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LIVING INTO GOD’S PRIESTHOOD:
BUILDING AND DEVELOPING TRUST
IN A TRANSFORMING COMMUNITY

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ABSTRACT

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Living into God’s Priesthood: 
Building and Developing Trust 
in a Transforming Community

First Presbyterian is a congregation situated in a community in 
transition from small, rural town to an exurb of a growing 
metropolis. The congregation’s membership is growing and 
diversifying as people move into the community resulting in a 
growing, vibrant ministry, but is also creating mistrust between 
long-time and newer members as the church’s story changes. First 
Presbyterian is in need of developing trusting relationships in the 
midst of this transformation. The Church, whose life and ministry 
reflects the Trinitarian nature of God, finds its relational identity in 
its call as God’s royal priesthood. This thesis article proposes that 
in using an intervention framework for continuously changing 
systems (congregations), church leaders can work to temporarily 
freeze their church ministry focus, reorient their life together in 
their priestly identity through worship, education, and the use of 
structured storytelling (Appreciative Inquiry), and unfreeze it again 
as a means to build and develop trust.
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INTRODUCTION

The “priesthood of all believers” is a phrase commonly used by protestant churches all across the world today. Its usage often denotes an understanding that the people of God are universally called and chosen to share in the “priestly” role of ministry.\(^1\) However, the importance of the theology has “ebbed and flowed” since the time of the Reformation.\(^2\) Today while the doctrine is given an occasional nod of approval, it is often more theoretical posturing rather than functional theology. Reclaiming our priestly identity presents an opportunity to understand the nature of our relationships in congregational life and the importance of building and developing trust. The priesthood of all believers characterizes not only the status and the interconnectedness of God’s people, but also the function of the Body of Christ as it relates to itself and to the world. In a fast-changing world in which the church often struggles to understand its identity, it is in our collective priestly call that we find not only reassurance of being chosen and set apart by God, but also the nature of our life and ministry together.

First Presbyterian Church (FPC) is located in a community in the early stages of transition from a small, rural town to an exurb of the metropolis of Des Moines. The congregation’s membership has grown and diversified as new people have moved into the community. In a congregation where historically everyone knew one another, members are now confronted with new people, new ideas, and different understandings of belonging in the community. The resulting transformation, while creating a growing, vibrant ministry, has also created less intimacy and a sense of mistrust between long-time and newer members.


First Presbyterian Church faces the adaptive challenge of building and developing trusting relationships in the midst of a rapidly diversifying community. Adaptive challenges, to be differentiated from technical problems which have known solutions, require learning by all stakeholders to both identify and to find solutions to a pressing challenge.\(^3\) Ronald Heifetz says that adaptive challenges can only be “addressed through changes in people’s priorities, beliefs, habits and loyalties.”\(^4\) Using an intervention framework to reorient continuously changing organizations outlined by Karl E. Weick and Robert E. Quinn, we faithfully worked to temporarily pause our “system” to refocus our ministry efforts in worship, education, and fellowship in order to rediscover our communal priestly identity.\(^5\) By “system” I refer to the church’s current ministry focus. Continuing this reorientation we then used an adaptation of the “initiating” and “inquiring” stages of Appreciative Inquiry to begin practicing our priestly functions: listening (priestly listening) to one another, sharing the most life-giving stories from our life narratives (priestly storytelling); sharing meals with one another, echoing the ancient pattern at the heart of the Christian life to be blessed, broken, and given (priestly meal-sharing); and giving ourselves to be in relationship with and for one another (priestly self-giving).

This thesis is a reflection of the small steps one congregation takes to build and develop trusting relationships through a concerted effort in rediscovering and living into its communal priestly identity.

**A PRIESTLY VISION**

The need for intervention at FPC has arisen with the transformation of the surrounding

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community. Urbanization from neighboring Des Moines has been expanding toward the small, agrarian community of Dallas Center for many years. People are moving to the exurbs with the vision of living a simpler, small town life. Paradoxically, the influx of new residents has inherently changed the communities and the organizations within them. Due in part to this growth and increased urbanization, FPC continues to see an influx of new church members whose life stories reshape the narrative of the congregation. Coupled with the loss of long-time members, the rapid membership transformation has created widespread, systemic anxiety within the congregation that, while not explicit, serves to hinder the development of trusting relationships between long-time and new members. The narrative that had once shaped the congregation and its history for so many generations is transforming.

As this membership transformation has progressed, the sense of separateness has only increased. We need an intentional form of intervention. We need a new theological frame with which we can begin fashioning a story together. We need space and time for rediscovering our priestly identity, for priestly listening, and for sharing our life narratives as a means to build and develop trusting relationships.

The perichoretic dance that we share in as a royal priesthood — our mutual, mediated indwelling of one another through the Holy Spirit — is modeled after the relational nature of God in the three persons of the Trinity. Our call as a priesthood is not rooted in an autonomous individuality, but is instead in our collective mediated indwelling of one another through the Holy Spirit. The priesthood of all believers offers an identity for the church that is inherently

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communal. The phrase is an adaptation of 1 Peter 2:5, in which the church is identified as a “body” with interconnected parts (1 Cor. 12), and a “spiritual house” in which Christ (“the cornerstone”) and the people of God (“the living stones”) are built up together (1 Peter 2:5). The shape and strength of the relational nature of the priesthood is founded upon trust in God and trust between brothers and sisters in Christ.

We see a vision of the relational nature of the priesthood in the second chapter of Acts following Pentecost (Acts 2:42-47). The life of the community is marked by the trust that people have toward God and one another, reflected in their praise of God, their acts of goodness toward everyone, and in their devotion to each other. They meet, practice self-giving, pray, worship, and share meals together. It is within this vision that we see how the functions of the priesthood build and develop trust within the community.

In the scriptural phrase, “God’s royal priesthood” (1 Peter 2:5), Martin Luther saw a new understand of ecclesiology. Luther reminded all Christians that as siblings of Christ they have the “power and command” to “preach, to drawn near to God, pray for one another, and offer themselves as a sacrifice to God.”

The priesthood of all believers characterizes not only the status and the interconnectedness of God’s people, but also the function of the Body of Christ as it relates to itself and to the world. In these priestly functions we not only share Christ with the world, but we grow in trusting relationship together: “proclaiming the word to each other” (priestly storytelling), “interceding with God on behalf of each other” (priestly listening), and “offering sacrifices on behalf of each other” (priestly giving).

8 Nagel, “Luther and the Priesthood of All Believers,” 278-283.
Priestly storytelling proclaims God’s “wonderful acts” from our own life narratives with others (1 Peter 2:9). The Apostle Paul reminds us that we all have something to share: “When you meet together, each one has a psalm, a teaching, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. All these things must be done to build up the church” (1 Cor. 14:26). Sharing our stories — which include both the acts of gathering together and telling stories from our life narratives — puts into conversation how God is at work in each of our lives, helps the church develop meaning together, and shapes community as members enter into each other’s stories.

We 

priestly listen 

when we listen to each others’ narratives and then intercede with God on behalf of one another. This priestly function is a way of listening to one another “as a form of mutual support, care, and edification.”

In his book, Practical Theology, Richard Osmer compares priestly listening to intercessory prayer. He notes, “to pray on [another’s] behalf, one must enter into their lives to the point that one begins to feel what they feel, yet without losing one’s own identity.”

We practice priestly self-giving when we present our whole selves as a “living sacrifice to God” (Rom. 12:1) by loving God and loving our neighbors as ourselves. Developing trust in community requires a self-giving (sacrificial love) that models the self-giving of Christ. Gathering together for the sake of others is in and of itself an act of self-giving. It presupposes that the ‘other’ is worth the risk, is worth the time, and is worth the investment.

At the heart of communal life in both the Old and New Testaments are shared meals: the Passover Feast and the Lord’s Supper. Meal-sharing has been a mark of the community of God’s

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10 Osmer, Practical Theology, 459-463.
11 Ibid., 455-456.
people throughout its long history. In gathering around the table for a shared meal, we not only gather to fulfill a basic human need, we also participate in the pattern at the heart of the Christian message — “blessed, broken, and given.” At the table, we have the opportunity to practice our priestly functions.

Building and developing trusting relationships within the community of faith is interconnected with our priestly identity and the carrying out of our priestly functions with and for one another. Utilizing an intervention framework that explores and reorients congregational life and ministry around the church’s priestly identity presents an opportunity to build and develop trusting relationships even in the midst of a continuously changing congregation.

A PRIESTLY OPPORTUNITY

FPC is one such church. In recent years, one would often hear members say:

“Who is that couple over there with the cute kids? They look familiar.”
“Who was the liturgist today? Was she a member? Wow, she had a voice!”
“These newer members don’t know the history of the church and how we do things.”

The small, rural, Iowa congregation in Dallas Center has undergone a rapid transformation in its membership. FPC has steadily grown over the seven years I have served as pastor. The urban sprawl from the neighboring metropolis of Des Moines has moved toward Dallas Center. Whereas Dallas Center was once an isolated, agrarian community, fewer than ten miles of farmland to the west and southwest now separate the small town from the big city. Dallas Center has become an exurb.

Dallas County (in which Dallas Center is located) is estimated to have grown in

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population from the year 2010 to 2015 by 21.2%, making it one of the fastest growing counties in the nation.\textsuperscript{13} While this population growth has largely been concentrated in other cities within the county, Dallas Center has seen two new housing developments break ground in the last five years. The farmland to the south of the church has also been purchased at twice the going price - not for the purpose of continued cultivation, but for future development. Growth is destined to continue.

