

PRAYER AS MISSION: RETHINKING FAITHFUL MINISTRY
FOR OLDER ADULTS

By

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of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Ministry

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To my wife Lynn, sons Liam, Frederic, and Xavier

To the older adults of Fall Branch United Methodist Church and Colonial Heights United Methodist Church: brothers and sisters in Christ who seek to be “like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither.” (Psalm 1:3)

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	1
PART ONE	10
CHAPTER 1 PERCEPTIONS OF OLD AGE	10
Western American Society	
The Church	
Perceptions of Older Adults (MDiv. Class Interview Summary)	
CHAPTER 2 MISSION AND PRAYER IN BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE	34
Mission of God	
Mission for the Aged	
Prayer as Mission in the Search for Vocation	
CHAPTER 3 CONCLUSIONS LEADING TO QUESTION(S)	55
PART TWO	58
CHAPTER 4 PROJECT RESEARCH DESIGN	58
Context of Research	
Small Groups	
Triads	
Group Process	
Summary of Group Process	
Scripture-Based Prayer in Groups	

CHAPTER 5 PROJECT ANALYSIS.....	72
Methodology Synthesis	
Project Theme and Thesis Development	
Project Themes	
Relationships	
New Mission Metric	
Prayer	
Value in Mutuality	
Gratitude Drives Mission	
Confirmation	
CHAPTER 6 CONCLUSION	90
APPENDIX 1	96
APPENDIX 2	106
BIBLIOGRAPHY	120

INTRODUCTION

Reality of the “Aging” Church

The church in North America is diverse. If characterized by the places in which they gather, one will find congregations meeting under the ornate steeples of traditional houses of worship, in storefront strip malls, industrial warehouses, rented movie theaters, and the living rooms of private homes. And from rural farm areas, large urban municipalities, to suburban neighborhoods, the people found among these congregations can be as diverse as the larger communities of which they are comprised.

For all its diversity, however, there are indeed unifying threads woven throughout the American church. Beyond any theological or doctrinal unity among church denominations and groups are certain social and demographic similarities. One in particular will focus the direction of this project. On average in the United States, but especially among mainline denominations, the church is getting *older*. Calling this phenomenon “the graying of the church,” Richard Gentzler notes that this is not just an experience of the church, but of the wider American society:

Since 1900, the percentage of Americans 65 years or older has more than tripled, from 4.1% in 1900 to 12.4% in 2000. The number of Americans 65 years or older has increased 11 times, from 3.1 million to 35 million. . . . The 65-74 age group (18.4 million) is 8 times larger than in 1900. The 75-84 year old group (12.4 million) is 16 times larger, and the 85 years or older age group (4.2 million) is 34 times larger. . . . The proportion of Americans age 60 with at least one parent alive has risen from 7% in 1900 to 44% in 2000.¹

While measured just over a decade ago, the increase in percentage of older adults in the population of this country is both undeniable and continues unabated.

¹ Richard H. Gentzler, Jr., *The Graying of the Church: A Leader’s Guide for Older Adult Ministry in the United Methodist Church* (Nashville, TN: Discipleship Resources, 2004), 10.

Gentzler concludes that we should not be surprised, then, that the church reflects the wider population in this way.² This is not to say, however, that any congregation will naturally gravitate toward the type of demographic statistics noted above. The specific cultural dynamics of a church's host community, the overall attractiveness the church presents through ministries of service outreach, evangelism, worship, vitality of congregational life, adaptability to cultural change, and a host of other variables all impact the make-up and development of any given church.

Mainline denominations, such as the United Methodist Church, are outpacing the wider culture as it pertains to age, however. While the U.S. Census Bureau estimates that the number of Americans age sixty-five and older will increase from 12.5% to 22% of the total population between the years 2000 to 2030, the United Methodist Church already claims 30% of its membership is at least sixty-five years of age. A full 55% of total United Methodist membership is fifty years of age or older.³ Every bit as much as the nation at large, the church in the west must, if not more so, deal realistically with this growing wave of demographic change. To exist faithfully under the auspices of its God-given mission, the church must, to an increasing degree, encourage the older adults comprising it to fruitfully engage in ministry.

The Specific Case of Fall Branch United Methodist Church

Fall Branch United Methodist Church is a small congregation of seventy-three members with an average attendance in worship services of around forty-five people. As

² Ibid., 6.

³ As reported in Richard H. Gentzler, Jr., *Aging and Ministry in the 21st Century: An Inquiry Approach* (Nashville, TN: Discipleship Resources, 2008), 26.

a congregation comprised primarily of adults described in the literature of gerontology as the “young-old” and the “old-old,” with an average age of around seventy, only about twenty-five of those are currently physically able and willing to take part in ministry efforts outside of Sunday morning worship services on the church campus. Since most of the current work of ministry is carried out by this handful of people, many serving in multiple roles already, there does not exist a great pool of people to enlist in either new or even current ministry activities. However, as a whole the people of Fall Branch United Methodist Church (hereafter, FBUMC) are devoted both to their church and the surrounding community.

Being raised and educated for congregational ministry among the Independent Christian Churches and Churches of Christ, serving the last six years in United Methodist Churches of Kingsport, Tennessee (in the Appalachian District of the Holston Conference) has been both a challenge and a blessing. Navigating differences in polity and doctrine while maintaining both my personal theological integrity and the necessary submission to United Methodist authority have stretched me to grow in ways otherwise not possible. My breadth and depth as a vocational pastor and disciple of Jesus have been nourished significantly. The people of FBUMC and District leaders have been more patient, ironically, with their Christian Church pastor than many Stone-Campbell congregations would likely be under the leadership of a minister ordained in the United Methodist Church. Unfortunately, FBUMC’s patience has not always been rewarded with reciprocation on my part.

The church celebrated its bicentennial anniversary in 2015. Its history is a rich one, but they have experienced a general decline in membership and overall participation in the church's various ministries over the past two decades: the sharpest being in the last ten years. The reasons for this are both varied and deducible at the local level. This decline also reflects symptoms characteristic of the larger mainline churches in North America. One symptom in particular, though, will be the focus of this project.

The stated mission of the United Methodist Church is to "make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world." During my tenure as pastor of FBUMC, it has been difficult to see that happening either among the members of the congregation and definitely not in the wider Fall Branch community. Numerous ideas, sermon and teaching series, brain-storming discussions for vision creation, and programmed outreach events have been conducted in an effort to promote growth in discipleship among church members and evangelistic efforts within our surrounding neighborhoods. Few, if any, bore much fruit as I desired to measure it. In my frustration over the situation, I found myself blaming congregation members for a lack of zeal or willingness to share in the mission of the church.

In numerous courses of Emmanuel Christian Seminary's Doctor of Ministry program, class discussions and exposure to authors such as Reggie McNeal, Neil Cole, Alan Hirsh, and Eddie Gibbs fostered examination of obstacles to the church fruitfully engaging people in contemporary society. A large thread running through such discussions brought to light a two-fold problem. First, is the mistake of making plans and employing methodologies of ministry and then asking for God's blessing and

empowerment after the fact. Such a process of ministry planning and implementation is at cross purposes with the witness of Scripture which sees faithful disciples, from Moses, Abraham and Israel to the Apostles and the early church, answering the call to *follow* God where he is already present and in the way he is moving. Perhaps the most pointed example from the New Testament is the post-resurrection Jesus commanding his disciples in Acts 1:4-5 to wait in Jerusalem until they experience the pouring out of the Spirit at Pentecost. Until that time, they *prayed* together and waited on God's instigation. Only then would they faithfully and fruitfully carry out their mission. In fact, it could be argued that their patient, expectant prayer *was* their mission at that time. It is a picture of God at the vanguard of kingdom expansion, privileging disciples to participate in *his* mission.

The second difficulty for fruitful engagement in mission are the church's assumptions regarding what and how it offers service to people and, in particular, what the proper, expected response of those "receiving" such ministry efforts must look like. This difficulty is discussed in the literature most often in terms of the church attempting to engage the next generation of contemporary society with long-established traditions and methodologies. Applying them uncritically, the church too often fails to engage people in terms they believe are relevant to their lives. Neither church members, nor those we desire to be so, are "empty vessels" just waiting to be filled with whatever we wish and on whatever terms. Again, the arc of biblical Scripture illustrates a God who seems to operate on an "asset based" engagement with humanity. God comes into relationship with people—shaping and molding them—in terms of the realities of their capabilities and identities. God values and partners with people in both their strengths and weaknesses.

Beginning there, he makes us more than what we currently are and employs us in accomplishing his mission.

Much of the literature addressing the difficulties broadly described above focuses on how the church might effectively engage a particularly younger generation of our current society. I began to wonder, however, if the situation I faced among the older adults of FBUMC and many churches in the surrounding area might be described and addressed similarly. In the way the church is often rightly accused of discipling younger generations and measuring their growth and service based upon cultural and life patterns that do not match their reality, do we treat older adults similarly? It would seem, ironically, that we have “set up” older adult Christians to see themselves as less valuable or capable of effective and faithful ministry through metrics based upon the capabilities and even affinities of younger generations. Across much of the literature of gerontology, the elderly are stereotypically perceived according to their *lack* of capability in areas such as: physical health, mobility, mental stamina and sharpness, flexibility in coping with the rigors of contemporary life, providing for themselves and caring effectively for loved ones, etc. Painted with a broad brush, it is a picture of people that must be almost exclusively ministered *to* by the church. Most definitely it is not a viewpoint from which older adults are readily and expectantly invited *into* active participation in the mission of God. The bible, however, speaks widely in terms of “disciples-in-training,” but knows nothing of “disciples emeritus.” In the same way, theologically, that children are not “the church of the future,” but are very much the church now, the elderly are not the “church of the past.” Older adults of previous generations are expected to be the church in the

present. Synthesizing the above observations, it would seem that an “asset-based” approach to ministry among the older adults of FBUMC, in which God is allowed to lead, call, and guide the particular capabilities of older adults may uncover both a value and fruitfulness otherwise dismissed.

Primary Question of Project

Given the above discussion of some of the realities of older adults and the difficulties of the church in engaging them in mission, I began to reflect upon what might be, at the least, a first step in changing the situation among the older adults of FBUMC. For the past four years, a small group of older adults of the congregation and I have been meeting weekly to pray and share in Holy Communion. For the better part of an hour on Tuesday mornings, a handful of older adults of the congregation gather, take a few moments to catch up with one another’s lives and then, under periodic words of topical guidance from me, spend the better part of an hour in silent prayer. We offer praise of God’s character, gratitude for the blessings bestowed upon our lives, and intercession for needs we perceive around us both near and far. This small group, over time, became as devoted to one another and to this time as to any other activity of the church. For some, outside of the Sunday morning worship service it is the only other church-related activity in which they regularly participate.

I began to wonder if prayer among a group like the one meeting on Tuesday mornings in the pews of FBUMC might in fact be a doorway to the more fruitful mission I was seeking for the older adults of my congregation. By extension, I considered if such groups could be an effective means for the church to engage them in ministry.

Furthermore, given the biblical warrant from Acts 1:4-5 mentioned above I began to consider if prayer might indeed be mission (or at least a catalyst for it) specifically for the older adults of FBUMC. Out of these considerations the following primary question of this project emerged: *If older adults are encouraged to (rightly) practice and recognize prayer as mission with God and on behalf of the church, in what ways would that impact their understanding of mission, of their ministry at this stage of their lives, and of using the capabilities they have for Christian mission?*

Project Report Overview

This project report will be divided into two major parts. Part One, consisting of three chapters, will serve as a type of literature review of materials that grant insight into the issues impacting this project. Chapter 1, entitled *Perceptions of Old Age*, will consider the ways older adults are perceived by both western American society at-large and the church in general terms. Additionally, insights into how aging adults understand themselves to be valued by church and society will be presented in the form of conclusions drawn from interviews conducted by Masters-level seminary students. These interviews were an assignment of Dr. Jack Holland, in coordination with this project's researcher, as a course requirement for a class on aging and ministry with Emmanuel Christian Seminary in Johnson City, Tennessee.

The second chapter, entitled *Mission and Prayer in Biblical and Theological Perspective*, will look at bringing into focus a sense of the mission of God as found in the biblical scriptures and an attending theological understanding. Where the aged among

God's people fit into this mission will also be explored. Finally, the part that Christian prayer plays both in and as mission will be considered.

Chapter 3, entitled *Conclusions Leading to Question(s)*, will share conclusions of the literature review and their leading to both the primary question of this project and a set of derived, secondary questions.

Part Two of this project is comprised of three chapters. Chapter 4, entitled *Project Design*, provides an overview of the design of the research conducted as a part of this project. Emphasis will be given to the instruments used in collecting data and the methodology employed in its analysis. Also, as the data collection phase of this project was conducted under the auspices of small groups, the means of implementing and conducting these groups will be described in this chapter.

Chapter 5, entitled *Data Analysis*, will describe and explore a set of themes derived from an analysis of the project's research data. In order to better facilitate a discussion of the connections these themes have, each is gathered under one of three larger categories: prayer, valuing of the aging, and mission. The final chapter, entitled *Conclusion*, offers insights from the project the researcher believes applicable to the ministry of the church. In particular, this concluding section will address some of the ways in which the church can more faithfully engage older adults as valued members of the congregation and as disciples capable of effective ministry.

PART ONE

CHAPTER 1

Perceptions of Old Age

This first chapter begins with a certain hesitancy. The intent of this project is to help the author and other interested parties better know the older adults of Fall Branch United Methodist Church in order to both serve them and assist them in serving God more effectively. By extension, it is assumed that insights gained in such an undertaking will benefit other area congregations and, indeed, any church that might find the topic sympathetic to its circumstances and needs. Part of that learning is addressing the wider, generalized understanding of older adults through the research and presentations of others knowledgeable in the fields of demographics, gerontology, sociology, and Christian ministry, for example. While gaining facility in such areas of study is immensely helpful and indeed necessary, the more one engages such literature the insight of Jane Thibault and Richard Morgan comes into stark relief: “It is easy to know the literature of aging; it’s quite different to live it.”¹ The statistics and trends surrounding a person’s life neither circumscribe nor penetrate it fully, much less entire generations. In considering the perceptions of old age in both the church and society-at-large, it is incumbent upon the wise observer to remember that what may be stated for a particular age group does not always translate to valid perceptions of meaning or significance. Indeed, some popular perceptions are caricatures untethered from reality. This is particularly true, as will be shown below, among older adults.

¹ Jane Marie Thibault and Richard L. Morgan, *Pilgrimage in the Last Third of Life: 7 Gateways to Spiritual Growth* (Nashville, TN: Upper Room Books, 2012) Kindle Reader e-book, 32.

Western American Society

In the current American culture, we see in television news programs, social media on the internet, our politics, and perhaps anecdotally in conversations between neighbors that change is occurring in society. Some moments and trends capture our collective attention and are difficult to ignore. Others, however, being less “sensational” than issues such as immigration policy, political unrest turning violent, or economic ups and downs, are paid much less attention while nevertheless remaining potent catalysts for change. Over the past century, American society as a whole has been aging. Due in large part to advancements in medical science, life expectancy has increased dramatically. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the average lifespan of forty-seven years shifted to around seventy-eight at its end. Meador and Henson note that in 1980, America claimed around fifteen-thousand adults aged one-hundred or older. There are now around one-hundred thousand at the beginning of the twenty-first century.² Within this trend, demographically, those considered older adults are themselves getting older. There were eight times as many sixty-five to seventy-four-year olds, sixteen times as many seventy-five to eighty-four-year olds, and thirty-four times as many eighty-five years and older adults in 2004 as there were in 1900. Forty-four percent of adults aged sixty or older in the year 2000 had at least one parent still alive; in 1900 it was seven percent.³ Today, in

² Shaun C. Henson and Keith G. Meador, “Growing Old in a Therapeutic Culture,” in *Growing Old in Christ*, ed. Stanley Hauerwas, Caroline Bailey Stoneking, Keith G. Meador and David Cloutier (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), 92.

