during a commute – "just turn everything off"
- I was mostly a listener, and enjoyed hearing others
- There are people dealing with the same issues as me; found commonalities
- Hearing other people's personal stories was meaningful (even though some were at slightly different stages of their lives/their parenting)
- There was continual affirmation: You're not in this alone

### 4. Would you say that this event "fed your soul?"

- Yes
- Yes
- Yes
- 100%
- Yes
- Yes, 100% - it was helpful and constructive

### 5. What would you have changed about the event?

- Maybe two table leaders at each table – our table leader might have benefited from a "plant"
- Maybe it could be even more focused by age, and even by people who have kids/people who don't; possibly divide tables by gender; let people know at appetizer time who they'll be sitting with; appetizer time was "tough" – not sure people really engaged in the question; people might not have really "got it" (the process) with the first round of questions (appetizer time); that particular appetizer (ceviche) was difficult to eat while socializing; maybe more intentional introductions during that time
- Not much could be improved upon
- Yay for wine & ceviche! (a great surprise)
- More mingling time in the beginning
- A ten minute warning before the end (so it doesn't feel like it ends abruptly)

- No suggestions – it was great
- Nothing
- It might be hard for formal dinners to continue logistically going forward (but I loved it) – Is it sustainable?
- Our table could have continued talking longer

6. What else do you want to say about the event?

- The conversations at my table were spiritual, but not really speaking about Biblical topics (which was okay)
- Definitely like questions that were already done and liked having seating arrangements pre-set because you're not trying to think of ways to start a conversation with someone you don't know
- I enjoyed it so much; my spouse and I talked about it for days afterward
- We do a lot at church, but this was “just for us”
- It brought everyone there a little closer together; furthered or started connections
- Space away from home without worrying about the kids (it was better than having a babysitter because we didn't have to come home and clean up, or take a babysitter home)
- We were able to stay relaxed during the evening
- Being up thinking so much at night – it was good to hear that others have night worries too
- It was calming and comforting to know that others have worries (it's an important connection to have – makes you feel less isolated – even though it might sound like a negative)
- Questions were not given too much time to where it became awkward
- Being with that age group – the demands and expectations on our time – was important
- No prep was key
- Our kids had a blast, which made it even better; no “after-guilt” that sometimes happens with a sitter
- Would love to do another event like this
- Would definitely go again
- Childcare was critical
- Unexpected positive outcome is that the kids formed friendships while at the church childcare
- Would like to focus on the intersection of how do you talk with your kids about a just and loving world (to share ideas between parents)
- It's great to learn from other people about what feeds their souls
- It was engaging, the integration of the spiritual with the everyday
- Getting to meet different people – as a single person, I appreciated couples being seated apart from each other
- We were all a little bit “off kilter” which actually helped
- I appreciated it that couples were put at different tables from each other
- People were receptive to the peer group opportunity, and I hope for more regular events like this, though the age span might be too broad

7. What do you personally hunger for, in terms of what would feed your soul, that you wish you had more of an opportunity to explore?

- Good to start broad and then dig more
- Time – struggles – how do you view time and how do you wish you could spend it – how do you come to terms with time, regrets, hopes
- How to have harmony in your life
- Fear – how is it manifested in your life; what are your strategies for handling fear
- Direction in life
- Relationships
- I want to make more connections with each other, without the pressure to be there all the time
- I'd like to address questions about faith and scripture
- Important to deepen friendships
- Volunteering; acts of service; putting into practice community connections; going out and being of service, especially as a family
- Good to talk about different life stages
- Am I doing enough?
- What are my vulnerabilities?
- Making sure you have time in your life to stay connected to people you care about
- What does being involved in the church look like at this stage of life
- How do you balance the need to be taken care of with the need to give back

8. Is there anything else that you want to share regarding meaningful engagement in the life of this congregation, or how you might envision shaping the future of the church as an anchor in your life and your spiritual journey?

- Looking for ways to easily access volunteering (through technology sign-ups, advance notice, etc.)
- The sermons in our church that are not afraid to touch the hard stuff are very meaningful – even being willing to say things that touch on our current political situation
- It is so important to connect on values with people who are right in front of you (not just on Facebook)
- Having hard conversations in a safe place is important
- Maybe an off-site book club (church isn't the only place you can be spiritual)
- We could have sub-sets of this age group within the same event, just seated at different tables
- Children's programming will be a priority for us moving forward
- Peer group fellowship & events are important
- Bible study and class opportunities are good
- We really hope this type of group can take shape for the future as a regular part of church life; and maybe hope for a more regular (even weekly) spin off of a smaller group
- Childcare is key