As the community has grown, so, too, has FPC. The church has welcomed the growth with open arms even though the accompanying growing pains arise without warning, are difficult to diagnose, and even harder for which to find remedies. FPC is moving closer and closer to an active membership of one hundred fifty.\textsuperscript{14} In his book, \textit{The Hidden Lives of Congregations}, Israel Galindo discusses this membership number as being a “tipping point” where congregations often plateau in growth.\textsuperscript{15} Malcolm Gladwell refers to the work of the evolutionary anthropologist Robin Dunbar to explore the significance of what Dunbar calls the “rule of one hundred fifty.” This rule states that the maximum number of social relationships that a person can biologically have is limited, approximately, to this number.\textsuperscript{16}

Using Galindo’s church size terminology, FPC has become a congregation teetering on the line between a “shepherding-size” congregation and “programmed-sized” congregation as it

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item \textsuperscript{14} The phrase “active membership” refers to the number of members that participate in worship and other church functions, activities, and events at least twice per month. While our membership role for the congregation is officially 186, this does not reflect the number of people participating with any regularity in the church’s many ministries.
\item \textsuperscript{15} Israel Galindo, \textit{The Hidden Lives of Congregations: Discerning Church Dynamics} (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004), 161 of 3965 (Kindle edition).
\item \textsuperscript{16} Malcolm Gladwell, \textit{The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference} (Boston: Little, Brown, 2000), 64-65.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
nears the one hundred and fifty mark.\textsuperscript{17} The significance of this membership size has to do with the systemic anxiety that not being able to \textit{know} everyone creates, particularly in a congregation whose cultural ethos has been characterized as a close of a family. Many in the congregation seek the intimacy they once had and yet the congregation is quickly reaching a point where that is impossible.

At the same time FPC has been experiencing growth, it has also been affected by great loss. Over the last few years, the congregation has said “goodbye” to eighteen beloved, long-time members. While the membership record boasts an increase of thirty members in seven years, there have been closer to fifty new faces in the community. While some of these newer members have family connections in the church, many of them do not. In a congregation that officially has one hundred eighty-six members, fifty new faces is a dramatic change.\textsuperscript{18} It is not just the physical loss of members but the loss associated with change that has exacerbated the feelings of anxiety.\textsuperscript{19}

The makeup of the membership has shifted in many ways as well. Many younger and middle age congregants in the church are members of families with two working adults in the household, with both commuting into the city for work. Whereas fifty years ago, most members of FPC had lived in the city of Dallas Center, it now has more than 30\% who commute to church from surrounding communities.\textsuperscript{20} With increased urbanization newer members participate more in activities, events, and clubs accessible to them and to their children both inside and outside of

\textsuperscript{17} Galindo, \textit{The Hidden Lives of Congregations}, 1493 of 3965.
\textsuperscript{18} First Presbyterian Church, \textit{First Presbyterian Church Statistical Reports}, 2010-2016. These fifty new members included youth who had completed confirmation as well.
\textsuperscript{19} Heifetz, \textit{The Practice of Adaptive Leadership}, 22 of 298.
\textsuperscript{20} The First Presbyterian Church, \textit{Church Membership Directory} (Dallas Center, IA: First Presbyterian Church, 2016).
the local community. No longer is the church one of the leading places where youth and adults find meaningful relationships and activities of which to be a part.

The newer members at FPC are also different from the long-time members in that they are generally from younger generations. They approach the church through a postmodern lens, which means they are cautious of institutional investment and prefer to keep their options open rather than make solid commitments. They often do not come from a Presbyterian church background, and many are unfamiliar with Presbyterian theology and polity, and hold little loyalty along denominational lines. They participate in worship and other church activities regularly but less frequently, averaging closer to once every other week. And they find a sense of belonging not in the specific locality of Dallas Center, but in a myriad of other social circles in which they participate.

These differences create an unspoken tension in the congregation between long-time members and newer members. This tension surfaces periodically when values and priorities between the two groups clash. For example, in a church town hall meeting, a long-time member opened a prepared monologue by stating, “I feel like I represent a marginalized, long-time member group in this discussion.” It was one of the first times the tension between newer members and long-time members had been voiced aloud in the community, and one of the first opportunities the church had to explicitly see and name this anxiety in our midst.

In her book, *A Particular Place*, Nancy Eiesland observes the organizational ecology of churches located in a transitioning exurb. She notes how congregations are affected by and respond to the population inflow. Congregants who once thought they knew their place in their churches all of a sudden have that familiar place called into question. Congregations use a wide
range of strategies to address the transformation taking place around them. Many realize that as
time goes by, the need to continually adapt their strategies is a necessity as their communal
narratives shift and change. Those that were either unwilling or unable to address the
continuously changing environment found themselves closing their doors.21

First Presbyterian Church, too, is wrestling with this type of change that has created
systemic anxiety but also created renewed energy in the life and ministry of the church. The
rejuvenation has led to growing and expanding ministries in directions both well-known and
brand new. Whereas the children’s Sunday School program had not existed six years ago, the
church now has four children’s classes on Sunday morning. Whereas adult education
opportunities had ceased, the church now has an adult education Bible study on Sunday
mornings. Whereas the youth program had ceased to have meetings, now two groups and almost
twenty youth participate regularly. The Wednesday evening fellowship and education program
(WOW) now host twenty-five to forty children and bring in more than twenty adult volunteers
weekly. We have created a volunteer praise music team, hosted a mobile food pantry, created an
annual community service auction, and have committed to continue a five-year partnership with
a community of subsistence farmers in El Salvador.

With such a rapid transformation in church membership — both in size and in make-up
— and with such dramatic growth and expansion in ministry activities, FPC has become a
community of faith running full speed ahead, yet it does not quite know who it is anymore.
Members do not know each other as they once did. In a congregation that found its identity in the
past by being a “family church,” where intimacy was of high value, tension has arisen as that

closeness has diminished.\textsuperscript{22} Members know less about each other’s stories, values, and history. They spend less time together in part because of less frequent participation by newer members in worship coupled with less involvement by long time members in the growing and expanding ministry activities of the church outside of worship.

As the sense of separation in the congregation increases, the level of trust members have in one another decreases. While an observer from the outside looking in might see FPC as a vibrant, growing congregation, it is also a congregation that is struggling to get to know one another. And so we begin a journey learning about and living into our priestly identity with the hope of building and developing trusting relationships.

\textbf{A PRIESTLY STATUS & FUNCTION}

While the priesthood of all believers is not a product of the Reformation but of scripture, it was the great Reformer, Martin Luther, who sought to reveal to lay people their priestly identity in Christ after centuries of neglect by the Catholic Church. For Luther, access to God was not reserved for one group of people over another, nor should some within the Church be granted special privileges over others.\textsuperscript{23} Luther writes, “For all Christians whatsoever really and truly belong to the religious class, and there is no difference among them except insofar as they do different work.”\textsuperscript{24} This shared status in God’s priesthood can be seen in the Apostle Peter’s first letter to the churches in Asia Minor, where he proclaims that the priesthood envelops all

\textsuperscript{22} Galindo, \textit{The Hidden Lives of Congregations}, 83 of 3965.

\textsuperscript{23} Lehmann T. Helmut, \textit{To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation, in Three Treatises} (Philadelphia, PA:Fortress Press, 1970), 12-15. Luther writes, “ … there is no true, basic difference between laymen and priests, princes and bishops, between religious and secular, except for the state of office and work, but not for the sake of status. They are all of the spiritual estate, all are truly priests, bishops, and popes.”

believers.\(^{25}\) Just as God instructed Moses to proclaim to the Israelites standing at the foot of Mount Sinai following their exodus from Egypt, “You will be a kingdom of priests for me and a holy nation” (Exodus 19:6), so now Peter reveals to the non-Jews their shared status in God’s priesthood (1 Peter 2:4-5).

It is important to note that although for Luther and many other reformers, all Christians share equal status in the priesthood, a Christian cannot carry out the priestly function for him or herself.\(^{26}\) There is no mention of an individual priest (apart from Christ) in the New Testament. Even as “every Christian acts as a representative of Christ, and therefore serves in a priestly function,” the priesthood only exists as a corporate Body.\(^{27}\) One cannot be a priest to and for oneself.

In a Trinitarian ecclesiology, we can begin to understand the inherent relational nature of the priesthood. German theologian, Jurgen Moltmann, in his “social doctrine of the Trinity,” states that the persons of the Trinity always exist “perichoretically,” meaning that the persons of the Trinity, while each a distinct person, always exist in relationship with one another.\(^{28}\)

The Orthodox theologian John Zizioulas goes one step further. He draws on the first of the Johannine epistles where the author makes the profession that “God is love” (John 4:16). Zizioulas sees this as an “ontological statement rather than a secondary quality” that reveals that God “subsists” as Trinity.\(^{29}\) Therefore the Trinity reveals that God not only exists in relationship with Godself, but that God is relationship.


\(^{27}\) Ibid., 67.

\(^{28}\) Ibid., 51.

\(^{29}\) Ibid., 53.
For both Moltmann and Zizioulas, the Triune relationship of God’s three persons reveals a relational way of being that does not diminish each individual person of the Trinity, but reveals a “co-indwelling,” and a “mutual-interpenetration” of the three persons.\(^{30}\) The Church’s identity as a priesthood, understood through a Trinitarian ecclesiology, is inherently communal. It is an interconnected web of relationships, stories, and shared lives. This mutual indwelling, while not having the same interconnectedness as that of the persons of Trinity, is made possible through the Holy Spirit who resides in each of us individually and together. Protestant theologian, Miroslav Volf proposes that when we have personal encounters with others, “that which the other person is flows consciously and unconsciously into that which I am.”\(^{31}\) For Volf, “in this mutual giving and receiving, we give to others not only something, but also a piece of ourselves….and from others we take not only something, but also a piece of them.”\(^{32}\) In this mediated indwelling of one another through the Holy Spirit the priesthood is continually shaped as God’s story and our life narratives co-mingle and collectively author a unique story together.