³ Richard H. Gentzler, Jr., *The Graying of the Church: A Leader’s Guide for Older Adult Ministry in The United Methodist Church* (Nashville, TN: Discipleship Resources, 2004), 10.

the United States, there are more adults aged sixty-five and older than there are teenagers.⁴ Commenting on such statistics, Richard Gentzler claims:

Probably no trend in the last 100 years has had a greater impact on the nature of religious, social, and political life than the dramatic demographic shifts reflected in our growing aging population.⁵

In order to understand this phenomenon in greater detail, sociologists and gerontologists have found it necessary to apply sub-categories to our aging population. Common parlance has for some time labeled all aging adults as simply “old.” When it is that a person falls into that category, though, can be fairly arbitrary. As aging as a field of scholarly study has developed, however, researchers have delineated aging adults as the “young-old,” the “old-old,” and in some cases those who are the “oldest-old” or “very old.”⁶ Precise age ranges for each category are not uniform, but most agree that the young-old are somewhere between sixty-five to their mid-seventies and the old-old are in the range of mid-seventies to mid-eighties. The category of very-old adults is usually reserved for those over eighty-five years of age.⁷

One need not consider long the generalized demographic shift in American society described above to conclude it carries implications that impact deeply all individuals, groups, and institutions. Coupled with what our society values, it generates ideals and metrics for how we view and interact with one another. In particular, such

⁴ Thomas B. Robb, “Aging and Ageism: Implications for the Church’s Ministry with Families,” *Church and Society* (Nov/Dec 1993): 110.

⁵ Richard H. Gentzler, Jr., *Aging and Ministry in the 21st Century: An Inquiry Approach* (Nashville, TN: Discipleship Resources, 2004), 24.

⁶ R. Paul Stevens, *Aging Matters: Finding Your Calling for the Rest of Your Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2016), 1.

⁷ Hauerwas, et al., *Growing Old in Christ*, 113.

conceptions drive much in how we view the older adults who are becoming a segment of our culture with increasing influence; whether as agents directly or, just as often, indirectly through the response of others to them.

Categorizing the Aging

The shift in American culture over the last one hundred years described above, was posited in terms of demographic age changes in the population. However, chronological age is only one dimension in how we might describe any age group. This is true of older adults as well. In terms of categorization, chronological age is perhaps the easiest to come to and, therefore, the one society reaches for first when describing older adults. For example, in society we have age “trigger points” that correspond to activities and seasons of human life. A person can possess a driver’s license around sixteen, is considered a legal adult at either eighteen or twenty-one, and can receive retirement benefits around the age of sixty-five. Chronological age alone, though, is not as helpful when considering the value and significance attached to an individual or group as a category based upon their stage of life. Gentzler, again, illustrates that there are several ways we may categorize how human beings age. These include not only chronological age, but also social position, subjective perceptions, and functionality.⁸

Social Position

Perhaps most closely tied to chronological age as a way to categorize people is their social position. As it pertains to older adults, American culture positions people in life according to expectations of how they relate to others based upon the above

⁸ Gentzler, *Aging and Ministry*, 23-24.

mentioned trigger points. For example, once a person reaches a certain age, they are expected to shift from being an employee and co-worker to retiree. After a period of retirement and perceived position of leisure, travel, and relaxation, older adults transition to one of burdensome dependence upon others when they are no longer able to independently care for themselves. This creates great difficulty in a society that “tries to minimize dependence while praising activity and independence.”⁹ For all the recent discussions regarding the demarcation in human relationships of Western American society in terms of tribalism, we nevertheless value people according to their *individual* ability to produce, provide, and “keep up” with the rapid changes occurring around us all. In each of the ways we might choose to categorize the elderly, our society, according to Patricia Jung, “measures old age by what it is not.”¹⁰ In each of the ways of categorization mentioned above and explored briefly here and below, many of the negative caricatures of older adults find their genesis in such an apophatic orientation to aging.

In seeing older adults through a perceived social position laid over them like a template, people are pigeon-holed when their capacities and interests no longer match that of earlier, youthful stages in life. Contributing to this situation is a lifestyle among Western countries that does not measure life in terms of intergenerational relationships as it once did. This is not to be understood to mean that adult children no longer value their parents or grandparents. It is simply a case that, given the fact that current generations of

⁹ James M. Houston and Michael Parker, *A Visions for the Aging Church: Renewing Ministry for and by Seniors* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011), 162.

¹⁰ Hauerwas, et al., *Growing Old in Christ*, 113.

families no longer expect to be born, live, work, and die in the same location as the previous, the mindset of American individualism, and the overall desire for independent living in all social positions these separations between generations has made them even more remote from one another. While there are get-togethers for special occasions and holidays, the daily rhythms of life seem to be lived in greater isolation, generationally. This phenomenon has given rise over the past century to the development, for example, of nursing homes and retirement villages. Given the expectations of measuring life stages according to prescribed social positions, it “perpetuates the notion that the old are to be cared for away from the rest of us, and that they prefer it so.”¹¹ Even in this less than ideal circumstance, however, it is still the family that can lay any claim to be an “age-integrated institution”¹² in our culture. Contrary to any hard and fast rules of social position for older adults based upon chronological age triggers, the reality is that most elderly are not merely “dumped” into nursing homes at the first opportunity. Statistically, Thomas Robb indicates that the majority of older adults are cared for at home by families until “long after financial and emotional resources and individual strength have been exhausted.”¹³ Furthermore, Robb argues against the notion of social position as a strict means of characterizing people as they age. Education, work, and leisure are not good

¹¹ Robb, “Aging and Ageism,” 112.

¹² Christina Embree, “Intercessory Prayer Across Generations: A Case Study,” *Christian Education Journal* 14, no. 1 (2017), 131.

¹³ Robb, “Aging and Ageism,” 118.

descriptors for demarcation based on age. These are activities needed at *every* stage of life, regardless of the season.¹⁴

Subjective Perceptions

If one were to interview two individuals in a family about a seventy-year old male neighbor each of them knew, it is not difficult to imagine that the descriptions given by a ten-year old girl would be vastly different from that of her ninety-year old grandfather. These are the subjective perceptions many make and hold to regarding older adults. Referencing Karl Barth's postulation, Ridenour summarizes the subjective manner in which we understand the nature of aging by saying that to the young, time is slow and unending. To the old, however, time passes quickly and is seen to be finite with "nothing more (for the older adult) within it."¹⁵ These notions are perpetuated, for example, in popular media and entertainment. One need only look at older adult characters such as Grandpa from *The Simpsons*, any of the women from *The Golden Girls*, or Frank and Estelle Costanza from *Seinfeld* to see that stereotypes are being reflected. In turn, these reinforced stereotypes become the preconceptions that guide us as we relate to the older adults around us.

To many in Western culture, to grow old means to necessarily become sick and physically frail, to cease being able to learn new information or skills, the inability to improve one's quality of life, a lack of interest in sex, economic disadvantage, powerlessness, and an existence that is largely burdensome to younger generations. While

¹⁴ Ibid., 116.

¹⁵ Autumn Alcott Ridenour, "The Coming of Age: Curse of Calling? Toward a Christological Interpretation of Aging as Call in the Theology of Karl Barth and W. H. Vanstone," *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 33, no. 2 (2013), 154.

there are realities of life that might lead one to draw such conclusions, Houston and Parker believe that such generalizations, applied uncritically, lead to distorted views.¹⁶

Considering the two examples of physical health and mental acuity among older adults illustrates the need for deeper description in order to avoid applying myths to an entire generation. Arthritis, high cholesterol, hypertension, diabetes, and heart disease are the most frequent chronic health conditions among older adults, with Gentzler noting 28.8% of sixty-five to seventy-four-year olds and 50.6% of those older than seventy-five having at least one.¹⁷ Yet, none are an inevitability as we get older. The NCOA Healthy Aging Team indicates that most are either mitigated or prevented altogether by diet and regular exercise.¹⁸ In fact, the Centers for Disease Control concludes that, while some diminishment in health is indeed unavoidable, true disability in old age can be delayed by “as much as ten years” by diet, exercise, and not smoking.¹⁹ Briggs notes that the most sedentary groups within the United States today are older adolescents and adults over the age of sixty. A full 60% of both groups’ waking hours are spent in sedentary activities!²⁰ Another caricature of aging held by many in our culture is that dementia is a necessary part of growing old. It is true that the speed of cognition, how rapidly we process

¹⁶ Houston and Parker, *A Vision for the Aging Church*, 112-120.

¹⁷ Gentzler, *The Graying of the Church*, 14.

¹⁸ NCOA Healthy Aging Team, “Top 10 Chronic Conditions in Adults 65+ and What You Can Do to Prevent or Manage Them,” National Council on Aging Blog,” entry posted February 2, 2017, <http://www.ncoa.org/blog/10-common-chronic-diseases-prevention-tips/> (accessed January 3, 2018).

¹⁹ Gentzler, *Aging and Ministry*, 35.

²⁰ Sonya Briggs, “Movement, Mobility, and Exercise,” Video recorded address, Tennessee Commission on Aging and Disability, Tennessee Tech University, Cookeville, TN, July 25, 2015, <https://www.tn.gov/aging/aging-well/State-of-aging/movement—mobility-and-exercise.html>. (accessed October 23, 2017).

information, slows as we age, but it is not an indicator that older adults are incapable of processing complex information, or of a neurological disease. Neither is “forgetfulness,” the other stereotyped symptom of aging, an indicator of the dreaded disease, Alzheimer’s. Equally, if not more so, an older adult’s inability to remember things as well as they once did is result of lacking mental stimulation and engagement, or a side-effect of medication; specifically those used to regulate high blood pressure. Often, when alternative treatments are utilized the memory loss is largely reversible.²¹ The upshot is that much our culture assumes is inevitable and negative as it pertains to growing old is a byproduct not of aging itself but the lifestyle choices made earlier in life and continued into older adulthood. It is a mistake to paint all elderly persons with expectations born out of the experiences of some.²²

Functionality

The above characterizations have a profound effect on how we view, value, and relate to older adults. Perhaps none, though, have as great an impact as the way American culture views people in terms of their productivity. According to Simone de Beauvoir, from around the 1970’s, human value in society became increasingly measured on the basis of one’s utility: specifically, to make a profit in a vocation.²³ Fowler, agreeing with this assessment, describes the societal shift from appreciating people in general for their virtues and usefulness to that of valuing the appearance or reality of success, wealth,

²¹ Gentzler, *Aging and Ministry*, 36.

²² Hauerwas, et al., *Growing Old in Christ*, 116.

²³ As cited in Ridenour, “The Coming of Age,” 151.

power, and celebrity.²⁴ As it pertains to employment, the most natural venue for measuring one's value in such a schema, the worker "knows that if a person becomes unproductive, sick, or *old*, he or she is disposable."²⁵ [emphasis added] It is perhaps ironic, then, that many employers still choose younger workers even though older adults are, generally speaking, more productive, creative, loyal, and less likely to be absent than their younger colleagues.²⁶ Yet, it should come as no surprise that, as Houston and Parker muse, a "materialistic culture can only cultivate utilitarian values."²⁷

This overarching metric of production in valuing people, and which produces such an adverse effect on older adults in particular, is an outgrowth of the aims of a "therapeutic culture" according to Meador and Henson. Aging is seen as an illness of human existence that is to be overcome through medically extending life and self-actualized psychological wellness.²⁸ Furthermore, the aim of the therapeutic culture is not only to feel well, but "to retain the strength to accomplish the same things as the young."²⁹ In this way, the old are measured not according to how well they make use of the capacities they do have, but rather by the capabilities of their younger selves.

Returning to the examples of employment and financial productivity, a consequence of characterizing older adults based upon functionality is that can often be viewed as a

²⁴ James W. Fowler, *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian: Adult Development & Christian Faith* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 2000), 2.

²⁵ Julie A. Gorman, *Community that is Christian: A Handbook on Small Groups*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2002), 71.

²⁶ Robb, "Aging and Ageism," 114.

²⁷ Houston and Parker, *A Vision for the Aging Church*, 106.

²⁸ Hauerwas, et al., *Growing Old in Christ*, 94-96.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 95.

burden on younger generations by no longer “contributing.” If older adults are cared for through pensions or public assistance “the wellbeing of one group is believed to detract from another.”³⁰ Old age is seen in much of Western society, then, as a “scientific and technical problem”³¹ to be solved.

Given the above stereotypes and characterizations, there is little doubt that “decline is the interpretive key that dominates our cultural understanding of aging.”³² We value productivity and utility to the detriment of seeking out a person’s intrinsic human worth based upon other virtues with which life might be seen to hold meaning and significance.

The Church

Robert Hull, in an article for *Christian Standard*, notes that in observing contemporary marketing, in which movies, cars, and personal technology like Apple digital products are frequently exemplified, older adults do not matter culturally. He goes on to inquire, though, “do we matter to the church?”³³ It is assumed that any pastor or church leadership team would not hesitate to answer yes to such a question. Furthermore, most all would definitely mean what they say. However, what is said does not always match what the church as a whole does regarding older adults. The shape of a

³⁰ Ibid., 235-236.

³¹ Paul J. Wadell, “The Call Goes On,” *Christian Century* (April, 19, 2011), 12.

³² Hauerwas, et al., *Growing Old in Christ*, 114.

³³ Robert Hull, “Demographic Darwinism and the Church,” *Christian Standard* (September 2, 2012) <http://www.christianstandard.com/2012/09/demographic-darwinism-and-the-church/> (accessed March 21, 2017).

congregation's ministry and how it measures success and effectiveness often shows a different picture than the affirmation.

On the surface, it would only be logical to pay conscious attention to the older adults who are a part of our congregations, as the church in the United States is aging faster than American society as a whole.³⁴ The United Methodist Church, the denomination I currently serve, holds a membership in which 55% are older than fifty-five and around 30% are older than sixty-five years of age as of 2008.³⁵ Older adults are not only continuing to become a larger percentage of the wider society and church, but on average they give more financially to their congregations and participate more regularly in activities like Sunday morning worship. Their engagement holds out the opportunity for faithfully guiding the direction of the church both now and in the future.³⁶

Paradigms of Ministry

Many denominations and Christian fellowships in America continue to see declines in membership and church participation. This is especially true in the Mainline Protestant denominations. General Conferences and Synods have labored for decades around the need for revitalization and renewed effectiveness. Committees and working groups ask seminal questions aiming to reclaim historically effective norms of ministry and mission. The goal is to translate answers to those inquiries into workable strategies. Quite often, these strategies seek to focus the church's efforts toward engaging particular groups of people with the expectation that doing so will reverse the decline and breathe

³⁴ Ross Henry Larson, "Reverie at Mile 100," *The Clergy Journal* (May/June 2001), 15.

³⁵ Gentzler, *Aging and Ministry*, 25.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 12.

new life into the American church. Given the mere demographic statistics alone, one would be led to believe older adults would rate as integral to any such endeavor. And yet, this is simply not the case.