This perichoretic storying, as modeled in the persons of the Trinity, is done in trusting relationship. Our priestly identity provides the Church much more than a democratization of members within the Body, but also reveals to the Body a way of being in trusting relationship with God and with one another. It is in the priestly functions (what the priesthood does) that unveils the shape of our mutual indwelling of one another.

Both the Apostles Paul and Peter offer us images to help us understand the nature of this indwelling with one another. Paul’s metaphor for the Church as a “body” comprised of “many

\(^{32}\) Ibid.
parts” working together offers us an interconnected way of being that necessitates dependence on one another (1 Cor. 12). In a similar fashion Peter compares Christians as “living stones” being built up with Christ as the cornerstone, into a “spiritual house” (1 Peter 2:5). Only in the careful bonding together of the living stones with Jesus Christ as the cornerstone is the spiritual house made into a place where “spiritual sacrifice” and “priestly service” can be offered (1 Peter 2:5).  

Scholar J. Ramsey Michaels asserts that in Peter’s description of both the status and the function of God’s people as a priesthood, there is a mutuality that excludes a hierarchy and that all people are called to perform two priestly functions: to “offer spiritual sacrifices and proclaim the mighty acts of God.” Martin Luther also saw the priesthood sharing these functions but included one other to his list: “interceding with God on behalf of each other.”

In these three functions of the priesthood—proclaiming the word to each other, interceding with God on behalf of each other, and offering sacrifices on behalf of each other—Luther reveals clues to the relational nature of the priesthood. In “interceding on behalf of each other,” a call is implied to listen to each other in such a way that we can intercede with God on behalf of each other — a “priestly listening.” In “proclaiming the word to each other” a call is implied to share, teach, proclaim, and tell the story of God with each other — a “priestly storytelling.” In “offering sacrifices on behalf of each other,” a call is implied to give of ourselves to and for each other, just as Christ has given freely to us — a “priestly self-giving.”

**PRIESTLY SELF-GIVING**

In these priestly functions, the community builds and develops trust necessary for

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33 Hubbard and Barker, *Word Biblical Commentary*, vol. 49, 100.
35 Ibid., 18.
communal life. The dictionary defines trust as “assured reliance on the character, ability, strength, or truth of someone or something.”\(^\text{36}\) In their article, “Generating Trust in Congregations,” Seymour, Welch, Gregg, and Collett make the claim that “the vitality and survival of congregations may ultimately depend on the trust congregants place in each other.”\(^\text{37}\)

Kenwyn K. Smith and David N. Berg help us understand why trust is so important to group life when they note that trust is about creating safety out of fear.\(^\text{38}\) When people feel safe, they are psychologically able to overcome the instinctual ‘fight or flight’ response associated with fear. When people in congregations feel safe with one another, it frees them to listen to and invest in one another, to relate their lives to each other, and to open themselves to being changed by each other as they find value within the group. When people feel safe, they are open to hearing not just positive feedback from the group, but also the negative feedback that is necessary for the group’s survival.\(^\text{39}\)

However, trust is difficult to create because it is paradoxical in nature. In order to develop trust, trust must already exist. In order for one to share and disclose, one already has to feel a level of safety in doing so.\(^\text{40}\) Therefore, generating trust is not a straightforward technical process. It requires that “someone in the group be willing to expose his or her weak, fearful, and ugly sides.” It is risky business that requires making oneself vulnerable to others.\(^\text{41}\)

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\(^\text{40}\) Ibid.

\(^\text{41}\) Ibid.
While there are a small number of theories that suggest that the ability to trust is inborn or developed very early in life, social learning theory claims that trust is learned through interaction with others. The affect theory of social exchange describes trust as “repeated, productive social interactions [that] produce positive emotions” that “work to reinforce” continued interaction and “enhance perceptions of network cohesion.” The implications of the affect theory of social exchange on congregations suggest that 1) the longer a person is involved in a congregation the more active he or she might be; 2) the closer a member is to a congregational leader, the more the member will interact with others in the congregation in positive, productive, satisfying ways; 3) the more close friendships a member has in a congregation, the more likely the member is to trust other congregants; and 4) the more frequently a member interacts with congregation members in his or her friendship network, the more likely the member is to trust congregants.

Linda Molm, in her work on the theory of reciprocity, echoes Smith and Berg’s insinuation that trust requires someone willing to risk. Going one step further from the affect theory of social exchange, Molm argues that interaction is not enough to develop trust. It is the risk that facilitates trust. She argues that reciprocal exchanges - “unilateral acts of giving without promise of repayment” - generate trust based not solely on cognitive judgment but on affect. A person proves his/her respect and trust through the giving or disclosing of himself or herself.

This act of self-giving with no expectation of reward echoes the gift of grace we have been given in Jesus Christ. The theory of reciprocity, coupled with the affect theory of social exchange.

42 Seymour et al., “Generating Trust in Congregations,” 130-144.
43 Ibid.
exchange, offers the Church a way to think about how it too might develop trusting relationships within its body as members take the risk to freely give to and for one other; in other words, as they practice a priestly self-giving.

**PRIESTLY LISTENING**

This priestly self-giving requires a particular kind of listening. Each person in the priesthood is called to act in a priestly way by “praying for each other (Eph. 6:18), confessing their sins to one another (James 5:16), and bearing one another's burdens (Gal. 6:2).” The mutual responsibility each person has for one another requires what Richard Osmer calls “priestly listening” - an “activity of the entire Christian community…in which people listen to one another as a form of mutual support, care, and edification.” Osmer compares priestly listening to intercessory prayer. He notes, “to pray on [another’s] behalf, one must enter into their lives to the point that one begins to feel what they feel, yet without losing one's identity.” Priestly listening — a type of listening that values another person, their history, and their worth in the Body of Christ — is done not as a means to manipulate or to collude, but with the intention to love and serve another.

Whereas this priestly listening in personal relationships was a more organic practice in the past at FPC, it is far less common as the community continues to change. Congregant’s social circles are many and varied extending beyond the local community.

It is important to note that priestly listening is not just a practice important to personal encounters. It is also a way to listen to the community and to the world around us. In *A

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**Footnotes:**

45 Osmer, *Practical Theology*, 459-463.
46 Ibid.
47 Ibid., 455-456.
**Particular Place**, Nancy Eiseland examines the changing organizational ecology of churches located in a transforming exurb similar to Dallas Center. She explores how the creation of “more and different organizations in the environment expanded choices about how individual and families organized their lives through routines of belonging.”48 With more choices as to where one spends his or her time, where one shops, where one worships, and in which activities children participate in, the once traditional pattern of belonging centered on the local community comes into conflict with this new “routine of belonging” that centers on “choice” in a much broader social context.49

Eiseland observes many ways that congregations approach this challenge. One congregation, Hinton Memorial UMC, created space to focus on understanding its historical church story, and began creating specific programming that preserved the best of who they were while also fashioning a new story together.50 Priestly listening amongst members to uncover the best parts of their church story was key. It helped to develop trust amongst the different subcultures in the congregation by allowing space for communal story-sharing.

What was necessary for Hinton Memorial was the creation of an opportunity to identify their adaptive challenge, listen to one another in a priestly way, reorient their life together, and move forward again. Karl E. Weick and Robert R. Quinn discuss this type of intervention in their article on organizational change theory. They describe how, in order to reframe a continuously changing system, an organization must periodically “freeze things” so as to do “balcony” work. (Ronald Heifetz describes “balcony” work as “taking a position sufficiently distant from day-to-

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49 Ibid., 135-136.
50 Ibid., 61-66.
day operations and worry in order to see the larger picture”). Then an organization must rebalance the system through reinterpretation and reorientation in order to reduce blocks. Finally the system is unfrozen to “resume improvisation…and learning in ways that are more mindful.” Periodically freezing the system (to understand what is going on), rebalancing and reorienting the system (to understand why things are going on and reframing the system), and unfreezing the system again (to live into the “what’s next”) is a helpful way to structure intervention in a continuously changing environment. As will be seen, FPC utilizes this framework to develop a process of intervention.

Priestly listening is not only something we do with and for each other individually but also collectively as we tune in to what is happening around us. Priestly listening is a part of the mutual, mediated indwelling in which we participate with each other through the Holy Spirit. The practice presumes love and respect for one another as we enter into each other’s stories.

PRIESTLY STORYTELLING

The Apostle Peter reminds us that one of our priestly functions is to “speak of the wonderful acts” of God (1 Peter 2:9). We are called to share stories not only of God’s wonderful acts in Scripture, but also of God’s wonderful acts in our personal and communal lives as the Holy Spirit works within and around us. It is our priestly call to share these stories where God “called [us] out of darkness into [God’s] amazing light” (1 Peter 10) not only outside the church as a means to evangelize but also within the Church where our stories shape our lives individually and together.

52 Weick and Quinn, “Organizational Change and Development,” 366.
In *Mighty Stories, Dangerous Rituals*, Anderson and Foley say “We are all practitioners who fashion stories and rituals to make sense of our lives.”\(^{53}\) This is because human existence itself is in the form of an episodic narrative. Our histories, experiences, relationships, and interactions create the living narratives of our lives. Family therapists Joy Friedman and Gene Combs go so far as to conclude that our “life narrative” — the sum of the remembered events (stories) in our lives — is our life. In other words, “we are our stories.”\(^{54}\)

When we priestly give by sharing our lives together in community (gathering together), we begin to put our life narratives into conversation with one another. We begin to build connections through our priestly listening, sowing the seeds of trust. Through the act of telling our stories, our life narratives begin to teach, instruct, admonish, lift up, challenge, and cause others to reinterpret their own life narratives. In *Revelation and Story*, Sauter and Barton say that “stories can disclose for us the possibilities of being human. Stories can open doors. Stories can transform people.”\(^{55}\) Our stories, when shared, become interwoven and connect us together as we participate in the mediated indwelling of one another through the Holy Spirit.

Sharing our life narratives, both through gathering together and through storytelling, also connect us to God. “When the Day of Pentecost had come, they were all with one accord in one place. And suddenly there came a sound from heaven, as of a rushing wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting” (Acts 2:1-2). In sharing our stories, saturated with the presence of the Holy Spirit at work in our lives, we reveal God to one another. Anderson and


\(^{55}\) Gerhard Sauter and John Barton, *Revelation and Story: Narrative Theology and the Centrality of Story* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2000), 55.
Foley say it best when they write, “each of us has stories to tell that allow the divine narrative to unfold, and all human stories are potential windows to the story of God.”

Storytelling also provides a way for groups with competing values to develop trust. In *Building Cultures of Trust*, while primarily discussing how to build cultures of trust between different subcultures, Martin E. Marty lays out “possible attitudes” with which groups can approach others with competing values. The attitude he suggests as necessary for developing trust is that of “dialogue,” which, while not perfect, opens up the possibility of cultivating trust. While not explicit about storytelling, Marty’s notion of dialogue between different subcultures refers to a way of story-sharing and priestly listening that requires a mutual appreciation and valuing of each party. Dialogue is about a conversation which is the “meeting place” where differing ideas “converge” and people seek to enter into one another’s stories not with indifference or with enmity but with openness, care, and gratitude. When we give of ourselves in sharing our stories, we put them into dialogue with one another and create a safe “meeting place” where trust can develop.

A practice of story-sharing — both in the physical gathering together and in the telling of stories from our life narratives — is an opportunity to both be God’s royal priesthood and to be shaped and molded by God as a priesthood. Our stories connect us to God and each other.

**PRIESTLY MEAL SHARING**

A physical practice that connects our stories is a shared meal. We see this in Acts 2:

“The believers devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching, to the community, to their

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shared meals, and to their prayers...Every day, they met together in the temple and ate in their homes. They shared food with gladness and simplicity” (Acts 2:42,46).

Immediately following the Pentecost event, the author of Luke-Acts shares with the reader a vision of the Church in community sharing, among other things, daily meals (Acts 2:42-47). The author places a high importance on meal sharing as can be seen in his gospel account where “Jesus is either going to a meal, at a meal, or coming from a meal.” Just as “the Son of Man [came] eating and drinking” (Luke 5:33) so, too, his disciples followed suit.

Shared meals create an occasion for creating dialogue between life narratives. Carolyn Steel notes that “few acts are more expressive of companionship than the shared meal…Someone with whom we share food is likely to be our friend, or well on the way to becoming one.”

There is an intimacy at the table that invites the sharing and disclosing of oneself.

At the same time the table is also a place where we connect with God’s narrative. As theologian Christine Pohl observes, “A shared meal is the activity most closely tied to the reality of God’s kingdom, just as it is the most basic expression of hospitality.” Simon Carey Holt goes as far as to state in a 2008 sermon, “Our life at the table, no matter how mundane, is sacramental - a means through which we encounter the mystery of God.” When we gather together for a shared meal, we get a glimpse of the great banquet of the kingdom of God and we connect with God and one another.

Jesus used shared meals as a conduit for teaching about God’s grace, for sharing life

narratives, and for telling stories that connected his hearers to God’s story. It was during meals that Jesus welcomed sinners and tax collectors (Luke 5), called for his hearers to welcome the poor and the “other” at their tables (Luke 14), taught about the inclusiveness of the great banquet (Luke 14), and shared good news about a kingdom of God where disciples “may eat and drink at [Jesus’] table…” (Luke 22:29-30). Sharing meals as disciples of Jesus not only models the ministry of Jesus, but also is a practice that recreates over and over again the pattern at the heart of the Christian story and at the heart of the gospel: “blessed, broken, and given.”

At shared meals we remember God’s blessings, we break bread together as broken people finding connection and belonging, and we give of ourselves to be with and for one another just as we remember our being given to the world as the body of Christ.

**PRIESTLY PROCESS**

Whereas priestly storytelling, listening, and self-giving was a much more organic practice at FPC in the past, a more intentional process that provides time and space is necessary for an intervention. Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is a process that uses priestly storytelling and listening as a means for a congregation “to know, to communicate, to discern, and to imagine (concerning themselves, their past, and their future).”

It is a process that guides and reconstructs a congregation along the lines of its best stories. What is unique about AI’s approach is “its practitioners’ sense of community, both in how they conduct their inquiries and in how they relate to one another.” As we seek to build trusting relationships within our community, AI

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63 Jones, “The Dinner Table as a Place of Connection, Brokenness, and Blessing,” 10-13.
offers a uniquely beneficial approach to practice our priestly functions through a lens of gratitude and appreciation for one another.

A scripture that best sums up the heart of AI’s focused story-sharing and the reason for its unique communal sensitivity is the Apostle Paul’s encouragement to the church at Philippi:

“Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just…think about these things” (Phil. 4: 8). Gratitude is at the heart of AI’s story-sharing approach. This is because, as twentieth century Swiss theologian Karl Barth reminds us, grace and gratitude are linked together. Our response to grace is always gratitude. AI offers a process by which our story-sharing focuses on that for which we are grateful; stories that speak of “the wonderful acts of the one who called [us] out of darkness into his amazing light” (1 Peter 2:9).

PRIESTLY INTERVENTION: OBJECTIVES, STRATEGIES, AND IMPLEMENTATION

In order to begin to build and develop trusting relationships at First Presbyterian Church, we developed a process for rediscovering and living into our identity as God’s royal priesthood. In the first part of this process we endeavored to pause our current system, reorienting our life and ministry together around our priestly identity through a four-week worship and small group series (Appendix A). In the second part of the process, we utilized the priestly listening and storytelling nature of the first two steps of the Appreciative Inquiry process (“initiate” and “inquire”) as a means to begin to practice our priestly call together through self-giving, listening, storytelling, and meal-sharing (Appendix C).

Alongside other church leaders, I developed, organized, and implemented a Sunday morning worship series, as well as two weekly adult small group gatherings that met prior to

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67 Branson, Memories, Hopes, & Conversations, 1294.
worship and on Wednesday evenings. All three opportunities centered on exploring the church’s identity as God’s royal priesthood. Each worship service included a theme that focused on one or more of the priestly functions (Appendix B), a “story moment” in the liturgy in which a church member would share his/her testimony in relation to the daily theme, and fellowship with food immediately following.

The small group gatherings on Sunday mornings and Wednesday evenings were identical in format with one exception. The Wednesday evening gathering included a potluck meal whereas the Sunday morning gathering included a light snack just prior to worship.

The small group gatherings began with the facilitator (pastor) offering welcome and prayer, followed by instructions and establishing group norms. The goal was to help create a safe, open space that invited participation and promoted trust building. Utilizing the scripture passage from worship, we practiced an adapted form of Lectio Divina (Holy Reading). Two separate readers from the group would read the same scripture passage. The facilitator encouraged participants to listen for a word, phrase, or idea with which God gifted them. This gave each person an opportunity to encounter God through the mutual intermingling of God’s story and their own stories. We then spent the rest of our time together in conversation, putting our stories into dialogue while practicing our priestly listening. The conversation was designed to begin with open story sharing where participants listened to one another with little direction from the facilitator. Slowly, we used more guided questions which were fashioned around the theme.

The month in which we chose to engage the first part of the intervention saw higher numbers of worship participants. Each Sunday had a unique liturgical addition that celebrated the faithful service of ministry groups within the church. In the four worship services, we recognized
Sunday school leaders and participants, long-time members, the choir, graduating seniors, and the high school mission trip team. Adapting our original plan, we chose at least one person from each of these groups to be our worship storytellers for each Sunday. Each storyteller reflected on a question fashioned from the theme for each week (Appendix B).

Implementation of Part One began in partnership with the priesthood (utilizing existing leadership teams) and ample communication with the congregation. I worked closely with the church Session in the months prior to implementation, both in identifying the adaptive opportunity and in developing the intervention plan (Appendix D). I also worked with the Adult Education Team to create the small group opportunities.

Church-wide emails, robo-call invitations, social media invites, virtual and paper flyers, bulletin and worship announcements, and a monthly newsletter article were all extended, inviting people to participate in worship and in the small group gatherings. The deacons were invited to extend more personalized invitations, particularly to church members who were less active.

By the time the series had started, information had been out for more than a month and about three dozen members of the church had been involved in planning and organizing parts of the process. The endeavor began with high hopes, optimism, and a great deal of investment.

The first Sunday arrived. The adult education gathering purposely met in our narthex, close to the entry doors. Fourteen adults and three children gathered in the small group before worship. Many of the participants were long-time members with the exception of a couple who, while having joined the church three years prior, served on the Adult Education Planning team.

Following the two readings of the scripture text, initial conversation centered on

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questions about terminology. The foreign terms “priest” and “priesthood” created a stumbling block for the group, so our conversation hovered around exploring these terms. There was a lot of dependence on me as the facilitator to answer inquiries, but there seemed to be little hesitation in the group’s willingness to participate, share, and ask questions.

Worship participation was, as expected, high. During the same service we recognized our Sunday School leaders and participants and shared stories from the program year before moving into the Word. While I preached, I invited four children to join me on the stage to begin to build our visual for the series. Their task was to build a spiritual house using a pile of blocks as quietly as they could. Periodically, as I shared about the opportunity we had to rediscover our priestly identity as a congregation, I had the kids tear down the house and build a new one. In the weeks that followed I used the visual to talk about how God was continually building us up as “living stones” into a church or “spiritual house” where we could offer our priestly service to God. This served as a segue to introduce the themes about priestly functions that we would be exploring in the weeks to come. I discussed the mortar, the love of God and each other, that bonded the spiritual house in which we rest and participate together through our priestly service.