In a 2001 article for *The Clergy Journal*, Ross Larson makes the bold claim that for fifty years the unwritten law of denominations and churches has been to focus primarily on youth and younger generations as the way to deal with the aging membership in our congregations.³⁷ Ron Crandall offers ideas and methods for renewing the life of small membership congregations in *Turnaround Strategies for the Small Church*. Of the twelve strategies aimed at church renewal and effectiveness summarized in his work, the only ministry function or program offering is to “develop new programs, especially for children and youth.”³⁸ Widely-referenced and popular church mission leaders, Eddie Gibbs and Reggie McNeal, also offer their thought on how to refocus the church in our changing cultural circumstances. In *Church Next: Quantum Changes in How We Do Ministry*, Gibbs intimates that while it is true that the church must minister to “all comers,” the future of the church is to be found in focusing on Generation-X and moving “beyond [the church’s] preoccupation with baby boomers”³⁹ McNeal takes an even more intergenerational approach to ministry in his work, *Missional Renaissance: Changing the Scorecard for the Church*. However, upon closer inspection, one finds that the examples of training, growing, and service are geared toward the incorporation of

³⁷ Larson, “Reverie at Mile 100,” 15.

³⁸ Ron Crandall, *Turnaround Strategies for the Small Church*, Effective Church Series, ed. Herb Miller (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1995) , 23.

³⁹ Eddie Gibbs, *Church Next: Quantum Changes in How We Do Ministry* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 19, 218.

children and students, not necessarily older adults.⁴⁰ Many churches follow the counsel of such leaders in how they program for ministry. Given the population bomb of older adults in the United States and western culture, most churches nevertheless prioritize either youth or corporate worship services when considering adding ministerial staff. There is little strategic thought put into what one might consider an “elder ministry” position.⁴¹ In our schools of theological and ministerial training, few seminaries offer much in the way of “gerontological content”⁴² in their curriculums beyond a section in larger courses on pastoral ministry. As the above examples illustrate, when considering how the church values older adults, positive affirmations are mitigated by the paradigms of ministry in which the church engages.

Ministry To, Not With

Between 1999 and 2005, The American Church Research Project conducted a study of eighty-five thousand Protestant churches. As a part of their research, the project collected data on congregations and their members’ income levels, location, education, the percentage of households with children under eighteen-years old, poverty levels, racial and ethnic backgrounds, age of the congregation, and population growth in the surrounding area. Of all the factors considered, the study concluded that there was no statistical difference between growing churches and declining churches based on them.⁴³

⁴⁰ Reggie McNeal, *Missional Renaissance: Changing the Scorecard for the Church* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2009), 108-109.

⁴¹ Larson, “Reverie at Mile 100,” 16.

⁴² Houston and Parker, *A Vision for the Aging Church*, 41.

⁴³ David T. Olson, *The American Church in Crisis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008), 132.

These results may seem surprising, but they point to the need to look in other areas of church life to help explain the level of vitality in congregations and their ministry.

When contemplating the perceived value older adults have within the church, a phenomenon similar to the one referenced in the above study is in play. Like the surrounding secular culture, the church tends to paint older adults with too broad a brush and measure their involvement and effectiveness in congregational life and mission with a metric unsuited for the aging to whom it is applied. The church, like American and Western culture measures the capacity and effectiveness of older adults on the basis of their productivity. Hull states that the trajectory of the church's life and mission is too often determined for all by the standard of younger generations who are "demographically most influential" and construct a system that he terms, in Darwinian parlance, is "survival of the fittest."⁴⁴ It is an activist measurement of mission that sees value in those church members who are able to "do." In such a system, when older adults are no longer able to be as *utilitarian*—especially in physical aspects such as maintaining a dizzying committee schedule, effectively managing a Vacation Bible School class of energetic, young children, or participating in physically-demanding short term mission trips—they can be seen as no longer of value in the church's mission.⁴⁵ Instead, older adults may be perceived as a burden to churches that measures ministry in this way. This is a natural byproduct, say Houston and Parker, when a church is geared toward the affinities believed to engage the young in a ministry of visible production.⁴⁶ The result is

⁴⁴ Hull, "Demographic Darwinism."

⁴⁵ Houston and Parker, *A Vision for the Aging Church*, 178.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 49.

that the church finds itself seeking to minister *to* older adults rather than purposefully working to equip and engage them *in* ministry.

Commenting on a 2002 survey of the United Methodist Church's General Board of Discipleship, Gentler notes:

The mission of older-adult ministry in most of our churches [UMC] appears to be planning social and fellowship activities for older adults, while providing outreach and service and providing spiritual growth opportunities takes a distant second and third place.⁴⁷

A church that gives highest priority to what R. Paul Stevens terms the “Sunday gifts”⁴⁸ of ministry, of which many older adults may no longer be capable, only encourages passivity among its members. Lacking understanding in how to foster ministry among the elderly—or even that they can in such a paradigm—the church most often only offers diversions and social activities.⁴⁹ A negative consequence for older adults, whose lives are perceived to have lost value within their church and are segregated from activities of the larger congregation, is the tendency to become “defensive or nostalgic about [their] generation and era”⁵⁰ in the life of the church. The upshot is that many older adults are treated merely as members and not disciples expected to share in the work ministry in appreciated ways.

⁴⁷ Gentzler, *The Graying of the Church*, 34.

⁴⁸ Gary A. Parrett and S. Steve Kang, *Teaching the Faith, Forming the Faithful: A Biblical Vision for Education in the Church* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), 420-423.

⁴⁹ Richard P. Johnson, *Parish Ministry for Maturing Adults: Principles, Plans, & Bold Proposals* (New London, CT: Twenty Third Publications, 2007), 5-7.

⁵⁰ David McCarthy, “Generational Conflict: Continuity and Change” in Hauerwas, et al., *Growing Old in Christ*, 245-246.

A contributing factor in ministering to rather than with or among older adults in the church is a flaw in our understanding of discipleship itself. Rather than purposefully discipling people throughout their life with the understanding that what fosters continued growth changes as we move from one season of life to another, churches too often assume that maturity in faith and service happens naturally as we grow older. Simply being a part of the church over time carries the expectation, at least functionally, of spiritual formation. Ministry with the aging, then, becomes a natural occurrence like growing old itself rather than an intentional focus.⁵¹ But as McNeal himself reminds us, “there is no necessary correlation between time logged sitting in pews and attaining godliness.”⁵² Add to this the fact that most ministry programs regarding older adults were developed during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries which, like Medicare and Social Security, were designed with shorter lifespans for participants in mind.⁵³ It is not difficult to see in this situation how the church can find itself at a loss in dealing with members living beyond the idealized timeframe in which fruitful discipleship and mission is conducted and with much altered capacities that do not match that timeframe’s expectations.

Perceptions of Older Adults (MDiv Class Interview Summary)

In order to check the validity of the conclusions from the above sections, it would be wise to compare them to older adults contemporary to this project. With that in mind, and in order to obtain a larger amount of data, Dr. Jack Holland, a professor of Christian

⁵¹ Larson, “Reverie at Mile 100,” 15.

⁵² McNeal, *Missional Renaissance*, 100.

⁵³ Houston and Parker, *A Vision for the Aging Church*, 41.

Ministry with Emmanuel Christian Seminary at Milligan College provided the opportunity to do so through a course he taught addressing the church's ministry with older adults. Six Master's level students were assigned, as a part of Dr. Holland's course, to interview two older adults each with questions provided by me. These were a select set from among a larger number of questions used among prayer group participants. Their focus was on how these aging men and women believe both the church and wider American culture values them. The list of questions provided to the MDiv students for use in their interviews can be found in figure 1 of Appendix 1. Once the interviews were completed, students then compiled and submitted a report of the responses made by these older adults. Using methods synthesized from Tim Sensing's *Qualitative Research: A Multi-Methods Approach to Projects for Doctor of Ministry Theses* and *The Long Interview* by Grant McCracken⁵⁴, the reports were analyzed to generate summary themes. Interviewee statements were observed and then compared and contrasted within the same individual report. Observations from each individual report were then compared to those across all student interview submissions. Finally, themes were developed by looking for redundant observations across all reports, moving from how individual older adults see the world around them to that of the group as a whole. To protect the anonymity of the older adults participants, both those interviewed by the MDiv. students as well as the other cohort groups of this project, a labeling system was utilized in order to specifically reference particular responses while masking individual identities. Abbreviations were

⁵⁴ See Grant McCracken, *The Long Interview*, vol. 13 of *Qualitative Research Methods* (London: Sage Publications, 1988) as well as Tim Sensing, *Qualitative Research: A Multi-Methods Approach to Projects for Doctor of Ministry Theses* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2011), Kindle Reader e-book.

used to distinguish whether participants are either “young-old,” “old-old,” male or female, and then a number for designating an individual within that cohort group. For the purposes of this project the young-old are those adults between sixty-five and seventy-five-years old and the old-old are those, primarily, in the age range of seventy-six to eighty-nine. While those older than eighty-five can be categorized separately as the “very-old” by some scholars, they were included in the old-old group of adults here. So, as examples “YOM1” would identify *young-old male, number one* and “OOF3” would be an *old-old female, number three* within the group. This process of coding analysis will be described in more detail in chapter 5.

Themes from MDiv. Student Interviews

Upon analyzing the data from reports submitted by Dr. Holland’s six Masters students, five themes emerged. They will be discussed briefly below and are as follows: physical capabilities as metric of ministry, value through relational networks, a desire for transfer of wisdom and experience, perceptions of isolation, and loneliness as a byproduct of disconnection from a sense of Christian mission.

Physical Capabilities as Metric of Ministry

A majority of those interviewed, when asked if they felt valued by the church, responded they in fact did. Only a handful made anything approaching a negative accusation in this regard. However, in terms of how their involvement and effectiveness in ministry is evaluated most also found it was on the basis of their physical capacity. In particular, effectiveness in Christian mission and active involvement in the church was understood by these adults to be according to the health and capabilities of their younger,

“prime” season of life. When asked in what ways the church shows it values older adults, YOM2 responded that he feels respected, but worries that at times other members may feel differently “in regard to his physical limitations.” Like the church at large, YOF3 indicates that ministry among older adults in her congregation is primarily being ministered *to*, as she says “there are things going on *for us* and they *give us* small relevant groups.” [emphasis added] Perhaps the most critical comments were from an old-old female (OOF3) who spent many decades as a greeter on Sunday mornings. When she was no longer physically capable of continuing that, but sought help in actively finding other opportunities of service in which she could fit in, was told by a young pastor on staff that the church “decided to put their focus on young people.” Like so many older adults, the church made her feel like a burden to be cared for rather than re-equipped for a new season of mission.

Value in Terms of Relational Networks

An interesting result of these interviews was an insight into where the older adults interviewed by Dr. Holland’s students indeed located their true sense of value; whether in the church or the wider culture. It is the relational networks possessed by the older adults through which they measured their sense of worth within an organization or group. YOF2 sees her family as her field of mission and gave up her desire to live independently to move in with children after serious health difficulties. Out of the loss of independence, though, she has found new mission in helping to care for and mentor her grandchildren. Her experience also points to another aspect of this theme. In describing her relationship with friends, she laments losing the ability to engage with them as she did in younger

years. With fewer people to turn to with burdens, she expresses struggling with feelings of isolation. Mutual nurturing is a key aspect in how one perceives their value, as people serve others and allow others to serve them also.

The Significance of Wisdom/Experience Transfer

If having healthy relational networks is a means of feeling valued by older adults, the sought after method of development and maintenance is through the sharing of their experience with others. YOM1 believes that his church is changing to address needs too quickly and without enough thought put into their decisions. Specifically, he wants to share his life experiences in helping to heal racial differences within his surrounding community. His is a nuanced approach that, as he puts it, would not only bridge gaps between younger generations, but that of older adults in particular in “racially reconciling the older white folks to the older black folks.” Age brings the opportunity for seasoned wisdom to the church’s ministry. The caveat to this theme is that older adults who wish to transfer their wisdom and experience to contemporary and future situations must be willing to do so with the knowledge they are helping to make new models better. Those older adults who wish to be heard only with a desire to maintain a previous paradigm of ministry and life can find themselves unable to translate their experience into a new season of life. OOF3 played the organ for her congregation until she was no longer able to physically do so. Without finding or being helped by the church to share her wisdom and knowledge, it seems to her “the church is pushing me away a little.”

Perceptions of Isolation

A full half of the interviewees feel a sense of isolation from the world around them. This impacted male, female, young-old, and old-old adults in equal measure. In a world that moves and changes at an increasingly rapid pace, it can be difficult for older adults to simply keep up. To a Western culture that values those who can navigate these quick shifts older adults too often are perceived by younger generations to be living in a different world. For the older adults in such a situation, it is not that they merely feel unable to keep pace. Even more so it seems to them they are, as OOF2 explains, living in “an old person’s world and there is [sic] certain things that are gone.” The sense is one of being stranded in a world that no longer exists. OOM1 recognizes, however, that moving past such a circumstance requires older adults to break free of the inertia of entrenched life paradigms. A strong sense of continual mission and singular purpose, manifested divergently into new situations as one ages is key to overcoming this sense of stranding. Long retired from teaching, and fearing losing his mental acumen, he remains connected to his church through sharing his work and academic insights in ways that help guide leadership decision-making. Fortunately for OOM1, he is part of a congregation that opens the door to renewed and continual service by older adults.

Loneliness as a Byproduct of Disconnection from Mission

The final theme observed from the older adults interviewed as a part of Dr. Holland’s class on aging and ministry centers on loneliness. This is a corollary theme to the previous one of feeling stranded in a non-existent world from the past. Negative feelings of isolation and loneliness are not simply brought on by being alone. It is a loss

of the sense of purpose that comes from active participation in mission and the personal value derived from that engagement. When faced with this circumstance, interviewees dealt with it in one of two ways. Facing the loss of relational networks, physical capabilities of youth, and a ready venue for transferring experience, YOF4 chose the path of a kind of stoic resignation. Instead of actively seeking out new engagements, she has oriented herself to seeing her “parents, and grandparents, and younger brother . . . and my friends” once she dies. YOF2 is pursuing a different path. Faced with the difficulties and isolation mentioned above, being unable to have regular contact with friends, her loneliness has driven her to reorient her relational dependence to Christ. “Christ becomes the person she goes to first,” her interviewer comments, “and she says that it has been much better that way.” In this, she is offered the opportunity to continue engaging the contemporary world in which she lives in mission. Being concerned for her relationship with Christ and his church, but being unable to physically participate in the mission trips she so enjoyed earlier, she found a new role of “financing mission trips and praying for those on mission.” The church has remained connected to her through these endeavors and has therefore helped her maintain the relational networks necessary to stave off the degree of loneliness others suffer.

Like the earlier presentations of how the church and wider American culture demonstrate they either value or disregard older adults, the above themes illustrate some of the negative consequences when older adults are measured by the capabilities and expectations of younger generations. But the themes drawn from the interviews show that it is not all bleak. As is often the case, how the truth of a given reality is leveraged can

determine whether outcomes lead to further decline or renewal. Biblical Scripture shows in passages such as 1 Corinthians 12:7, for example, that no one is to see their primary relationship to the church as one of “passive recipients”⁵⁵ of ministry. This is true of older adults as well, for whom this distortion of mission most readily exists. Rather than seeing the aging among us as burdens measured by what they cannot do, the church especially would do well to approach older adults from the standpoint of their assets. A renewal of the contemporary church (and by extension the surrounding culture) depends on doing so. “Every member serves the whole body,” Bonhoeffer reminds us, “either to its health or to its destruction.”⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Greg Ogden, *Transforming Discipleship: Making Disciples a Few at a Time* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 24.

⁵⁶ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together: The Classic Exploration of Christian Community*, trans. John W. Doberstein (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1954), 89.

CHAPTER 2

Mission and Prayer in Biblical and Theological Perspective

When considering older adults and their current place within either the church or society at large, the reality of the nature of that participation can be missed. The church, in particular, needs clarity not only on the institutions, organizations and the place it finds for older adults within those. Throughout its history the church has recognized with varying degrees of consciousness that it exists with a purpose beyond its own existence. The discussion regarding older adult participation in that mission and how the church might better foster it among its aging members would be aided by greater understanding of that ministerial purpose.