The first Wednesday evening gathering followed later that week, and we had fifteen participants join us for the potluck and adaptation of lectio divina in the church narthex. Almost all of the participants were long-time members, and only one family, other than my own, brought children. Four of the participants had participated in the previous Sunday morning session. After a welcome and opening prayer, we shared in a potluck meal together. This created a different dynamic from Sunday morning as pleasant, random conversation whittled away the allotted dining time with laughter, stories, and less formalized conversation. The shared thoughts and
conversation that followed our time of lectio divina was very similar to the Sunday prior, and all in the group participated with little hesitation.

The next week came and went. Before we knew it the series was over. Worship attendance had been a bit higher than normal. The Sunday morning and Wednesday small group gatherings attracted fewer people each week and participants were generally the same people over and over again, most of whom were long-time members or members from leadership teams who were involved in the organizing and planning process. Because of prior commitments, few of our session elders and deacons were able to participate in the small group gatherings. Newer members who generally participated in worship less frequently, largely did not participate in the small group gatherings, though many came to worship at least one Sunday. This trend was surprising. Wednesday evenings were specifically chosen because our Wednesday program - in which many of our newer members participated - had just ended for the program year, and the Wednesday gathering presented an easy opportunity to continue a routine for one more month.

Though the congregation spent a month together in worship and small groups exploring their priestly call and functions, infrequent participation by many members made it difficult to entirely freeze our system so as to reorient ourselves into this new identity. Most telling of this reality was the comment made by a church member one week after the series ended, “I loved the idea for this intervention plan, but if people are like me and only came to one event, they probably found it interesting but have no idea how being God’s priesthood builds relationships.”

The worship and small group opportunities alone, while providing a new theological lens through which to view our adaptive opportunity, fell short of reorienting our thinking and storying together. Part Two of the intervention was designed to put into practice what we had
explored in Part One. We had worked to lay the foundation and frame our house; now it was time for the chaotic, artistic work of the construction process which would give life to our schematic.

Part Two of the intervention began during the implementation of Part One. Because the Session would serve as the leadership team for the AI small group gatherings, I wished to lead them through the initiating stage of AI (Appendix E). This meeting was attended by the treasurer and only three of our nine elders. I led the group through AI questions borrowed from Appendix J of Mark Lau Branson’s book, *Memories, Hopes, & Conversations.* These questions were already crafted with a focus on relationships. The intent of the gathering was to practice AI together, to model for the session how to lead groups through the process, while also taking time to allow them to ask questions, establish what our group norms might be for our future gatherings, and begin to modify the AI questions as a team. While the meeting was sparsely attended, it was also fruitful in adapting the questions to better suit a small group setting (Appendix F).

Originally our adaptation of the AI interviews was going to take place in six to ten small group gatherings throughout the summer immediately following Part One of the intervention. The gatherings would take place in varying locations, days, and times. A facilitator would guide the small groups through AI questions for a focused time of story-sharing while a note-taker would collect these stories to later be sifted through for recurring themes. However the overarching goal for these gatherings would be to encourage relationship building through participation (self-giving), story-sharing, and listening by participants. Sharing a meal together would also be a part of each gathering.

As Part One of the intervention was coming to a close and summer was fast approaching, the Session and I, after much deliberation, decided to postpone Part Two of the intervention until after summer when attendance in church would increase. Instead of carrying on our theme immediately as originally intended, the summer became an interruption in the process and the system we had partially frozen was allowed to thaw before we were ready to live into our newly fashioned reality.

In midsummer, I initiated an email conversation with the church session for the purpose of establishing a timeline for Part Two of our strategy. Two realities set in immediately. First, energy and investment for this process had diminished as reflected in Session responses. Having had months off and now having the church program year looming on the horizon, the original enthusiasm had lessened and the intervention had become another item on lengthy ‘to do’ lists.

Exacerbating this loss of energy was the second reality that had set in. FPC had been in a process of exploring an expansion of our church building. For more than two years, FPC had been discerning, planning, working with an architect, and listening to God for direction. All of that hard work now came to a crossroads and a decision was going to have to be made if we were going to move forward. September became, at the last minute and by necessity, a month for priestly listening and story-sharing in a more concentrated and focused form of dialogue in relation to the proposed building expansion. The congregation would engage in two town hall meetings to discern together God’s direction for this building expansion. Because this project had members strongly opinionated both for and against its implementation, this definitive timeline exacerbated tension and anxiety in the church. The building project now shifted to the top of the session’s “to do” list and overshadowed other ministry endeavors.
The Session found itself busy with the usual ministry work associated with a new program year, but was also confronted with this unexpected challenge. Because the divisiveness of this building expansion conversation had spawned from the very adaptive challenge we had been working to address, I pitched a radical idea that was greeted initially with reservation and resistance. Rather than push off our intervention plan to late October, I suggested that we use the month of August to engage in our AI gatherings. The format would have to change because there was so little time to organize and promote, but utilizing August presented an opportunity to “get to know one another” through the practice of our priestly functions, not in a divisive way, but in the heart of gratitude for one another. Since the building expansion conversation was divided, finding time for members to gather together to listen to one another’s stories was a wonderful opportunity to prepare for the building expansion dialogue ahead.

The Session and I worked to adapt our original strategy for Part Two of the intervention. Now the AI small group gatherings would meet immediately following worship on the Sundays in August. To encourage participation, we shortened three of our worship services to thirty minutes and had three small groups meet simultaneously for an hour following worship. The gatherings themselves became almost an extension of worship. On the fourth Sunday, because of a church conflict, we had one small group gathering one hour prior to worship.

On the Sundays in August, I again preached through the hermeneutic of being the royal priesthood together, reemphasizing and expanding on what we had explored in Part One (Appendix G).

It became apparent when working to recruit Session elders as facilitators and note-takers that we would not be able to fill all of the leadership roles in our new intervention model. I
invited others from the congregation to help who had gifts for facilitating groups. All five of the invitees accepted the roles gladly, but because they came into the process late, each received only minimal instruction regarding facilitating AI in small groups. The last minute recruiting, while utilizing the gifts of others in God’s priesthood, also led to a breakdown in record keeping and the quality of the note-taking at the gatherings.

To promote the small group gatherings, in addition to using previous communication methods from Part One of the intervention, I created a YouTube video invitation that was posted on the church website and sent to the congregation via email.\textsuperscript{70} We also sent copies of the AI questions out to the congregation in advance and printed them in the bulletins for each Sunday.

The first Sunday for the AI gatherings arrived. Following worship I encouraged church members and visitors to divide themselves equally into the three groups and challenged them to join a group comprised of people they knew the least. I reminded members to grab their refreshments on the way to the group gatherings. We covenanted with one another that the gatherings would be one hour in duration. Childcare was offered for the last three weeks but not the first.

In each group the facilitator would open with prayer, welcome the group, reiterate why we were gathering, collectively fashion group norms, and offer some instruction. The facilitator showed gratitude for participants who “priestly gave” of themselves to be present. Because these gatherings were not strictly AI gatherings but were about building relationships and trust, facilitators were instructed to allow room for unrelated stories to the questions, particularly in the beginning of each session. It was also encouraged that a method of introducing each person in

\textsuperscript{70} https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TiUXFP9f-Sk, accessed 1/29/18.
the group should be used. Because of our limited time frame, all of the AI questions were not equally addressed. It was the group’s story sharing that directed on which questions were largely focused. However, facilitators were instructed to spend ample time on the final AI question: “Make a wish for the future of our church. What would our church look like or become if this wish came true?” This gave members a chance to listen to one another articulate their visions for the future. These visions often included values, priorities, and a deep sense of love for our congregation.

On the first Sunday, forty-five people participated in the three small groups. While the majority of participants were long-time members, there were new members present as well, particularly in the first two weeks. In each corresponding week, participation declined. In part this was because we challenged members to come to at least one of these gatherings. We also used the same AI questions each week which, to some, seemed redundant.

By the final week we had one small group gathering comprised of about fifteen long-time members, all of whom had participated in one or more of the prior gatherings. Most had been part of the leadership throughout the process. At the end of Part Two of the intervention, almost half of the congregation had participated in at least one small group gathering.

At the close of each Sunday gathering, the facilitators from each group met briefly to share experiences and observations. After the first gathering, one leader blurted out, “Well that worked better than I thought. My group couldn’t stop talking!” Another recited the story of how one of our church patriarchs got his nickname. I shared with the others that the group I facilitated seemed hungry to share their stories and to hear others.

Most of our leadership check-ins were less about the content of the AI questions (as we
all knew this data would be sorted through and digested later on in the process) and more centered on our observations of the group dynamics. Though, time and again, as groups talked about their hopes for the future, members inevitably began sharing about their dreams for our church ministry and our church building. “We want to continue to grow in our membership and ministry.” We want to “value close relationships” with one another. We want to “value our tradition but continue to be innovative.” We want to continue to be “welcoming and inviting to everyone.” People began to share their values, hopes, and dreams with one another. What had taken place was a mediated indwelling of one another by the Holy Spirit that would shape our future building dialogue in the month to come.

Following the final gathering I created a survey using Google Forms that was edited and approved by the church session. It was then sent out to the congregation via email (Appendix H). This survey was used to see what effect, if any, participants experienced in terms of building and developing trusting relationships through the priestly intervention, as well as to see what ideas and suggestions they might have to better achieve our goal of building trusting relationships in the congregation. Thirty five surveys were completed. Sixteen who returned the surveys did not participate in the small group gatherings predominantly because their schedules did not allow them to do so. Of the nineteen people who returned surveys and participated, most found value in the gatherings for building trusting relationships, though to varying degrees. The greatest strength of the small group gatherings for participants was the intentional time set aside for gathering. The specific format, the questions, and the food/meal was not seen as important for the purpose of trust building.

The food, which had originally been designed to be a shared meal, turned out to be little
more than a shared snack following worship which was already a church tradition. Our adaptation left little room for a full meal and so it was hard to say how the original plan with a full meal would have affected the outcome of the process.

PRIESTLY REFLECTION: EVALUATION AND LEARNING

There were several key learnings I experienced during this intervention. First, no matter how carefully planned a process might be or how well it is theologically grounded and articulated, ministry in the Body of Christ is messy and unpredictable. The journey that a congregation is on is not a simple, linear walk into the promised land; rather, the Church’s life is one of perpetual wandering in the wilderness. God’s royal priesthood serves together on a wilderness trek filled with manyunknowns, surprises, dangers, and with no guarantee of seeing the promised land for themselves. There is only faith in the hope that the promised land is on the horizon. It takes faithful experimentation as a congregation to walk together, hoping and trusting that God’s ultimate end, whether the congregation sees it or not, is the fulfillment of God’s kingdom on earth for which we await, work towards, and long for. In the wilderness it is not just relationship-building that people are seeking with one another and God, but purpose in relationship — that which gives meaning to lives individually and together — and how that meaning connects with God’s ultimate plans for creation.

For many of our newer members there was a lot of questioning about the efficacy of the intervention. It is one thing to repetitively talk about being a royal priesthood and to seek to engage in pre-programmed gatherings to practice our priestly functions together for the purpose of building trusting relationships. But it is another thing entirely to be transformed into this new and different way of being in the world, understanding its significance for daily life. For long-
time members who were accustomed to the institutional means of gathering together, particularly around Sunday morning worship, the intervention was less of a risk and easier in which to engage. For newer members, the intervention was seen as being offered at inconvenient times or, for others, was not worth the investment in the midst of already overloaded schedules. While this busyness for many members was in part because Part Two of the intervention took place during the final month of summer, the reality is that more and more members’ schedules are generally full all year around. This is a part of the new reality in which we live today. Building relationships for the purpose of being in relationship was not incentive enough to interrupt busy schedules and to take the risk of engaging in the small groups for many newer members. Because so many of them find their circles of belonging in a myriad of other groups outside of the church, relationship building alone was not a great incentive to draw people together. Though the survey results suggest that for many of those surveyed, the theological frame was not seen as important, this may have had more to do with the two parts of the intervention being disconnected and with the system being allowed to thaw before we could engage in the small group gatherings. We were never able to reorient our life together as originally intended.

This leads to a second key learning I experienced. In spite of what I perceived as a disjointed, interrupted intervention with lower turnout and participation than hoped for, the Holy Spirit was at work in both predictable and surprising ways. It was no surprise that watching members give of themselves in their story-sharing was a humbling and holy experience. To watch how others listened to one another, not with apathy or indifference, but with genuine interest, curiosity, and care was gratifying and heart-warming. I watched as members came into conversation, shaped dialogue together, and created holy space in which the Holy Spirit mediated
the indwelling of God’s people. The power of priestly story-sharing gave people agency in the Body of Christ in ways seemingly intangible. This experience shaped the Body as a whole as witnessed in the small group gatherings and in other gatherings yet to come. The Holy Spirit at work in the self-giving of members through story-sharing and priestly listening structured through the Appreciative Inquiry questions, broadened dialogue, communicated others’ values and hopes, shared the wide scope of God’s activity amongst the Body of Christ, and created a sense of gratitude amongst participants for one another. While the AI data has yet to be sifted through for thematic material, the conversations themselves had unique value that deepened the relationships amongst participants.

There were only a limited number of surveys completed following the intervention. From that data it is hard to come to any genuine conclusion as to the development of trust amongst members. Participating in one or two gatherings is not a lot of time to begin to develop and strengthen relationships. Through observations made by leaders and participants alike, we could deduce that the intervention had some positive affect on building and developing relationships, but to what extent was not initially clear (Appendix H).

The following month, in what was not part of the planned intervention, we engaged in two town hall meetings for our building expansion dialogue. Many of the members that had participated in the AI gatherings were present at these two meetings. In contrast to past town hall gatherings, while members still had ample questions, comments, and conversation, the dialogue was different. The meetings themselves were more subdued and non-confrontational. The difficult work of dialogue was done respectfully and kindly; not with members talking over one another but with careful listening and direct engagement. What was expected to be a very
divided vote the following month turned out to be a surprising eighty-four percent in favor of the building expansion.

Our competing stories that had been speaking over and around one another for so long concerning this new building expansion, began to enter into a fruitful dialogue. The tension and division did not just suddenly disappear, rather there was a sense that members began to see one another not as opponents but as partners and siblings in Christ. People began to value one another’s stories in a new and real way. One of our long-time members (and perhaps one of our few remaining patriarchs in the church) spoke at the end of our first town hall meeting and summed up this mysterious indwelling of one another best when he stated, “No matter what decision we make, let’s go forward together.”\textsuperscript{71} The Holy Spirit had been at work in ways many of us had not known and had not expected.

A third learning I experienced had to do with my own failing. My litmus test for success in this intervention had naively become the utopian-like vision of community that the author of Luke-Acts paints following Pentecost (Acts 2:32-37) - evidence that I had fallen astray into the problem/solution paradigm. However, the reality of the implementation and the following impact in the congregation had so much more to do with God’s work through the Holy Spirit than in all of the careful planning after which I or anyone else labored. While the hermeneutical lens through which I had viewed the story from Luke-Acts had been through the Pentecost event in the beginning, over the course of the intervention’s preparation and implementation it had been quickly overshadowed by my inclination to see myself and the church leaders as the primary catalysts and actors for solving a perceived problem. It had become \textit{my} doctor of ministry project

\textsuperscript{71} 2017, September 10 Town Hall Meeting
rather than God’s work of which we were a part. Somewhere in the mix, I had lost sight of the cornerstone of this spiritual house that God was fashioning us into together.

CONCLUSION

Being God’s priesthood is not about living into a preconceived picture of the community of faith or coercing a community to build and develop trust through a pastor-prescribed remedy or process. To reduce the priesthood to this image is to assume that community cohesion and unity is a problem that needs be fixed; a technical challenge to solve rather than an adaptive one. Falling prey to this assumption, I set myself up to be a lone priest, all the while promoting a collective priesthood. Being God’s priesthood, trusting in God and each other is not about the methodological processes we create, or the solutions we devise. God’s priesthood, God’s spiritual house, is held together first and foremost with God’s grace and God’s steadfast faithfulness toward us. It is in our being able to create space for priestly listening to God and God’s story of love and faithfulness, to the church and the church member’s stories, and to the world and the world’s stories around us that we indwell in one another through the Holy Spirit growing in our lives of faith and in our relationships together. Being the priesthood is less about what we organize and plan than it is about the space and the opportunities we provide for encountering God. It is about self-giving, listening, story-sharing, and finding ways to discover meaning and purpose in our lives. It requires the ability to be able to change plans on the fly, adapt to new circumstances, and allow God’s stories and our own stories to continually redirect us in the wilderness.

The building expansion conversation provided an element of purpose that added to our priestly gathering together in ways that could not have been planned, or strategized, or perfectly
laid out. It necessitated dependence on and trust in God. The perceived obstacle — namely the building expansion conversation — that confronted us in the midst of our carefully planned intervention was the kind that always confronts congregations in the wilderness. It was not a problem to be solved or an interruption to be scoffed at and put on the back-burner, but was an opportunity for the church to be the priesthood of God not in a sterile, safe environment but in the real, messy, constantly changing world we all know so well. Our priestly intervention gave time and space to broaden our communal story and to develop, to some small degree, a deeper trust in God and in one another.

While the scope of this thesis project focused primarily on relationship building, the intent in initiating an AI process was to also work toward developing a communal story and identity together. It will be humbling to watch how God continues to shape the life and ministry of FPC as the AI process moves forward, and as we seek to explore and live into our priestly identity together.

In our individualistic culture today where it is more highly valued to express our ideological positions, ideals, convictions, and opinions apart from the community, disregarding our inherent connectedness to each other, our priestly identity and function offer us a way of being in the world that reminds us to listen, to value one another’s stories, to give of ourselves for others, and to have fruitful dialogue in the midst of controversy. This is a Christ-like way of being that needs to direct our lives, not just within the Church but outside of it as well.
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APPENDIX A

Building Relationships Objective One: Checklist

STEP 1: Introducing the Adaptive Challenge, Objectives, and Strategies to Session, Deacons, and other leadership teams.

STEP 2: Newsletter Article (April Newsletter) - Introducing Adaptive Challenge, Sermon Series, and 4-week weeknight Small Group Gatherings. (Pastor Adam)

STEP 3: Promotion of Sermon Series & Small Group Gatherings (Apr. 9-May)
- newsletter & from the pulpit (Pastor Adam)
- email (Office)
- social media (Office/Pastor)
- personal invitations (Deacons, Elders, Pastor).

STEP 4A: Prepare, Organize, and begin recruiting for the worship series. Pastor working with worship team to:
- Finalize themes and worship elements
- recruit “story-tellers”
- recruit a team or individual to create the representation of the “Spiritual House” we will be adding on to each week in worship.

STEP 4B: Pastor working with Fellowship team. Creating and Organizing a potluck on May 14th that:
- encourages new members and long time members to sit together.
- creates table discussion that encourages relationship building
- provides a space for communion together

STEP 4C: Pastor working with Adult Ed Planning Team. Creating and Organizing the 4-week Wednesday evening Adult Small Group gatherings that:
- use the same Scripture and themes from the Sunday before to learn about our priestly call.
- encourage dialogue and story-sharing amongst participants
- recruit ‘story-tellers” for each week to share on the particular theme.