Mission of God

The first and perhaps most important realization in any consideration of Christian mission is the fact that it is indeed God's mission. It is more than merely a case of deity, the God we know from biblical Scripture and in the person of Jesus Christ, *existing* and then people choosing to carry out works of service to honor him and make him known. God himself is in possession and control of a mission being carried out in the world. The Apostle Paul addresses this important nuance in his letter to the church at Ephesus:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace that freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace that he lavished upon us. With all wisdom and insight he has made known to us to the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a

plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.¹

Many commentators discuss and debate this passage from the standpoint of doctrines concerning predestination for salvation and human free will. However, for our purposes here it provides a different insight. Note in the passage that God's actions in Christ were chosen "before the foundation of the world" and that the love and grace demonstrated in Christ are according to "the good pleasure of his will." It is God who is at work in the world to bring about a specific goal; long-planned and implemented through his Son, Jesus. There both was and is a "plan" with a goal that is all encompassing (i.e. "gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth"). Paul here illuminates an understanding of God who, prior to any human decision, effort, or even existence, moves to accomplish his specific purposes for all creation.

Throughout the Bible, we are presented with a similar picture of God being the one with a mission for and in the world. In each case, it is God who initiates to move forward and bring about the desired end of his will. In the Abraham saga found in Genesis 11-25, God initiates relationship with Abram; instigating a move to a new territory and the promise to make him a great nation. During an encounter between God and Abram in Genesis 12, we learn that God does so in order that "all the families of the earth shall be blessed."² God's plan is further revealed as he reassures Abram (now Abraham) through the sealing of a formal covenant between them. This relationship is in furtherance of God's larger purpose in the world. Abraham and his offspring will be given

¹ Ephesians 1:3-10, NRSV.

² Genesis 12:3, NRSV.

the land of Canaan for a rightful possession wherein God reveals he will be not only the God of Abraham but also of “your offspring after you throughout their generations”³

The ancient Hebrew descendants of Abraham, known in the Bible as the nation of Israel, also illustrate that it is God himself who is on mission in the world. The book of Deuteronomy in the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament conveys that after leading the Hebrews out of Egyptian slavery at God’s behest, Moses reminds them they are:

a people holy to the LORD your God; the LORD your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on earth to be his people, his treasured possession. It was not because you were more numerous than any other people It was because the LORD loved you and kept the oath he swore to your ancestors”⁴

The people are saved, assisted, and given direction and a way of life at the instigation of God for his purpose. The nation of Israel did not merit such favor: God chose them out of the mystery of his own pleasure and good will.

Isaiah grants insight into what it is that God is working to accomplish in the establishment of Israel with the particular manner of life he proscribes for them. Christians, in reading the Hebrew Scriptures in light of Jesus, interpret him to be the servant referenced in the “Servant Song” of Isaiah 42. While this is indeed a legitimate interpretation born of Christian faith, the language describing the servant as a “chosen one” (see v. 1) points to the nation of Israel as the original referent. Isaiah describes Israel, the chosen one of God, as being “called . . . in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you,” God proclaims, “as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the

³ Genesis 17:7a, NRSV.

⁴ Deuteronomy 7:6-8, NRSV.

dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness.”⁵ It is clear that Israel, while playing a part in carrying out a mission in the world, does so under the auspices of God’s overarching purpose for not only them, but all peoples.

Of all the passages that could be discussed in illustration of the above point, there is no more potent example than God’s sending of Jesus Christ in the incarnation. Following one of the most familiar verses in all the Bible, John 3:17 explains that God sends Jesus “in order that the world might be saved through him.” Furthermore, the Apostle Paul, in elaborating on what God has brought into the world in Jesus explains that “[a]ll this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ”⁶ As we observe the narrative arc of Scripture, we can see threaded throughout that the actions of God are neither haphazard nor merely discreet incidents of the exercise of divine power. There is a will being manifested toward its culminating purpose.

We Are Invited to Participate in God’s Mission

In a helpful summary, Olson presents various elements he believes are inherent to God’s mission in Jesus Christ. Jesus came into the world to forgive sins, restore creation to a relationship with God free from the destructive bondage human sin imposed, engender a way of life governed by justice and compassion, and establish a new people of God capable of living in right relationship with him and one another.⁷ Woven together with this treatment is the vital part the new people of God, the church, is to play in realizing God’s mission in the world.

⁵ Isaiah 42:5-7, NRSV.

⁶ 2 Corinthians 5:18, NRSV.

⁷ Olson, *The American Church in Crisis*, 200-206.

To say that the church has a mission may be true, but is misleading, devoid of the crucial recognition that Christian mission is only an extension of the mission of God. In accomplishing his mission, God invites people to partner with him. Recognizing the umbrella of God's mission over the actions of the church and the purposes driving them, The Lord's Prayer of Matthew 6 demonstrates the necessary priority. "Your will be done, on earth as in heaven," Hauerwas and Willimon explain, "is first a declaration of what God is doing before it implies anything that we ought to do."⁸ God's mission takes precedent over any mere human design, however godly oriented. And yet, it is part of the nature of God's mission to in fact have men and women join him as agents of his will being worked out in the world. God in creation of the world did so with the the mind beforehand that our existence would be characterized by "good works" which are "to be our way of life."⁹ In our salvation from sin, are given not just a righteous status before God, but a divine purpose as well. "God freely elects creatures," Daniel Migliore reminds us, "to be partners in the mending of creation. Election is a call not to privilege but to service."¹⁰ Andrew Murray, in his classic work, *With Christ in the School of Prayer*, describes the service we undertake in partnership with God even more boldly. Like the figures of Abraham, Moses, Daniel, and the disciples in the New Testament, God's

⁸ Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Lord, Teach Us: The Lord's Prayer & Christian Life* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996), 64.

⁹ See Ephesians 2:8-10 and its treatment in Gary A. Parrett and S. Steve Kang, *Teaching the Faith, Forming the Faithful: A Biblical Vision for Education in the Church* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), 33.

¹⁰ Daniel L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1991), 183.

mission shared by disciples “would actually depend on them and their faithfulness.”¹¹

This purposefully designed partnership between God and his people is a theme which, as Migliore reiterates, is “deeply embedded in the biblical witness.”¹² In Exodus 8:1, God commands Pharaoh to release his Hebrew slaves in order that they may serve him in the wilderness. Jesus tells his closest followers that he came “not to be served, but to serve” in Mark 10:45. The Apostle Paul proclaims to the Corinthian church that he and his fellow missionaries relate to them as “slaves for Jesus’ sake” in 2 Corinthians 4:5. In each of these examples, we see a person or people oriented toward living out God’s intended design for a renewed creation. “Our mission is none other, no more nor less,” Glasser notes, “than participation in Jesus’ mission . . . centered in Jesus Christ.”¹³

Formation in Mission Participation

That the mission of the church is to continue and embody Christ’s ministry of reconciling humanity to God has implications for those engaging in it. One notable outcome is spiritual formation and growth in Christian maturity. If spiritual formation is “a process of being conformed to the image of Christ *for the sake of others* [emphasis added]”¹⁴ as Mulholland defines it, then it should be naturally understood that formation and mission are integrally related. Indeed, as the church commits itself to carrying out the

¹¹ Andrew Murray, *With Christ in the School of Prayer*, rev. By Harold J. Chadwick (Gainesville, FL: Bridge-Logos Publishing, 1999), 65.

¹² Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, 183.

¹³ Arthur F. Glasser with Charles E. Van Engen, Dean S. Gilliland, and Sharon B. Redford, *Announcing the Kingdom: The Story of God’s Mission in the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 12.

¹⁴ M. Robert Mulholland, Jr., *Invitation to a Journey: A Roadmap for Spiritual Formation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 12.

purposes of God in the world, it finds that mission is a “major motivation, means, and environment for spiritual formation.”¹⁵

Mission for the Aged

All people are in need of a restored relationship with God and are likewise called to share in his mission regardless of circumstances. A question of Christian life regarding older adults in the church is, then, how does one so called engage in workings of a mission-oriented relationship with God if they are not able to do so by means understood to be standard?¹⁶

God’s Care for the Aged

In contrast to Western culture and, too often, the church, God neither devalues nor disregards people when the capacities of their youth are diminished by old age. God is not the God of the young and strong only, but as Isaiah 46:4 assures, “even to your old age I am he, even when you turn gray I will carry you.” God’s concern for us is consistent throughout every season of human life. Additionally, Psalm 139 expresses that no one, in any condition of life “is beyond the sight or reach of God.”¹⁷ Neither age nor decline in physical function is a factor in how or if God chooses to be in relationship with a person. Moses also speaks of God’s impartial care for all people, including the elderly, when he reminds Israel that God “maintains covenant loyalty with those who love him and keep

¹⁵ Julie A. Gorman, *Community that is Christian: A Handbook on Small Groups*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2002), 93.

¹⁶ DeeAnn Klapp, “Biblical Foundations for a Practical Theology of Aging,” *Journal of Religious Gerontology* 15, no. 1/2 (2003): 77.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*: 80. See specifically, vv. 12-7 and 11-12.

his commandments.”¹⁸ Obedience born of devotion, not a particular physical capacity or stage of life, would seem to be the requirement for an ongoing connection to God’s presence. Echoing this sentiment, Jesus likewise commends those who would love him to “keep my word,” with the promise that both he and the Father God “will come to them and make our home with them.”¹⁹

The Equal Call of the Old

Not only does God love older adults in equal measure to all others, but he also calls them to equally share in his mission. In the New Testament, age was never a disqualification in ministry that was deemed worthwhile to God. Zechariah, Simeon, and Anna, for example, all served in various capacities in the temple in Jerusalem.²⁰ Thibault and Morgan highlight for us that far more crucial was sensitivity to the movement of God’s Spirit²¹ as the key requirement for faithful mission, irrespective of one’s age. Eom and Park quip in contrast to the chronological triggers society employs for viability in vocation that “God does not stop inviting people into ministry when they reach older adulthood. Nor does he take away blessing when people reach 65.”²² Psalm 71 insinuates that a desire for continued, valuable service by older adults throughout the entirety of life is a valid expectation:

¹⁸ Deuteronomy 7:9, NRSV.

¹⁹ John 14:23, NRSV.

²⁰ See the exploration of Luke 1-2 in Klapp, “Biblical Foundations”: 73-74.

²¹ Jane Marie Thibault and Richard L. Morgan, *Pilgrimage in the Last Third of Life: 7 Gateways to Spiritual Growth* (Nashville, TN: Upper Room Books, 2012) Kindle e-book, 47-49.

²² Steve K. Eom and Timothy K. Park, eds., *Discipleship in the 21st Century Mission* (Euiwang, Korea: East-West Center for Missions Research & Development, 2014), 59.

For you, O LORD, are my hope, my trust, O LORD, from my youth. Upon you I have leaned from my birth; it was you who took me from my mother's womb. My praise is *continually* of you. . . . O God, from my youth you have taught me, and I *still proclaim* your wondrous deeds. So even to old age and gray hairs, O God, do not forsake me, *until I proclaim* your might to all the generations to come [emphasis added].²³

Within the church, all are given gifts by God for the purpose of ministry as Paul teaches in 1 Corinthians 12. Of special note is that while they are given variously and to individuals, their effective functioning is only as the body of Christ as a whole.²⁴ In this way, all people and gifts are valuable in carrying out the mission of God in which the church participates.²⁵ Older adults who seek to be valued partners in service to God's mission can be assured that, in contrast to the world around them that sees opportunity so much a product of luck or the capacity for self-actualization,²⁶ mission is a privileged expectation provided by God.

Implications of God's Call Throughout Life

Many in the literature who discuss the place older adults have in society and the church's work and function do so through centering their thoughts around how we understand vocation. Although some follow seminal figures like Martin Luther who understood vocation to primarily refer to one's profession or job, the above description would have us take a more encompassing view. For our purposes, "vocation" is defined

²³ Psalm 71:5-6, 17-18a, NRSV.

²⁴ See especially 1 Corinthians 12:7ff.

²⁵ Parrett and Kang, *Teaching the Faith*, 419.

²⁶ R. Paul Stevens, *Ageing Matters: Finding Your Calling for the Rest of Your Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2016) Kindle e-book, 34.

in terms of the entirety of one's life as the context for responding to God's call to mission.²⁷ Seen as such, it mitigates the notion of human value rendered only through utility and production. It is with this understanding that we are able to free ourselves and others from dependence on "self-actualization,"²⁸ as Fowler puts it, to find meaningful vocation. Instead, as invited participants in mission that is given and directed by God, our vocation is found in dependent relationship and use by him.

If the utility of youth and the production appropriate and possible during that stage of life are not the measure of vocation's validity for life's entirety, new doors of possibility open for older adults. In terms of Fowler's understanding of life stage development, this indicates vocation is a dynamic, not static pursuit. As we process each new stage of life, to do so successfully means "reforming the ways we relate to others and the world."²⁹ The meaningful vocation does not reach a final and fully developed status where one "has arrived." Value in mission is experienced when one remains open and engaged with God in whatever state one might find oneself.³⁰ For either the church or older adults to dwell on what capacities from a person's past are diminished or lost threatens to overlook both the responsibility and opportunity to respond faithfully to God now.³¹ In fact, Wadell believes that feelings of resentment experienced among older

²⁷ Autumn Alcott Ridenour, "The Coming of Age: Curse or Calling? Toward a Christological Interpretation of Aging as Call in the Theology of Karl Barth and W. H. Vanstone," *Journal for the Society of Christian Ethics* 33, no. 2 (2013): 156.

²⁸ James W. Fowler, *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian: Adult Development & Christian Faith* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 2000), 81-83.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 116.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 60.

³¹ Ridenour, "The Coming of Age": 159.

adults can be staved off when any decline in former capabilities is seen in the light of being “summoned to find new opportunities to love God and neighbor.”³² The church would do well, then, to more strategically help older adults discern what God has in mind for them³³ in their current situation and stage of life with its accompanying capabilities. Older adults, for their part in relation to the church, should strive to remain flexible; significance is found in service characterized by Christ’s presence, not a specifically defined and required mode of vocation. Understandably difficult and requiring both time and discipline to process successfully, perhaps one of the most valuable services the church can provide to older adults is to make a space for this shift in focus to occur. The church that values older adults will expect them to be in mission: not as a way to demonstrate their value, but because they intrinsically possess it as an equal part of God’s missional people. Speaking of the life and discipline of Christian prayer, but applicable to our discussion here, Richard Foster advises that “the path does not produce the change; it only places us where the change can occur.”³⁴

Prayer as Mission in the Search for Vocation

In purposefully opening up space within the rhythms of its life to assist older adults in actualizing meaningful vocation, the contemporary church does not need to create opportunities *ex nihilo*. Prayer, rightly understood and engaged in as a discipline of

³² Paul J. Wadell, “The Call Goes On,” *Christian Century* (April 19, 2011): 11.

³³ Thomas B. Robb, “Aging and Ageism: Implications for the Church’s Ministry with Families,” *Church and Society* (Nov/Dec 1993): 117.

³⁴ Richard J. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth*, rev. ed. (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1988), 8.

Christian vocation, has been both mission and a means of discovering it since the beginnings of the church.