STEP 4D: Deacons working to promote and invite members of the congregation to participate.

Step 4E: Recruiting an individual or team to put together and finalize a “Relationship Survey” using Google Forms to be distributed on Apr. 23rd and then again at the end of the process (October).

STEP 5: Distribute Relationship Survey (Apr. 23)

STEP 6: Worship Series & Small Group Series Implementation (Apr. 23 - May 14)
APPENDIX B

Priesthood of All Believers Daily Worship Themes and Storytelling Questions/Topics

Apr. 23 - SERMON 1 - A Royal Priesthood: A Spiritual House (1 Peter 2:1-10)

Storytelling Theme: A time when your faith was strengthened because of your relationship with other Christians.

Apr. 30 - SERMON 2 - Priestly Community - Priestly Giving & Priestly Listening (Romans 12; Acts 2)

Storytelling Theme: When was a time someone else gave of themselves for you?

May 7 - SERMON 3 - Priestly Storytellers & Priestly Listeners- Proclaimers of God’s Wonderful Acts/Storytellers (1 Peter 2:1-10)

Storytelling Theme: Tell us a time when God has worked in your life.

May 14 - SERMON 4 - Priestly Meal-Sharers (Luke 7:34)

Storytelling Theme: Share with us a time when you shared a meal with others and God was present.
APPENDIX C

Building Relationships Objective Two: Checklist

STEP 1: Discuss the Adaptive Challenge, Objectives, and Strategies with Session, Deacons, and other leadership teams. (April 9)

STEP 2: Pastor leading the Session & Deacons through an Appreciative Inquiry Session. (April 26th)

STEP 3: Session will gather to finalize a process (dates & times) for the house meetings that include a shared meal, fellowship, and group story-telling/interviews. Pastor will train the elders to lead the house meetings and take field notes. (May 7)

STEP 4: Begin Advertising and promoting the House Gatherings. (Late Apr. - newsletter (May) - Pastor, early May - email (office), social media (pastor, office), personal invitations & letters (deacons)

STEP 5: At least 8 House Gatherings (May - late September) (May - Sep)

STEP 6: Distribute Relationship Survey again (October) (October)

STEP 7: Session collects surveys, compiles all the field notes and data, and organizes all of the stories from the House Meetings and begins to evaluate the process to this point, and moving on to the Imagine stage of the A.I. Process. (late Oct)

STEP 8: Continue finding common themes from our stories and begin to create provocative proposals in ministry. (Nov)
APPELLIX D
Session Intervention Power Point

BUILDING CHURCH @ FPC
REDISCOVERING OUR PRIESTLY CALL

A CONTEXT FOR CHANGE
HOW IS OUR COMMUNITY CHANGING, AND WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR FPC?

WHAT’S CHANGING IN DALLAS CENTER?
• Dallas County is the 5th fastest growing county in the country.
• Houses are being built in DC.
• A new church development is across the street.
• The urban sprawl is moving closer to DC.
• Many new residents in town have no history in DC.

WHAT’S CHANGING @ FPC?
• We have been steadily growing in size over the last 6 years.
• Our membership has been transforming.
• We have lost many long-time members.
• We have welcomed many new members.

WHAT’S CHANGING @ FPC?
• While worship attendance is regular for members, it is less frequent.
• <30% of our members live outside of Dallas Center.
• Many visitors and new members have no history in our church.

HOW DOES THIS AFFECT US?
• (Size) We are a congregation in between what is considered a “Shepherded-sized” church and a “Program-sized” church.
• Membership Demographics/Make-up
• Less time “Together”
A CHALLENGE/OPPORTUNITY WE ARE PRESENTED WITH

- People do not know one another as well as they did in the past, particularly long-time members and newer members.
- Whereas building relationships in community happened more organically in the past, a concerted, intentional effort is necessary.
- How do we build trusting relationships that strengthen our community and our life and ministry together?

A THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE
REDISCOVERING OUR CALL AS A PRIESTHOOD OF ALL BELIEVERS

A ROYAL PRIESTHOOD

- From a Trinitarian Ecclesiology
- We see this best in Acts 2: "42 The believers devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching, to the community, to their shared meals, and to their prayers. 43 A sense of awe came over everyone. God performed many wonders and signs through the apostles. 44 All the believers were united and shared everything. 45 They would sell pieces of property and possessions and distribute the proceeds to everyone who needed them. 46 Every day, they met together in the temple and ate in their homes. They shared food with gladness and simplicity. 47 They praised God and demonstrated God’s goodness to everyone. The Lord added daily to the community those who were being saved."

THE INTERCONNECTEDNESS OF THE PRIESTHOOD OF ALL BELIEVERS

- 1 Peter 2 - A "Spiritual House"
- 1 Corinthians 12:12 - a "Body"

WHAT DOES THE PRIESTHOOD DO?

- Martin Luther gives us four functions of the priesthood:
  - power and command to "preach,
  - to draw near to God,
  - pray for one another,
  - and offer themselves as a sacrifice to God."

A PRIESTHOOD NOT JUST FOR THE WORLD, BUT FOR EACH OTHER.

- we “proclaim the word to each other” (priestly storytelling) when we gather together, share our life stories, and how God is working in our lives.
- we “intercede with God on behalf of each other” (priestly listening) when we take the time to listen in such a way that promotes mutual care, support, love, and edification of each other.
- we “offer sacrifices on behalf of each other” (priestly giving), when we give of ourselves, our time, our energy, our effort to get to know others and build relationships.
A PRIESTHOOD AT THE TABLE

- Meals are at the heart of both Testaments in the Bible: The Passover meal, and the Last Supper.
- Gathering around the table follows Jesus example
- Meal-Sharing meets a basic human need, but also reminds us of the pattern at the heart of the gospel and the Christian life: blessed, broken, given.

A PRIESTLY PROCESS: APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY

- Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is a process that uses the power of story and priestly listening as a means for a congregation “to know, to communicate, to discern, and to imagine (concerning themselves, their past, and their future).”
- The process requires developing questions that prompt people to share their best stories.
- While the process helps develop themes that the leadership can use to develop programming, the real value in the process is the inclusiveness of the congregation, the conversations, and the relationship building.

A PRIESTHOOD OF ALL BELIEVERS
BUILDING TRUSTING RELATIONSHIP

BUILDING TRUSTING RELATIONSHIPS AS GOD’S PRIESTHOOD: HOW?

- An Intentional Process (Appreciative Inquiry) that includes:
  - Priestly Storytelling (Gathering and Sharing stories)
  - Priestly Listening (Listening with Love)
  - Priestly Giving (Taking the risk to Love)
  - Priestly Meal-Sharing (The Shape of Love)

OBJECTIVE 1

TO NAME AND MAKE VISIBLE FOR THE CONGREGATION THE UNIQUE ADAPTIVE "OPPORTUNITY" WE FACE - THE OPPORTUNITY TO BUILD AND DEVELOP TRUSTING RELATIONSHIPS WITHIN OUR CONGREGATION - THROUGH LEARNING ABOUT AND REDISCOVERING OUR PRIESTLY CALL IN COMMUNITY TOGETHER.

STRATEGIES

- A 4-part Worship Series - The Priesthood of All Believers
- A 4-part Weeknight Small Group - Same theme with potluck
OBJECTIVE 2
BEGIN TO BUILD AND DEVELOP TRUSTING RELATIONSHIPS WITHIN THE CONGREGATION.

STRATEGIES
- A series of 8 house meetings over the course of the next 5-6 months.
- The house meetings will use a form of Appreciative Inquiry to share stories, to listen to one another, to give of ourselves, and to share a meal.
- Encouraging the congregation members to attend at least 2 of the house meetings.

LEADERSHIP
- The Session:
  - facilitating the house gatherings and A.I. Questions
  - taking field notes during the gatherings of the stories shared AND the interactions of those in the group.
  - promoting the house gatherings

LEADERSHIP
- The Deacons:
  - taking field notes throughout the process (April-October) during worship, WOW, and other programming.
  - promoting the house gatherings with their shepherding groups (invitation letters, calls, cards, etc.)

LEADERSHIP
- The Worship Team
  - working with Pastor Adam to organize the 4-week worship series including: a) recruit the storytellers; b) create the artistic “house” we will build and develop; c)

LEADERSHIP
- Fellowship Team:
  - help organize the potluck on May 14th
LEADERSHIP

- The Adult Ed. Planning Team
  - helping organize, plan, and implement the 4-week Small Group events.

LEADERSHIP

- Pastor Adam:
  - introducing A.I. to the Session
  - training Session and other leaders to facilitate and lead the house gatherings, as well as how to take field notes.
  - creating the Priesthood of All Believers worship series.
  - attending as many of the house gatherings as possible taking field notes, but NOT leading discussions.

EVALUATION

HOW DO WE KNOW IF TRUSTING RELATIONSHIPS WERE BUILT?

EVALUATION METHODS

- Survey - Distributed before and after the process
- analyzing the field notes over the course of the process.

WHAT HAPPENS AFTER THE PROCESS?

- We continue the A.I. Process and develop Provocative Proposals.
- We develop long term ways to build, develop, strengthen, and maintain relationships. (As we grow, this will become even more important).
APPENDIX E

Practicing Appreciative Inquiry
Leading the Session Through the A.I. Process

Opening with Prayer (focus is on gratitude for the participants)

(Food is provided)

What is Appreciative Inquiry?

“Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever I pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.” - Philippians 4:8

It’s easy to focus in on problems and challenges as a church and attempt to work to solve them after careful analysis. But often times focusing in on what seems like our weaknesses or deficiencies clouds the process from the beginning to the end framing current circumstances in a problem/solution model. But in working through a process that focuses first on a collective gathering of the best and most life-giving stories of our congregation, we begin to redirect our thinking to that which is our best as a church. If our best is the focus of our conversations with one another, then our best begins to shape our life and discernment together.

40 minute Interview questions Instructions: We will be spend one hour as a group answering sample Appreciative Inquiry questions that have a focus on relationships. I will be your facilitator and will be asking the questions and help moderate the conversation. Another one of us will be taking notes of our time together.

- Establish group norms
- Go around the group and do introductions (facilitator starts).
- go through the A.I. questions

Reflection of the Process:

- Overall impressions of A.I.? What did you appreciate? What did not work well?
- What group norms are important for the process?
- Reflection on the questions? How might we adapt these questions to better work in small groups to help us build and develop relationships?

Close in Prayer
APPENDIX F

Adapted Appreciative Inquiry Questions

1. What do you think is the most important, life-giving characteristic of our church? When we are at our best, what is the single most important value that makes our church unique?

2. How do you see that our church has related to our community and to the world? What do you think is the most important thing we have done?

3. What relationships, programs or events have been the best at creating our congregation’s relationship with God?

4. What are the healthiest, most life-giving aspects of the relationships you see among people in our church?

5. When you think about your experiences in our church, what has contributed most to your SPIRITUAL life?

6. Describe a time at our church when you felt the most engaged, alive and motivated. Who or what group was involved?

7. What valuable ways do you feel you can contribute to our church personally? Think about your personality, your skills, your activities, etc.!

8. Make a wish for the future of our church. What would our church look like or become if this wish came true?
APPENDIX G
Intervention Part II Worship Series

Week 1: Scripture - Philippians 4:1-9
  Theme: We all have a story to share.

Week 2: Scripture - Matthew 18:21-25
  Theme: Centrality of forgiveness in Christianity and used

Week 3: Scripture - Matthew 14:22-23
  Theme: Facing storms in life together

Week 4: Scripture - Romans 12:1-8
  Theme: Our ‘priestly service’ - “offering our bodies as a living sacrifice to God” - with our unique gifts.
"Get to Know Your Church Family" Survey

1) Into which of these age categories do you belong?

- 0-25: 31.4%
- 26-35: 11.4%
- 36-45: 17.1%
- 46-55: 25.7%
- 56-65: 8.6%
- 65+: 28.6%

2) How often do you participate in worship at First Presbyterian Church?

- Every week: 60%
- 2-3 times per month: 8.6%
- 1 time per month: 28.6%
- 6-10 times per year: 6%
- less than 6 times per year: 8.6%
3) How often do you participate in other church ministries, programs, activities, and/or events at First Presbyterian Church?

34 responses

4) Did you participate in one or more of the "Get to Know Your Church Family" Gatherings?

35 responses
If you answered "No" to question #4, please answer questions 5-6. Otherwise, skip to question 7.

0 responses

No responses yet for this question.

5) If you answered "No" to questions #4, why did you not participate (select all that apply)?

14 responses

- I didn't see a...: 0 (0%)
- My schedule...: 10 (71.4%)
- The gatherin...: 3 (21.4%)
- I didn't know...: 0 (0%)
- I didn't feel c...: 1 (7.1%)
- I wasnt inter...: 1 (7.1%)
- With young c...: 1 (7.1%)
- My son woul...: 1 (7.1%)
- I did not atte...: 1 (7.1%)

If you selected, "Other," what other reasons did you choose not to participate?

3 responses
With young children, it's tough to extend times after worship or to have things before worship (unless Sunday School is in session). I understand the need to gather and have meetings, but at times it may be necessary to shorten Worship to allow everyone to participate. It's tough to have Worship for 1 hour and 15 minutes with kids, and then have additional needs afterward.

I didn't feel comfortable doing so.

I did not attend church on one of the Sunday's it was offered.

6) Because growing in our relationships in our community of faith is important to our being the Church together, what could we do differently to encourage you to participate in events that help build our relationships together?

15 responses

- Offer the event... (4, 26.7%)
- Include in W... (3, 20%)
- Try and kee... (4, 26.7%)
- Our family w... (1, 6.7%)
- Unsure... (1, 6.7%)
- I'm not intere... (1, 6.7%)
- Present and... (1, 6.7%)
- Host events i... (1, 6.7%)
- Host events... (2, 13.3%)

If you selected "Other" or if there are other suggestions you have, please write those suggestions in the space below.

3 responses
Just keep trying I will get to something eventually.

Include this in Worship

Avoid the event in summer when church attendance is lower.

Questions 7-18 are for those who answered "Yes" to Questions #4.

1 response

yes

7) Do you feel like you got to know other church members better having participated in the "Get to Know Your Church Family" event(s)?

19 responses

- Not at all: 21.1%
- Maybe: 31.6%
- A little bit: 42.1%
- Yes: 25.2%
8) On a scale from 1 to 10 with 1 being "completely dissatisfied" and 10 being "extremely satisfied," how would you rate your overall experience in the "Get to Know Your Church Family" gatherings?

19 responses

9) On a scale from 1 to 10 with 1 being "completely dissatisfied" and 10 being "extremely satisfied," how would you rate the event's effectiveness at helping members get to know one another?

21 responses
10) On a scale from 1 to 10 with 1 being "completely dissatisfied" and 10 being "extremely satisfied," how would you rate the event's effectiveness at helping build and develop trust between church members?

20 responses

11) On a scale from 1 to 10 with 1 being "completely dissatisfied" and 10 being "extremely satisfied," how would you rate the event's effectiveness at encouraging members to share their faith and their stories with one another?

20 responses
12) On a scale from 1 to 10 with 1 being "not helpful at all" and 10 being "extremely helpful," how helpful were the questions used during the event at encouraging members to share their stories?

20 responses

13) On a scale from 1 to 10 with 1 being "not very important" and 10 being "very important," how important was having food at these events?

19 responses
14) What was your favorite part of this event?

19 responses

- intentional time: 15 (78.9%)
- the question: 1 (5.3%)
- the food: 1 (5.3%)
- the leaders/...: 1 (5.3%)
- the daytime...: 1 (5.3%)
- The end: 1 (5.3%)

If you selected "Other," please explain your favorite part of the event?

1 response
15) What was your least favorite part of this event?

13 responses

- Intentional time: 1 (7.7%)
- The question: -2 (15.4%)
- The food: -2 (15.4%)
- The leaders/…: -2 (15.4%)
- The day/time…: 0 (0%)
- Same old qu…: 1 (7.7%)
- I was only a…: 1 (7.7%)

8 (61.5%)

If you selected "Other," explain your least favorite part of this event?

4 responses

- I was only able to make one session.
- I already knew everyone...the people I really wanted to get to know did not participate
- Amount of time allowed to get to know one another. Too short.
- Thought it was fine :)

The end
16) How can we make these gatherings better?

13 responses

- Listen to what the congregation
- Have these types of meetings throughout the year
- Rephrase the questions so the replies can more easily be in a story format. The "answers" we put on sticky notes were 1-3 words, which could lead to "stories", but most did not.
- Try them during winter months
- Tie in with worship maybe?
- Keep having them with a twist bring something from your past to show and tell
- Vary the questions asked.
- More time for discussions.
- Shorten the service to allow more time for an event afterwards. Services are 1 hour long on average, an event takes another hour or so and that makes it harder to stay after the service if we have plans for early afternoon.
- Vary questions - don't use same questions every time
- More people attending - don't know
- I think the gatherings were on point. For example I heard the mouse story and realized what a valuable history he shared of the community.
- Not sure

17) How can we better encourage members both from younger and older generations to participate together in these events?

12 responses

- Have them throughout the year
Summer is a hard time of year to hold these as many people are gone. We could only participate in one. Our kids enjoyed this too. Maybe another time of year would be better.

Church dynamics are changing and personal interactions aren't perceived to be very important in many circles. Taking the time to do something for others, shows "we care". On the other hand, just talking/visiting with others may provide some perspective and knowledge, but that's a long ways from truly showing you care! Planning activities that illustrate our commitment and interest in our church family will pay far greater dividends! Working hard together will create more of the stories and memories you're wanting, to truly strengthen our church commitments, our family bonds and our relationship with Jesus Christ, who gave "everything" to us.

I think more open ended questions, sharing about families, what is your biggest challenges, etc. faith maybe should be the last this asked. What is the hardest challenges that have led you to church.

Add some game as a part of the discussion. Everyone loves a little friendly competition.

Make activities where an older person's input into a group is needed and vice versa.

split up family members to different groups

Game times with sitters provided.

beyond me how you get people to participate

don't know

Use the band group to entice young musical folks to join us and participate in that group. If they enjoy they may join and join in these events.

Not sure

18) Is there any other feedback that you would like to offer?

7 responses

If we're really striving to be the "church", our actions are going to speak volumes more than our "talk"! Story telling can be fun and interesting, if there is a common thread or interest between the speaker(s) and the audience. Otherwise, many times, it's just listening to those who like to hear themselves talk.

I think this is a good start, let's work on questions that get people to share what is going on in their lives.

Sure wish more of the young families who are new to the church would have participated. They are the ones who we need to get to know and who need to know us!

Need to consider the needs of everyone when scheduling. For example, on Kickoff Sunday, we had Sunday
School; during Worship we had the presentation of the Burnett Trust distribution, presented Bibles to 3-year-olds, and so forth; and then we had a building meeting afterward. It’s a lot to expect of young children. Perhaps we need to incorporate more of this into Worship and then adjust the length of worship accordingly to fit everything from 10 - 11.

Great idea!

It is fun to form a strong bond with other members.