Crandall laments a modern church he believes seldom sees prayer's missiological content and nature. He goes on to say that prayer should be both understood in the church as "a ministry of its own."³⁵ "All too often," Foster agrees, "[churches] are places for everything and anything except prayer."³⁶ In contrast Jesus calls for the first century temple community, and in like manner the church, in Matthew 21:13 to be a "house of prayer." This phrase echoes the prayer of King Solomon found in 1 Kings 8:22-53, where in dedication of the temple, it is the prayer of God's people, not ritual sacrifice, he expects to be the focus of activity there.³⁷ The early church "began as a praying community of praying followers," says Wolpert, "who then became a community of pray-ers leading as they themselves were led by the Spirit."³⁸ The New Testament offers multiple examples of prayer woven integrally within Christian life, of which the following are representative:³⁹

James 5:16; 1 Thessalonians 5:11	Prayer for Fellow Believers/One Another
Ephesians 6:18	Prayer for the Church

³⁵ Ron Crandall, *Turnaround Strategies for the Small Church*, Effective Church Series, ed. Herb Miller (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1995), 49.

³⁶ Richard J. Foster, *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home* (San Francisco, CA: Harper Collins Publishers, 1992), 198.

³⁷ Samuel E. Balentine, *Prayer in the Hebrew Bible: The Drama of Divine-Human Dialogue*, Overtures to Biblical Theology (Mineapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993), 273.

³⁸ Daniel Wolpert, *Leading a Life with God: The Practice of Spiritual Leadership* (Nashville, TN: Upper Room Books, 2006), 152.

³⁹ Christina Embree, "Intercessory Prayer Across Generations: A Case Study," *Christian Education Journal* 14, no. 1 (2017): 135.

Colossians 4:3-4	Prayer for Leaders
James 5:14	Prayer for the Sick
1 John 5:16-17	Prayer for Sinners
1 Timothy 2:1	Prayer for Humanity in General

Beyond the fact of prayer as a regular rhythm of church life in the New Testament, prayer was intrinsic to the effective conduction of the church's mission. Luke-Acts presents a narrative in which God consistently acts through and on behalf of those who prayed, in furtherance of his mission.⁴⁰ This is because as God's mission, not one human beings can rightly manage in creaturely terms, "missions is not primarily a strategic endeavor, it is a spiritual endeavor."⁴¹

Pursuit of Prayer in Witness of the New Testament

One could scan the entirety of the New Testament in illustration of the connection prayer has to the mission of God. For the purposes of our discussion, it is sufficient to more narrowly focus this brief exploration on the Luke-Acts complex of writings. Together, they bear witness to Jesus' life of prayer and also show his earliest disciples after the resurrection in similar fashion.

Considering prayer and the various reasons Jesus engages in it, one is struck by the fact that the accounts of Jesus praying in Luke's Gospel orbit around acts of mission. At the inauguration of his formal ministry through his baptism by John and God's confirmation of his identity as Son of God, Luke 3:21 shares that this takes place while

⁴⁰ David Crump, *Knocking on Heaven's Door: A New Testament Theology of Petitionary Prayer* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 195.

⁴¹ Richard H. Gentzler, Jr., *Aging and Ministry in the 21st Century: An Inquiry Approach* (Nashville, TN: Discipleship Resources, 2008), 25.

Jesus is in the midst of prayer: “and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.’”⁴² It is in the following verse that Luke tells us Jesus “began his work.”⁴³ While the exact content of his prayer is not revealed, we also find Jesus spending an entire night in prayer just prior to choosing the twelve men he would disciple to be his apostles.⁴⁴ The transfiguration account in Luke 9:28-36, in which Jesus’ glory and destiny is revealed to Peter, James, and John on the mountaintop, also occurs in the context of prayer. Before his death on the cross, Jesus journeys with his disciples to the Mount of Olives to again pray. In response to the temptation to avoid his suffering and to seek the courage necessary for obedience, Jesus asks God the Father to “remove this cup from me; yet not my will but yours be done.”⁴⁵ On the importance of this event, Ridenour believes that it is precisely in prayer that Jesus “steps forward to fulfill his work or calling [on the cross].”⁴⁶ Understood this way, prayer is the catalyst for the fulfillment of Jesus’ sacrificial vocation. It is also notable that Jesus attempts to incorporate his disciples in this act of mission by asking them to pray in concert with him regarding his mission. This is not the first incident, though, in which Jesus encourages his followers to model his prayer behavior as a part of learning to be in mission as he is.

⁴² Luke 3:21b-22, NRSV.

⁴³ See Luke 3:23.

⁴⁴ Luke 6:12-16.

⁴⁵ Luke 22:42, NRSV.

⁴⁶ Ridenour, “The Coming of Age”: 162.

The version of The Lord's Prayer familiar to most people is the longer rendition found in Matthew 6:9-13. Although Luke's account does not contain every petition Matthew does, it offers similar insights into prayer as a means of mission. Witnessing Jesus' prayer life, one of his disciples requests that Jesus teach them to pray.⁴⁷ Unlike contemporary American customs, first century Jewish culture in Israel would have been anything but bereft of prayer. It is significant, then, that a religious person of the day would have asked to be taught to pray. There is no clear indication in Luke's pericope, but it is likely that this disciple saw the efficacious nature of prayer expressed through Jesus' actions and desired to experience prayer in similar fashion. Jesus responds to this disciple, saying:

When you pray, say: Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. And do not bring us to the time of trial.⁴⁸

Most commentators take note of the priority of the petitions in the order Jesus offers them. In the same way that all Christian mission is God's mission, Jesus instructs disciples similarly to pray that the kingdom of God will come in its fulness. In doing so, one acknowledges and submits to the primacy of God's will in all other affairs. Beginning in this way orients us to filter our lives and the world around us with God's mission as the priority.⁴⁹ Secondly, prayer in service to God's mission is not disconnected or hovering above the everyday concerns of life. Indeed, it is in such need of material resources, forgiveness and reconciliation, and faithfulness in the face of testing that

⁴⁷ See Luke 1:1ff.

⁴⁸ Luke 11:2-4, NRSV.

⁴⁹ Crump, *Knocking on Heaven's Door*, 135-136.

David Crump says this prayer offers a “kingdom grid” for filtering life.⁵⁰ Unlike mission the contemporary church would see discretely compartmentalized as either cross-cultural evangelization, medical work among the underprivileged, Christian-based crisis counseling, or the work of congregational pastors, etc., prayer is an *omnibus* mission—engaged in all areas of life God desires to shape and transform. Jean Daniélou aptly describes this understanding of prayer as an empowering element bringing God’s purposes to fruition:

[Prayer] strives to bring the movement of God’s love, the Spirit, into the thick and heavy dough of human existence in order to make it rise.⁵¹

Like Jesus in the Gospel of Luke, his followers among the early church in the Book of Acts also pray as a vehicle of sharing in the mission of God. A seminal text in Acts that summarizes the ideal, if not always normalized, manner of life among early Christian believers is found in Acts 2:42. Alongside apostolic instruction in the gospel, fellowship among disciples, and sharing meals, the Christian community “devoted themselves to . . . the prayers.” These regular, set times of prayer—which became ritualized for Jews at the destruction of Solomon’s temple—are often the context for acts of service carried out by Jesus’ followers.⁵² For example, in Acts 3:11 Peter and John are traveling to the temple to participate in one of the regular times of prayer; in this case, three o’clock in the afternoon. It is on their way into the temple precincts that they

⁵⁰ Ibid., 147.

⁵¹ Jean Daniélou, *Prayer: The Mission of the Church*, trans. David Louis Schindler, Jr. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996), 97.

⁵² Parrett and Kang, *Teaching the Faith*, 409.

encounter a crippled man and restore his ability to walk.⁵³ It was at the noon hour (another time ritually set aside for prayer) that Peter stopped to pray while traveling through Joppa.⁵⁴ Out of the vision granted him during that time of prayer Peter partnered obediently with God for the Gentile conversion of Cornelius. This illustrates what, again, Daniélou suggests is prayer fostering mission in that it realigns our lives and wills with Gods; making us, then, useful vessels.⁵⁵ It is also instructive to consider how ministry was prioritized when conflicts arose in the early church surrounding food distribution among various constituencies within the church. Deciding among the possible options for mission activity among more “tangible” needs, prayer was maintained as a priority. In Acts 6:4, we are told some are chosen to take care of the widows’ food needs, while others will continue to make prayer a devoted ministry of the Christian community.⁵⁶ As the Book of Acts makes clear, it was not any sense of “activism”⁵⁷ as we might understand it today that drove and inspired the New Testament church’s mission. Prayer was the vehicle of their ministry, as it provided the opportunity for the disciples to be continuously connected to God and in submission to his will.

Prayer as Mission in Church Tradition

The church evolved in the centuries since the first Jesus followers of the New Testament. Institutional structure and increasing levels of positional leadership

⁵³ See Acts 3:1-10.

⁵⁴ See Acts 10:9ff.

⁵⁵ Daniélou, *Prayer: The Mission of the Church*, 122.

⁵⁶ Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 34.

⁵⁷ Michael Green, *Thirty Years that Changed the World: The Book of Acts for Today*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2002), 268.

hierarchies became more and more the normal expression of the church. New cultures and societal traditions were grafted into the early mix of Greco-Roman converts standing alongside Jewish followers of Jesus Messiah. Yet for all the challenges and changes, the undercurrent of prayer as a vital mission of the church remained.

The classical marks of the “true church” are described variously within traditional understandings. The Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed points toward a demarcation for the church as being one, holy, catholic, and apostolic. From the time of the Protestant Reformation, the true church is wherever the word of God is properly taught and preached and the sacraments (however many are believed to be included as such) are rightly administered. Daniel Migliore would add that in the history of the church, it is not only where the community empowered by God in Christ through the presence of the Spirit is both seen and heard, but just as importantly where people are rightly touched through God’s mission.⁵⁸ Historically, the church called people to be trained in the ways of following Christ by teaching them to pray. Most notably, the core curriculum was the Lord’s Prayer⁵⁹, discussed above. Luther’s small and large catechisms, Calvin’s Geneva catechism, and the Heidelberg catechism all had The Lord’s Prayer, along with the ten commandments of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament, and The Apostles’ Creed as content.⁶⁰ In this, the church sought to form people’s wills and vocations to be an expression of God’s purposes. Prayer, centered as it was in the formation of a person’s life, was not merely a discipline to be mastered as such by new converts. Prayer was

⁵⁸ Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, 204-205.

⁵⁹ Hauerwas and Willimon, *Lord, Teach Us*, 18.

⁶⁰ Parrett and Kang, *Teaching the Faith*, 112.

listening to God to be more fully drawn into the kingdom story, its rhythms of life, and conformity to God's mission as one is conformed to Jesus' life.⁶¹ "Prayer is a primary means of ministry," Samuel Balentine notes, "wherever the faithful are in communion with God. . . . [T]he church is summoned to a ministry that both promotes and enables this dialogue."⁶² Perhaps the most readily accessible example of prayer as mission in popular knowledge are believers within the monastic tradition. Monks formed and informed by praying the Daily Office did so as a missional function of the church-at-large. It is perhaps no coincidence, then, that some of the most prolific of those we would consider "missionaries" were also some of the first great contemplative pray-ers. Francis of Assisi, Ignatius of Loyola, Bernard of Clairvaux, and Teresa of Avila all gave themselves to witness and service out of zeal enflamed in the monastery at prayer.⁶³ Among later Christian leaders of history, prayer continued to be understood as a necessary catalyst for mission. John Wesley, for example, is remembered to have said that he understood God as doing "nothing but in answer to prayer."⁶⁴ In this vein, Christian denominations of the Wesleyan tradition, such as the United Methodist Church, who believe the situational application of God's grace to people can be "prevenient" or, employed prior to conversion in the calling of one to faith, naturally see prayer as a vital ministry in service of God's mission to reconcile all people to himself.⁶⁵ The long arc of church history

⁶¹ Reggie McNeal, *Missional Renaissance: Changing the Scorecard for the Church* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2009), 114.

⁶² Balentine, *Prayer in the Hebrew Bible*, 274.

⁶³ Daniélou, *Prayer: The Mission of the Church*, 96.

⁶⁴ John Wesley, as quoted in Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 34.

⁶⁵ Crandall, *Turnaround Strategies*, 125.

conveys prayer as indeed a key environment in which God works both *in* and *through* his people to accomplish his goals. The church at its best today continues to promote it as such.

Prayer in an Asset-Based Search for Mission by Older Adults

The movement of these first two chapters has been to demonstrate, briefly, that the contemporary church found within Western (specifically American) society has cultural roadblocks to seeing older adults with the intrinsic value God places in all people. Specifically, this is propagated by a metric of functional utility based on the capabilities and goals of more youthful generations being applied to older adults who no longer necessarily possess the capacity to “keep up” on those terms. In attempting through this project to explore if the above paradigm can be shifted in a more positive direction, where older adults are allowed and encouraged to be valuable agents of God’s mission, the question becomes how might one do so? I believe an answer to this question is for the church’s leadership to be more adaptive in nurturing the older adults they pastor on the basis of the capabilities the elderly *do* have. In this asset-based approach, older adults can potentially be helped to learn and continue growing in vocation in the midst of ever-changing seasons of human life. This in contrast to simply providing ready-made answers to solve the “technical” problem of an aging congregation.⁶⁶ Put differently, if the church faces a situation where its older adults are not actively engaging in mission, the proper response is not merely to try to dragoon the elderly into a program specifically for them, but based on production of outcome. Neither is being satisfied with simply

⁶⁶ Gil Rendle, *Journey in the Wilderness: New Life for Mainline Churches* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2010), 88.

finding leisure-style activities to occupy their time, segregated from the rest of the church, a model instilling value born of mission. It would seem that coupling an asset-based model of ministry among older adults with prayer understood as the vehicle of mission could lead to a more efficacious relationship between the church and the older adults who continue to become a larger percentage of its members.

CHAPTER 3

Conclusions Leading to Question(s)

The previous chapters explored the place both the church and contemporary society offer to the older adults in their midst. Given the findings of the literature review and, especially the themes derived from the interviews of older adults by Dr. Holland's MDiv. students, several conclusions come to the surface. These not only impact the validity of the primary question of this project, but also the design of research. The following is a short summary of these insights.

The first conclusion is that *prayer connects Christian disciples to a God who is consistent*. As was demonstrated in chapter 2, God has distinct purposes for creation. Furthermore, he is actively engaged in bring those purposes to full realization. While the cultures in which God labors to this end change and evolve, his will for them does not. Prayer is rightly understood as a foundational means of being in relationship with the God known in Jesus Christ; the one whom Scripture promises “is the the same yesterday and today and forever.”¹

Second, *prayer, as an ongoing discipline, fosters stability in the midst of a dynamic experience of life*. For older adults who to varying degrees experience diminishment of capability compared to earlier periods of life, the opportunity to be connected to a person and power that is eternally consistent is desirable. A life bathed in

¹ Hebrews 13:8, NRSV.

the discipline of prayer helps us step into the reality God is bringing about and which contrasts the changing narrative(s) of the world.²

Third, *the openness required of prayer promotes a willingness to engage in new paradigms of activity and perception*. Classically understood, prayer means listening to, submitting to, and responding obediently to the God with whom we are engaged in this discipline. At the same time, this necessary flexibility is undergirded by the stability of relationship with God who is steadfast and reliably faithful. Rather than fight against their contemporary *sitz em leben* or unnecessarily harbor resentful attitudes based on nostalgia for past seasons of life, older adults have the opportunity to continue moving into their future with renewed hope. Prayer, says Crump, “cultivates the necessary spirit of cooperation”³ required to be co-laborers with God.

The primary question this project seeks to address is: *If older adults are encouraged to (rightly) practice and recognize prayer as mission with God and on behalf of the church, in what ways would that impact their understanding of mission, of their ministry at this stage of their lives, and of using the capabilities they have for Christian mission?* From this question and the above summary of insights, several secondary questions arise (in addition to those used in the MDiv. student interviews) which will be addressed through the research and analysis of this project. They are as follows:

² Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Lord, Teach Us: The Lord's Prayer & Christian Life* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996), 66-67.

³ David Crump, *Knocking on Heaven's Door: A New Testament Theology of Petitionary Prayer* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 196.

How might prayer specifically for the church's mission by older adults affect their perception of being valued by the church?

What might the church gain by approaching ministry involving older adults as ministry "among" and "with" them, rather than only "to" them?

What are the perceptions of ministry in making use of their gifts for ministry at their stage of life?

What, in regard to how Fall Branch United Methodist Church understands its mission to "make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world" would need to change, if it interpreted that mission through the lens of the capabilities of the older adults currently making up a majority of its membership?

What ministry might be inaugurated if the church facilitated and supported older adults pursuing a mission given to them by God?

PART TWO

CHAPTER 4

Project Research Design

This chapter will describe the design of the field research for this project. To be included are summaries of the primary context for the gathering of raw data, the instruments utilized among research participants, and the process in which research participants were involved. Finally, this chapter of the project report will summarize the rationale for making Scripture-based prayer the primary task of the project small groups.

Context of Research

As was seen in chapter two, prayer can be considered the “omnibus” mission of the church; focusing as it does, on the overarching will of God in and for creation. All other specific and localized mission(s), by whatever disciple, at whatever stage of their discipleship, flows from this source. Prayer, not activism, inspired and drove Christian mission in the earliest centuries of the church. Yet, given the disconnect at times between the contemporary church, older adult members, and Christian mission, a more nuanced approach than simply asking the elderly of the church to pray more would seem to be in order. Of the conclusions from the literature review regarding prayer in chapter three, a corollary not specifically detailed, but incumbent upon them all, is the role that a purposeful community plays in making prayer an efficacious spiritual discipline and catalyst for Christian mission. As such, the context for the field research of this project will be designed around small groups of older adults engaging in prayer together.

Small Groups

Small groups of Christians within a larger congregation of believers have been utilized for a variety of reasons throughout the church's history. For the purposes of this project, they are the context for participation by older adult volunteers in the research and through which much of the raw data will be collected. In the attempt to discern if prayer can not only be seen as mission, but additionally a catalyst for particular manifestations of mission among older adults, small groups are ideal. Latini posits that it is precisely the engagement, discussion, and practice of faith within the Christian small group that helps participants practice faith *outside* the group.¹ The life lived outside the small group is more likely to be lived in greater faithfulness because of the faith learned and practiced within the group. Rendle believes this is the case because the best mission and mission decisions happen not at the instigation of individualists, but within "a movement with others who are also looking for new paths"² It is in purposeful engagement of a small group that older adults have an opportunity to be *interdependent* among one another for spiritual growth and discover the value of not only being with but for others.³

Three local United Methodist congregations in close geographic proximity to each other were contacted and, with the agreement of each church's senior pastor, invitations (see Figure 2 in Appendix 1) were given for older adults to attend an informational

¹ Theresa F. Latini, *The Church and the Crisis of Community: A Practical Theology of Small-Group Ministry* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2011), 53.

² Gil Rendle, *Journey in the Wilderness: New Life for Mainline Churches* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2010), 138.

³ Latini, 122-123.

meeting explaining the goals of the project and to encourage their participation. Among the three congregations in which a presentation was made, only older adults from two of them, Fall Branch United Methodist Church and Colonial Heights United Methodist Church, chose to participate in the project's small groups. Within each of the participating congregations, a minimum of two, distinct small groups of volunteers was required to be formed, up to a maximum of four. These requirements were set in order to provide an opportunity to compare the experiences of small groups within each congregation, while likewise not proving to be unwieldy for overall analysis should the groups become too numerous.

Triads

The generally understood make-up of Christian small groups, regardless of the group's purpose, is the periodic meeting of between eight to fifteen individuals. It is thought that this range of members provides enough people for good diversity in discussion while not having so many participants that it becomes easy for an individual to merely observe without active engagement. For this project, however, each of the two to four small groups within participating congregations consists of three older adults.

According to Greg Ogden, small groups of three or, "triads," hold an important key to the development of mission among disciples.⁴ As will be described in the following section, a core need of the groups in this project's research is the ability to have regular opportunities for deep discussion of each participant's experiences and understandings. Unlike larger groups that by their nature limit the capacity of individuals

⁴ Greg Ogden, *Transforming Discipleship: Making Disciples a Few at a Time* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2003), 15.

to share in any given gathering, and pairs that gravitate toward “mentor-mentee” relationships, triads are more open to fostering dialogue among members interchangeably.⁵ Discipling pairs may offer maximum space for discussion between two people in comparison to larger groups, but a hierarchy can develop with one participant often defaulting to a leading position that attenuates true dialogue. Echoing Ogden, Neil Cole also believes three members are ideal for the obvious reason that it is difficult to remain anonymous in such a small-numbered group. A corollary benefit of the triad is it has the potential to mitigate the more reticent to participate being overwhelmed by their perception of having an outsider status in a larger group.⁶ Organizationally, the smaller the group, the more nimble and flexible it can be in carrying out the tasks to which all are assigned as a part of the research. Part of the intention of the design of these groups is to allow as much freedom within the structure of the process as possible. How a particular triad within the larger cohort of older adults from each congregation functions differently than others may also prove insightful.⁷ It is within these small groups of three, then, that older adult participants will hopefully be able “to share stories from their lives that shed light on the issue at hand.”⁸

⁵ Ibid., 146-149.

⁶ Neil Cole, *Cultivating a Life for God: Multiplying Disciples Through Life Transformation Groups* (Carol Stream, IL: Church Smart Resources, 1999), 50.

⁷ Julie A Gorman, *Community That Is Christian: A Handbook on Small Groups*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2002), 118.

⁸ Linda J. Vogel, “Creating Learning Environments for Mature Adults that Foster Creativity and Faith Formation,” *Christian Education Journal* 5, no. 2 (2008): 326.

Group Process

At the orientation and invitation meetings at FBUMC and CHUMC that met on August 22 and 27, 2017, respectively, the goals of the project as well as the process in which the older adults present were being asked to participate were explained. For those agreeing to join one of the research groups, weekly meetings would begin the week of September 17, 2017 and continue about one quarter of the year, for a total of thirteen weeks. Groups would therefore complete their required weekly meetings in mid-December 2017. From FBUMC, eight individuals signed up to be a part of the project. The invitational meeting at CHUMC garnered twelve volunteers. However, between the initial meeting and the beginning weekly group gatherings, one older adult from the CHUMC cohort was forced to withdraw from the project, leaving only eleven volunteers from this congregation. As is obvious, these counts do not make for an even number of triad groups among either congregation. Because it is believed that a group slightly larger than three is preferable to pairs, the researcher decided in consultation with the cohort from FBUMC to proceed with two groups of four members each. At CHUMC, instead of the original four triads, it was similarly decided to meet weekly with three triads and one group of two. Group assignments were made by the researcher among all groups at each congregation, mixing together men and women, as well as the young-old and old-old among them. Although the older adults of the overall groups within the respective churches had know each other for many years already, no married couples, specifically, were assigned to the same group. This was done in an effort to curtail potential

hindrances in sharing what an individual might be thinking or feeling in group discussions due to any notions it would be a detriment to their spousal relationship.

Summary of Group Process

Prior to the beginning of group meetings each participant was given an initial questionnaire to be completed and submitted to the researcher at the first weekly meeting. As a part of this questionnaire, individuals were asked to provide their name, age, sex, and how long they had been a member or regular participant of the congregation. Additionally, this initial instrument asked the participant to respond to ten questions addressing their understanding and practice of prayer, their sense of Christian mission, and a sense of their perceived value among others and within the church. As was described earlier, each individual was given an alphanumeric designation based on this initial questionnaire to reference them anonymously throughout the remainder of their involvement in this project. The ten questions of the initial questionnaire are listed below:

1. How would you describe your practice of prayer?
2. Do you pray regularly with a group of other Christians? Would you describe that experience?
3. As an older adult, will you discuss how you feel society and the church value you?
4. In what ministries of the church are you personally involved? Please describe your participation. How often do you serve?
5. What do you see as the primary mission of the church? How do you see yourself fitting into that mission?
6. What do you desire most to do and/or be for God? Are there impediments to making that desire a reality? If so, please describe them.

7. The stated mission of the United Methodist Church, to which this congregation belongs, is “to make disciples of Jesus Christ, for the transformation of the world.” How do you feel connected to that mission?
8. Are there types of ministry in which you feel underutilized? Please explain.
9. If someone could get to know you better, what would you say they most have to gain?
10. Discuss what signals or demonstrates to you that you are valued or under-valued by the church.

Each older adult in a group was also given a weekly session guide that provided an order of movement through the small group gatherings. Attached to the session guide was a list of thirteen biblical passages; each to be the focus of the small group’s scriptural intake on a given week. Each text was chosen by the researcher based on its perceived ability to speak to notions of the mission of God and encourage human participation in it. The Bible passages along with their discerned, thematic applications is seen in Table 1.

In order to facilitate gaining familiarity and comfort with the group process of reading selected biblical texts, discussing them according to a predetermined set of questions utilized each session, and prayer based on that discussion, the first month of meetings were conducted as a single group within each congregation. All small groups, whether triads or one of the altered groups, met collectively to be guided through reading Scripture, interacting with the discussion questions and other small group members, and prayer. During this period of weekly meetings for field research, the researcher’s primary purpose among the groups is to answer any questions about the process and/or consideration of the biblical passage for the day. All tasks of the session were completed

Table 1. Small Group Session Bible Text List

Week	Scripture Text	Text Notes/Prayer Theme
1	Daniel 4:34-35	God is sovereign; God does what he wills.
2	Genesis 11:31-12:4	God has a plan to bless; we are blessed to be a blessing.
3	Matthew 15:29-38	God among us with compassion; God uses limited resources beyond what can be in our hands.
4	Colossians 3:12-17	As disciples, we take on Christ and his way. What we do and how we do it are for his purposes and glory.
5	Mark 10:46-52	Do we really want what God offers? Proper place of disciple is following Jesus on <i>his</i> way.
6	Micah 6:6-8	Life of discipleship is way of covenant maintenance.
7	Philippians 2:1-13	Modeling Christ's self-sacrificing mission.
8	John 3:16-21	God's mission is to save; both invitation and challenge. God's mission by nature forces a choice.
9	Psalms 103:1-14	God sympathizes with our finite condition and acts in compassion toward redemption. God finds value even in our weakened (mortal) and distorted (by sin) condition.
10	John 15:9-17	Jesus lays down his life for us. We are valued as friends and return friendship by loving as he does. We love God by loving others; in doing so, God bears fruit through us.
11	Ephesians 3:14-21	Power of God's love in us accomplishes far beyond what we, alone, could even imagine.
12	Isaiah 55:1-9	God has plans to partner (offering witness and blessing of others) with those who are in covenant relationship with him.
13	Romans 12:1-8	Each Christian is given gifts as part of the church, to be utilized in building up the body of Christ. All Christians are necessarily connected and valuable to one another in the Church.

by the older adult participants within the confines of their assigned small groups after the plenary segments of the weekly gathering.

After the initial month of plenary meetings within their respective church congregations, small groups were free to meet weekly for their sessions at a time and place of their choosing. Both the groups from FBUMC and CHUMC chose to continue meeting at the same time and day as they did during the plenary gatherings, only conducting their discussions, Scripture readings, and prayer autonomously within the triads and alternate groups. Because of the opportunity this schedule provided to observe

the small groups more directly, I continued to meet weekly when each church's small groups gathered for sessions. I provided less guidance than in the month of plenary sessions, but was on hand to offering assistance as needed. Furthermore, my presence at the weekly gatherings allowed me to observe firsthand how individuals and groups developed in both their competency in the small group process and in prayer and Scripture intake for the purposes of this project. The original project design planned for conducting monthly "check-in" interviews with the cohort of small groups within each congregation. Given the choice of weekly meeting schedule by the groups and the chance it afforded for more regular observation, a single interview was employed near the end of the thirteen week series of meetings. On December 5 and 10, 2017 at FBUMC and CHUMC, respectively, a group interview of all older adult project participants was conducted at each congregation. The interviews were audio recorded and subsequently transcribed by the researcher for later analysis. As with the initial written questionnaire, anonymity was maintained in this interview transcription by designating each individual with the letter R and a number corresponding to the order in which they first offered a verbal response (e.g. R3). The primary questions asked by the researcher during these recorded interviews are listed below:

1. How would you describe your experience during the prayer group so far? What's been most valuable to you? Is there anything you'd consider least valuable?
2. What effect, if any, has your participation in the group had on your experience of prayer?
3. Do you feel the prayer groups have benefited you a lot, some, a little, or not made much of a difference? Would you describe why you believe that is the case?

4. Do you feel you spend more time during the group sessions discussing observations from Scripture readings, life situations, etc., or more time in offering prayer?
5. If you were to start over and be a part of these prayer groups again, what would improve your experience?
6. Where or when do you feel most connected to the church? Is there a group of people that make you feel more connected to and engaged with the church?
7. In what ways, if any, is your connection to God different because you have been a part of these prayer groups?
8. Is there anything your experience in these prayer groups have made you more aware of about yourself? About the church?
9. Is there anything we haven't talked about this evening that you would like to share?

The final part of the field research of this project was a concluding questionnaire distributed to all small group participants completing the thirteen week series of prayer and discussion meetings. This final questionnaire asked older adult participants to respond to questions similar to those of the initial questionnaire, with a few modifications. "Bookending" the participant experience in the small groups with these questionnaires it is intended to assist the researcher in discovering potential shifts in self-perception of personal value, understandings of prayer and the Bible, and sense of Christian vocation as older adults. The eight questions of final questionnaire are as follows:

1. Has your participation in this group altered your understanding of prayer? If so, in what ways?
2. What would you say is the most valuable experience you had through participation in this prayer group?

3. Describe any discoveries from your prayer group you think would be important to the mission and ministry of your church.
4. Are there any opportunities or ideas for faithfully serving God that have come up through your prayer group experience? If so, could you see yourself being a part? In what way(s)?
5. What do you see as the primary mission of the church? How do you see yourself fitting into that mission?
6. What do you think would need to be either initiated or “re-tooled” if the church wanted to better support older adults in pursuing a mission given to them by God?
7. Will you discuss any effects that praying together has had on your perceptions of being valued by the church?
8. Are there any thoughts you have about this experience (i.e. in the prayer groups) that these questions have not covered? Please share them.

Figure 3 offers a graphical summary of the group process described above. This graphic was also distributed to the older adults attending the orientation / invitation meeting.

Scripture-Based Prayer in Groups

It is the experience of many in American culture who pray, as well as Christians in the church that prayer is primarily intercession. One asks God to intervene in a particular situation to bring about a hoped for change. It is only natural that we gravitate toward this manner of prayer, as it is more “tangibly” understood. In praying so, we are seeking to engage the very real people and situations before us with the God in whom we trust. This is why prayer in the church, corporately, and by Christians individually, can seem to gravitate toward asking for healing of the sick or shoring up a deficiency of one’s life (e.g. a financial shortfall). Older adults, even those involved in the life of the church for decades, are not necessarily immune to a view and practice of prayer, so truncated.

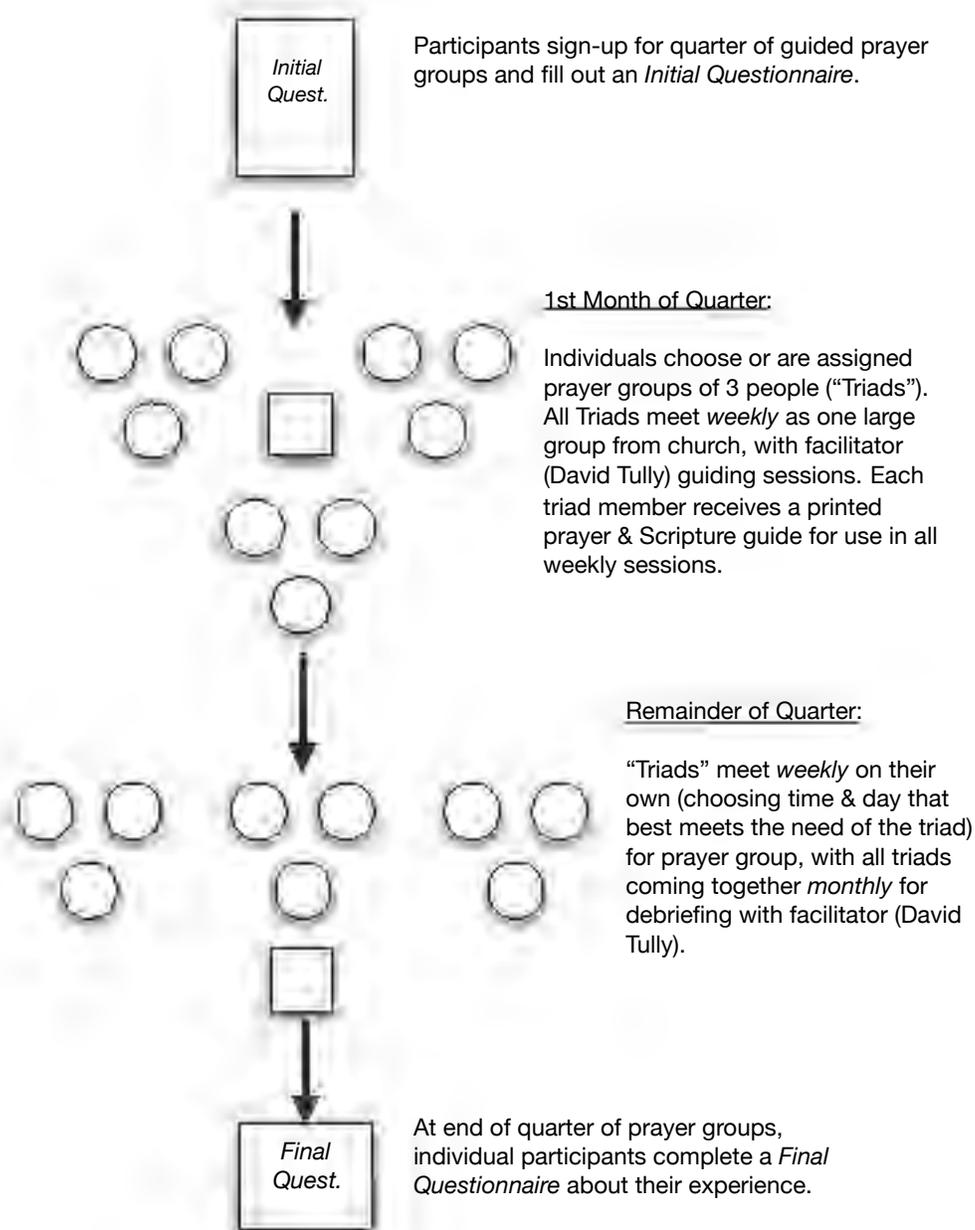


Figure 3. Prayer Group Process

As we saw earlier, however, prayer begins with listening. Learning to pray rightly, then, involves reorienting ourselves toward listening to God as the primary task of prayer.

The tasks small groups shared in as they gathered weekly centered around prayer prompted by the reading of selected passages of Scripture. The intention in this is to allow the Bible to not only provide insights into what participants pray, but also how and

to what end. In seeking to pray as both a form of Christian mission in the world as well as fostering specific acts of mission, Scripture-based prayer is “the most promising method”⁹ according to Bonhoeffer. Dallas Willard agrees, as he describes prayer guided and shaped by the Bible as essential “to our cooperative efforts with God . . .”¹⁰ Willard furthermore offers principles for properly praying with Scripture:

1. A desire for God’s will to be true for us.
2. Utilize familiar Bible passages first.
3. Trust that God will meet you in the biblical encounter.
4. Intentionally seek for God’s word to be integrated into your life
5. Seek to synthesize scriptural realities with the realities of your life.¹¹

It is taken as axiomatic that the Bible is the written word of God which most clearly reveals God and his will to humankind. As such, it can be reliably understood to also place parameters on all that God may choose to communicate to human beings. On this basis, and Willard’s principles listed above, a weekly guide was developed to help older adult participants develop the practice of prayer as listening to God and moderate their attempts to hear through biblical Scripture. This guide and the process it encourages is shown below.

OPENING

What are you most grateful for this week? For what are you least grateful? Share this with your group.

—Offer prayers of thanks, in turn, for what God is doing.

—In turn, ask God to be with a fellow group member and for them to deepen their trust in

⁹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together: The Classic Exploration of Christian Community*, trans. John W. Doberstein (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1954), 84.

¹⁰ Dallas Willard, *Hearing God: Developing a Conversational Relationship with God*, rev. ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2012), 209.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 211-214.

him.

—Pray for the Spirit of God to lead your group into greater clarity of his ways and your life with him during this time.

—Pray, then, in unison, *“Lord, lead us into all your truth—your word is truth. Teach us your ways, O Lord, that we may walk in your truth. Give us undivided hearts to revere your name. Amen.”*

SCRIPTURE

Read the following Bible passage aloud in you group (see weekly Bible text list).

—Discuss the following questions, as a way to allow Scripture to guide your group’s prayer together:

1. What does this passage bring to mind regarding who God is and/or what he is like? What insights does it give you into God’s purposes and/or intentions?
2. Is there a call to God’s people to follow in this passage? Is there something specific to your church?
3. In what way does God encourage you, personally, as his follower in this passage? In what ways are you challenged?

PRAYER

Aloud, encouraging each group member to offer prayer, or in silence, as a group:

—Prayer first concerning insights gained from your discussion of question 1, followed by prayer based on question 2, then question 3, above.

—(While there is no set amount of time to pray in each section, allow your group to “be generous” with time to “sit with” God and one another!)

CLOSING

Offer final prayer, having each group member pray aloud for the person on their right. Focus especially on how the person for whom you’re praying may be blessed and be a blessing to others.

CHAPTER 5

Project Analysis

Having gathered data from five written instruments (i.e. initial questionnaires and final questionnaires from participants of each of the two congregations, in addition to the MDiv. student questionnaires for older adult respondents) and group interviews among older adult participants of both churches, we now turn to the analysis of this information. Given the large amount of data utilized in this project and the fact that it is documentary and narrative in nature, a qualitative process of analysis was developed. Guiding this development were the methods and recommendations of Tim Sensing and Grant McCracken.¹ “The object of analysis,” McCracken states, “is to determine the categories, relationships, and assumptions that informs the respondents’ view of the world in general and the topic in particular.”² To do so, however, “requires some creativity, for the challenge is to place the raw data into logical, meaningful categories, to examine data in a holistic fashion, and to find a way to communicate the interpretation to others.”³

Methodology Synthesis

The basic, core methodology of qualitative analysis consists of formal, repetitive and progressive readings of data in order to draw out insights that address the primary question of the research. While such an approach may be caricatured as overly subjective,

¹ See both Tim Sensing, *Qualitative Research: A Multi-Methods Approach to Projects for Doctor of Ministry Theses* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2011), Kindle e-book, and Grant McCracken, *The Long Interview*, Qualitative Research Methods Series 13 (Newbury Park: Sage Publications, 1988).

² McCracken, 42.

³ Sensing, 194.

as the researcher must necessarily utilize “experience, imagination, and intellect in ways that are various and unpredictable”⁴ when analyzing data, it is not without formal processes and protocols. The elements of these methodologies work toward fostering a truly realistic view that may be mined from the raw data. Sensing describes the process of analyzing documentary data in three broad movements.⁵ First, the interpreter/researcher engages a particular respondent’s offering, in this case a questionnaire or an interview, in a *literal reading*. A transcript of the research participant’s responses to questions and engagement in discussion is read to understand the words, phrases, and language used. This is done because it is vital at this juncture that the interpreter be cognizant of what the respondent actually verbalized in the engagement. Observations of potential significance in these statements are made and noted for use in further analysis upon subsequent readings. Second, once a literal reading of the data is completed and the researcher is confident in what the respondent said or wrote, an *interpretive reading* is conducted of the same data. In this secondary reading, the researcher is seeking out any inferences of meaning that may rise to the surface from what the respondent said or, if available additionally, how the participant responded to a particular question or prompt. Finally, the researcher engages the data again in a *reflexive reading*, where the thoughts, understandings, and presuppositions of the interpreter are considered in light of the data and how the reader’s frame of reference intersects with any potential inferences of meaning discovered.

⁴ McCracken, 18.

⁵ Sensing, 196.

McCracken, in like fashion, offers a methodology of reading documentary data in qualitative analysis. Focused specifically around the analysis of data derived from interviews, I nonetheless found his recommendations useful in developing a process for all the data of this project; interviews and questionnaires alike. His five-step process⁶ can be summarized as follows:

1. In initial readings of the documentary data, treat the utterances and responses in their own terms. (This is similar to Sensing's literal reading.)
2. Develop observations from responses and utterances in terms of the evidence internal to the individual transcript.
3. Review the observations developed to ensure they are consistent and applicable within the individual transcript.
4. Consider the individual observations for any patterns they might illuminate from within the individual transcript.
5. Develop themes from any observable patterns from the individual participant's responses in the instrument.

Each participant's responses for a particular instrument are read in succession in this way until all data for that tool (e.g. a questionnaire) is so analyzed. Upon completion of this process, the patterns and themes of each individual respondent are then compared and contrasted with one another in service of developing themes for the instrument as a whole. In summary, this form of analysis involves "oscillating between bits of data and the whole context [allowing] a process of updating, refining, and modifying

⁶ McCracken, 42-52.

interpretations as an ongoing process.”⁷ For this project, the above methods were synthesized to provide a methodology of reading and coding the raw data of individual responses to an instrument, comparison of the patterns and themes of those individual data sets across examples from each instrument overall, and, finally, comparing and contrasting these observations between all instruments utilized in the project’s research to develop interpretive themes. The synthesized method of reading data used for this project is as follows and is similar to the five-stage analysis summarized above:

1. *Observe statements individually from each questionnaire.*
 - Look for meaning within an individual statement’s range of implication.
 - Consider whether or not a particular statement can function as a doorway to the assumptions and beliefs behind it.
 - Postpone the formation, at this point in the reading, of generalizing observations.
2. *Expand observations within a transcript or individual instrument.*
 - Develop stage one observations by looking for similarities in the rest of the transcript.
 - Compare and contrast observations of the individual questionnaire or interview.
3. *Comparison and contrast in a questionnaire or interview.*
 - Develop patterns and themes within the single transcript.
 - Compare observations in order to develop other observable patterns and themes through such comparison.

⁷ Sensing, 194.

- Consider if there seems to be a hierarchy within multiple themes, with one or more as primary over others.
4. *Narrowing down themes.*
- Validate and refine themes through observing any redundancies among themes of an individual transcript.
 - Formulate an “umbrella” hierarchy of themes if applicable: consider if there are any primary or dominant themes, under which others may be nested as support.
5. *Comparison of themes across multiple questionnaires or interviews.*
- Only proceed in this stage of analysis after the prior stages have been completed for all relevant questionnaires of a particular instrument (e.g. initial questionnaire, FBUMC group interview, etc.)
 - Draw conclusions and theses in comparing and contrasting all themes.
 - Movement from considering how individual participants see the world to that of the research group.

As an example of the above process, one of Dr. Holland’s graduate students, as a part of the MDiv. interview, asked an older adult participant “What has your experience been in aging?” Respondent OOM2 replied, “lonely.” The graduate student conveys in his written report that the seventy-eight year old male expands upon this response by further explaining that “when they (he and his wife) were young and traveled all over the world, they would find people their age and younger to pour their wisdom and love into. This act was fulfilling to them. In their old age they have lost that.” The notion of wisdom, coupled with the act of “pouring” what he possessed of that into others was noted as a

potentially significant observation. In reading the rest of the transcript, it was observed that this sense of loss of connection was described in other contexts as well. When these observations were compared and contrasted among others of this transcript, a pattern emerged of the desire of participant OOM2 to translate his wisdom and experience forward to the next generation. Surrounding this, and as a sub-theme nested underneath, was the additional desire of this respondent to seek involvement in service that evokes a personal sense of significance. In comparing and contrasting the patterns and themes found among the responses of OOM2 with those of the other participants in the MDiv. interview, one of the themes that came into focus was a “desire for (personal) significance fostered through wisdom and experience transfer.” Tables listing the observations for each of the instruments (i.e. initial questionnaire, final questionnaire, MDiv. interview, and the transcripts of participant “check-in” interviews) can be found in the appendixes.

Project Theme and Thesis Development

In order to move forward in the interpretation of the data of this project, and to provide a logical and organized vehicle for conveying this information, computer spreadsheets were utilized to keep observations of the raw data and the progression of analysis manageable. To this end, in addition to the spreadsheets created for each data instrument another was also developed to aid in the consideration of overall themes. While there are multiple ways these spreadsheets could themselves be organized for purposes of analysis and presentation, Sensing notes that it is helpful to organize data

around key concepts relevant to the topics of research.⁸ Given the issues considered in both the primary and secondary research questions of this project, it was decided to order this synthesizing spreadsheet according to the issues of *prayer*, the perceived *value* of older adults, and the *mission* of God in which older adults participate. The spreadsheets containing the observations and themes drawn from the initial questionnaire, final questionnaire, MDiv. interviews, and the group interviews from both participant congregations were also reengaged along these lines. For both the initial and final questionnaires, individual questions were assigned as belonging under the larger rubrics of prayer, value, or mission. How each question in an interview or questionnaire is categorized in these spreadsheets is shown under the column labeled “Question #” with either a “P,” “V,” or “M,” respectively for prayer, value, or mission. Once completed, the patterns and themes drawn from each instrument were likewise conceptually organized. Upon completion of a coding analysis of the data among all the instruments and the ordering of observations and instrument group themes according to the P/V/M construct, these themes were placed into the spreadsheet found in table 7 of the appendixes. A small section of the synthesis spreadsheet of table 7 is shown in the text below in order to illustrate what the information, so organized, conveys.

Seen in table 8, for the initial questionnaire, the composite concepts applicable to the project issue of *prayer* are listed in a single column. Taken as a whole, they are still however categorized according to the particular congregational group from which they

⁸ Ibid., 210.

Table 8. Illustrative section of synthesis spreadsheet

Initial Questionnaire			
Theme	Composite Concepts		Synthesis
Prayer	Fall Branch UMC	Functions Primarily as means of seeking God's help in moments of personal need	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Prayer is bent toward discreet acts of seeking intercession. As such, it can be somewhat of a tangential act of one's overall discipleship and/or sense of mission
		Something "accomplished as part of tasks in daily life or corporate religious rituals	
		Experienced primarily in corporate, church-initiated settings	
		Provides a personal, therapeutic effect	
	Colonial Heights UMC	Default practice is intercession at moment of need	
		Focus is on quantity/periods of prayer, rather than quality of prayer	
		Participate as "observers" of prayer in corporate environments	
		Prayer in group settings usually NOT primary purpose for gathering	

originate. In comparing and contrasting these concepts, an overall synthesis for both congregations, concerning the issue of prayer, from that data tool, were developed. The same process was carried out for the issues of *value* and *mission* for each instrument.

Project Themes

A final piece of analysis was conducted in order to develop the overall themes of this project's research findings. The synthesized insights of table 7 were compared and contrasted in a similar manner to the initial readings of the raw data. These were supplemented by my observations of participants during the period of small group meetings as they pertained to the interpretations coming to light in analysis. This was done in the effort to safeguard my interpretations from an undue weight being placed on my own experiences in attempting to answer research questions. While I am not yet an

older adult and would not be comparing similar experiences of aging to theirs, the preconceptions of value and mission I might hold regarding the aging requires conscious consideration. Finally, it was observed that participants underwent particular shifts in their understanding and attitudes concerning the issues of prayer, their sense of personal value, and ideas of mission participation. These changes, happening over the course of the thirteen week small group sessions, were made possible through comparison of how participants responded differently to similar questions found between the initial and final questionnaires. Some of the insights of these shifts will be noted in the following discussion of overall themes. A full listing is given in table 9 of the appendixes. We now turn to a discussion of the themes.

Relationships

The importance of relationships to the older adults of this project can hardly be overstated. Specifically, *relationships are the vehicle through which they evaluate and engage in ministry and mission*. At the most basic level, and what could be expected of most small group experiences, the weekly gathers provided an environment in which participant relationships could be positively nurtured. One FBUMC participant stated that they “liked the casual, loving, getting together” in which they “don’t have to look like or bring anything.” In other words, it became a comfortable way of being with one another without the need for pretense. Another older adult noted they even “made new friends.” This is remarkable in that everyone had known each other for years among the respective congregations. It demonstrates the ability of such groups to foster closer connections and a sense of belonging. This is the experience of the older adults of CHUMC as well. “You

don't say everything in a big group," explained one participant, "but in a little group we can tell each other. And I just feel closer to my friends."

Relationships were also found to be the context in which ministry is understood to be developed by older adults. When considering proper methods for engaging in any ministry undertaken by the elderly of these two congregations, emphasis was given to how those methods will either foster or hinder relational growth or maintenance. Whether it involved discussions of serving in a food pantry, greeting guests to a Sunday school class or worship service, or singing for others in a church choir, the sense of mission among participants always orbited around how these activities might encourage relational growth and strength. One of the greatest desires shared by many, when asked how their small group experience effected their sense of mission, was the strong desire to involve others in similar experiences: "I wish (the prayer groups) could be more church-wide. It would be wonderful for our whole church." This theme was manifested most notably in the shift from a sense of personal valuation in terms of what these older adults received *from* society and the church, to being found more richly *with* one another in the mutuality they have in purposefully sought relationships. Mission and value are spawned out of presence with one another. The sense of mission, while consistently demonstrated to revolve around acts of hospitality, also subtly shifted from focusing on participating in current church programs to consideration of how hospitality might be extended to people outside those structures. In a response to the final questionnaire, FBUMC respondent YOM1 offered that he might need to consider "going to the nursing home to see shut-

in's" or perhaps expanding upon the food pantry the church currently operates to "have a clothing give-away to anyone in the community or to shelters."

New Mission Metric

Another theme that emerged from the analysis of the prayer groups is coming to understand *mission as a mutual seeking of God's will and a willingness to share in it*. This is in contrast to the statically-defined metrics of mission based on one's ability to produce according to capabilities and competencies of a younger age. The primary driver of this shift was centering the focus of small group activity in Scripture-guided prayer. While some participants found this to be a new and difficult experience, it opened new avenues of growth and development as they listened to God. There was a growing sense that they could trust God to use the competencies they do possess for ministry as they shifted their focus, through group prayer, on what God is doing and in which they are being invited to participate. YOF1 of CHUMC conveys this realization "that prayer and Bible study are interrelated, that God speaks to us through Scripture and expects us to respond. . . . prayer is a natural response to reading." Another respondent of CHUMC, YOF2 says in a similar fashion that "Scripture gives me more to relate to and things to learn from others' experiences" as she seeks "to be God's hands and feet and mouth or voice with all of his people. Hopefully, God lets me be aware as needed."

A sub-theme attached to this new way of measuring mission among older adults is a recognition of *expectations* God has for them, those that older adults can have of the church and one another, and that the church can rightly hold for its older adults. Beyond the sense noted above that God's will is indeed revealed, actively and presently, with the

expectation of human response, expectations rightfully exist between the church and older adults. Rather than having the church merely be faithful to care for its older adults, in this experience the older adults grew in their desire for the church, of which they are a part, to be faithful in mission. In acknowledging that “the Bible can direct our prayers,” one FBUMC participant from the interview explained they are “praying for what the church is supposed to be doing.” This came as a newly realized experience for many. Beyond obedience in individual lives, prayer groups developed a mindset of being a participant of the church which is called to a mission corporately. Praying for the church and its mission fostered a greater sense of belonging and love for the church, even when its actions are disappointing to some of its older adult members. “(Prayer for the church’s mission) makes you love your church more. You know, all churches have their problems and we might hash’em over, but then deep down, we still love the church,” one woman revealed. Several participants of both congregations were critical of how the church can seem to hold low expectations for older adult participation in ministry, as is evidenced by their responses in the initial questionnaire. Consistent among many of the older adults of both research cohorts, YOM2 of FBUMC said initially that his sense of connection to the mission of the church was “being helpful in financial giving, as needed.” Numerous adults at the beginning of the project saw themselves, at best, in a supporting role on the margins of the church’s mission. However, as participation in the weekly prayer groups progressed, they slowly came to see that what was earlier understood as tertiary to the faithful activity of the church can indeed become active engagement on their part. The church best fosters this sense of mission engagement among older adults in relating to

them through the underlying expectation that they will indeed be actively involved. Offering his thoughts on this, OOM1 of CHUMC wryly said the church can rightly expect “not to put older people out to pasture—they can still do jobs, plus they have been there with knowledge and smarts.”

Prayer

An umbrella over the previous themes is the way in which older adult participants in this project began to see prayer from the viewpoint of mission. Specifically, *prayer as mission is one of reorienting life to key relationships*. Reflecting on biblical passages together and allowing the insights gleaned from them to guide prayer was a catalyst for this theme. Most participants at the outset of small group gatherings viewed and practiced prayer primarily as an act of intercession at a time of need either for themselves or others. The focus was on the quantity or “how often” one prays rather than a great deal of interest in its depth or “quality.” Weighing their understanding of prayer heavily toward petitions meant that it was an act of piety carried out in discreet moments rather than a relational rhythm of life. OOF1 of CHUMC, when asked in the initial questionnaire to describe her practice of prayer simply responded, “when someone has a need, I ask God to take care of it.” OOF2 states in her answer to the same question, “daily,” without follow-up, giving indication that prayer was evaluated mainly in terms of how often she engaged in the practice.

As participants continued to practice group prayer guided by Scripture, many began to shift their focus toward seeing prayer as enriching their relationship with God. Describing this evolution, YOF3 of FBUMC explains that her understanding of prayer

began to include much more often “giving God praise” as the way she initiated times of prayer. Several participants of the CHUMC cohort, in their interview, indicated that Scripture-guided prayer gave them a greater sense of connection and dependence upon God in their relationship with them. Echoing this sentiment, one respondent in the interview notes that “you can think of the thing you’re not grateful for, and you say, ‘Well, gee, I got through this week even though these things hit me.’ I’ve got more to be grateful for than not to be grateful for.” On the heels of that comment another older adult spoke up to summarize the point: “it underscores our need for God.”

The prayer group also enhanced the relationship between group members. When asked what of their prayer group experience was perhaps most valuable to them, one older adult of FBUMC said “The best part for me has been praying for others in my group. I feel supported when they pray for me, too. I get encouraged because of Christ. I’m thankful to be a part of this, my group.” Similar to other such comments, the greater connection to God is almost always mentioned in concert with a deepened connection between the older adults who were praying together. “When we were together and we prayed for each other . . . we didn’t know, really, how they felt; well we know we liked each other,” one CHUMC participant offered, “but when they prayed for you, you felt much closer to them and to God.” Additionally, as participants talked about life experiences with each other as a way of engaging and interpreting the Bible passages under discussion, it helped them to see how God was at work in their lives. For this particular small group, the times of sharing and discussion interwoven with Bible reading, as one described it, “seemed like prayer, too. Even though it wasn’t like a formal

prayer, that's to me a type of prayer." More and more, many participants began to see prayer as a way of growing and maintaining a relationship with God and other disciples than simply a petition born of need. These were not the only relationships being reoriented to varying degrees by prayer. While fewer in number among most participant comments, there were nonetheless those who saw prayer as leading them to more carefully consider their relationships with those outside the church. OOF3 of FBUMC expressed a desire, in the final questionnaire, to spend more time in fellowship with those home-bound adults to whom the congregation delivers meals on a monthly basis. Additionally, this same woman described wanting to get to know and serve the children of the public school located close to the church building. "This is a serving church," she stated. Experiencing an increase in their own feelings of valuation by the church, some believed that seeking and inviting people in the community to join a prayer group like the research project in which they participated would be helpful. In finding a greater closeness of relationship among their own group members pushed them to want to offer it to others as well.

Value in Mutuality

A fourth theme is *personal value is found in and strengthened by mutual listening around a common purpose*. More than one participant acknowledged that engaging others in the project's small groups elevated their sense of being valued, especially by the church. Purposefully meeting together for sharing life stories, reading the Bible, all leading into prayer based on those insights, created an environment in which these older adults felt cared for and important. During the interview with the CHUMC project cohort,

one participant shared how a fellow group member offered a personal story of their life with the group in a way that made them feel special. “He shared the experience that he came through it with the help of the Lord and . . . it made him a better person. I admired him for sticking with the mistake he made early, but it turned out OK.” A FBUMC interview respondent, in commenting on the effects of the group’s supportive environment said, “I got a greater awareness of the problems and stress through answering the questions together. . . . It made me start looking for my group members outside of our Tuesday meetings; to check-up on them and see how they’re doing.” That the common purpose for the small groups was to listen to God and expect to be led together through that relationship had an apparent added benefit for these older adults. As mentioned previously, more than a few project volunteers initially felt either ignored or undervalued by the church. Participation in the small group where they felt significantly accepted and cared for was projected onto the church-at-large. Perhaps recognizing this, OOF1 of CHUMC quipped that she does feel valued by her congregation, but wondered if “maybe in small groups is where the value comes from.”

Gratitude Drives Mission

The final theme brought to light from interpreting the data of this project is that among these aging church members, *mission is facilitated by a sense of reciprocal blessing*. Through the biblical texts, discussions, and prayer participants were reminded of God’s blessing on their lives. Whether materially or spiritually, what God has done for them was weekly brought to the forefront of their minds. That they were in the company of other older adults, likewise reminded and sharing that with one another, had a

multiplying effect. Weekly sessions purposefully began with older adults being asked to share with one another things they were both most and least grateful for since they last came together. One respondent from CHUMC stated that a disciplined consciousness of gratitude “set a good tone for the whole study.” Expanding upon this she continued in saying that “several Scriptures you know, were about how much God loves us So you end by thinking about the week, . . . what we were grateful for.” This increased awareness of God’s blessings, based upon reflecting on one’s life in the light of Scripture highlighting God as the source, had implications for how some of these older adults began to view their relationship to others. Participation in the prayer groups helped one older adult “realize that other people had problems, you weren’t the only one.” While several began the prayer groups doubting their competency to serve in what they perceived the church might consider a significant ministry, a shift occurred in which a growing trust in God encouraged these adults to use their current capabilities in service to others. Most often these desires manifested themselves in terms of either the transfer of wisdom and experience to others, or acts of hospitality and welcome. Being blessed by God pushes one to bless others in response. Recognizing that the heart of prayer begins and ends with gratitude can make those so blessed seek to share what they do possess with others.

Confirmation

In order to check the strength of validity in the above themes confirmation is needed. Copies of the data were given to the project advisor, Dr. Jack Holland, for his own review. While his analysis did not yield an exact match of the themes offered above,

there was a good degree of agreement in what we both observed. He saw, as shown here, an emphasis on the relationship between participants and its effect on their experiences in the group. This undercurrent of relational networks as the substance out of which much of the shifts in thought and understanding developed is common to both readings.

Additionally, Dr. Holland noted a distinct sense of joy as these older adults spent time together in the small group activities. I take this as a corollary to the theme of mutually listening to one another strengthening the participants' sense of personal valuation.

Finally, Dr. Holland observed that while members of the project research groups were not in denial of their stage of life, they did not want to see it as an indication that they had nothing to offer in terms of desiring to share in the church's mission. Considered broadly, this would indicate that the theme addressing the tension between the divergent metrics of ministry for young and old are indeed descriptive of the manner in which these older adults are engaging their world. Prayer focusing on mission and that is itself seen as such mission can be a vehicle for helping them navigate it faithfully.

CHAPTER 6

Conclusion

Tim Sensing advises that those doing research of the type found in this Doctor of Ministry project should not “confuse boldness with arrogance”¹ in the application of their conclusions. His counsel is no where more wise than here. At first glance, it would appear that the themes that rose to the surface after analyzing the project data do not answer the primary or secondary project questions in either a direct or obvious fashion. However, this does not mean that what has been learned through this project does not provide insight into the ways in which prayer, rightly understood and practiced, can impact the understanding and practice of Christian mission by older adults.

Restated, the primary question of this project is the following: *If older adults are encouraged to (rightly) practice and recognize prayer as mission with God and on behalf of the church, in what ways would that impact their understanding of mission, of their ministry at this stage of their lives, and of using the capabilities they have for Christian mission?* Seen in the literature review and the theme developed from the project research groups, prayer is most essentially, a disciplined act of relationship. Inherent in a Christian understanding, prayer is an act of relationship between human beings and the Creator God who most clearly has related to us in his Son, Jesus Christ. Even among human beings, relationships can be purposeful, but not programmatic in a way that definitively predicts a specific outcome. All the more this is the case in the relationship between created human beings and the God whose ways and thoughts are so beyond our own

¹ Sensing, 214.

(especially given a timeframe of thirteen weeks for its accomplishment!). If the expectation was that because of these small groups, the older adult participants would begin to conduct a certain set of hoped-for “acts of ministry,” then one would miss much of what actually *did* transpire in disappointment. As the one responsible for this research, I must admit to succumbing to this kind of mindset initially. However, after additional reflection on the findings presented earlier it can be shown the themes and observations do address the questions, although in a more subtle and tangential way.

When considering the impact that prayer might have on participants’ understanding of mission, conclusions are best drawn from the shifts observed during the thirteen week small groups. The themes discussed in chapter 5 describe, in a “static” way, how older adults came to see prayer, value, and mission. In looking for prayer’s *impact*, however, it is in noticing how the status quo changed from the beginning to end of the project that provides the greatest insights. In the attempt to draw useful conclusions we must now turn from mere observations to tentative prescriptions.

Above all else, the small prayer groups facilitated the opportunity for older adults to develop in their ability to “seek after.” This is key in how the findings of this project might effectively provide responses to primary questions. For example, in strategically and purposefully allowing biblical passages to guide one’s prayer, the older adult participants were encouraged to see the God who first pursues them. The God of the Bible is on a mission of redemption and reconciliation of all creation, including older adults. Everyone is invited to participate. As the older adults practiced this way of prayer each week, they began to shift their understanding of prayer to that of a regular rhythm of

relational maintenance with God. This was not an evolution without difficulty. Many found it took disciplined effort to more freely allow Scripture to inform and guide their prayer. It is not a skill that seemed to come naturally. However, all of us come to the relationships we hold with only what we have and are. Prayer that is seen as the pursuit of relationship with this understanding has the potential to elicit the possibility that one may indeed find significance and fruitfulness in it. By the end of the thirteen weeks of meetings, most all of the project participants were able to see that one cannot pursue a relationship with God without being drawn into God's mission. The church in western culture needs to recognize this as much older adult Christians. Set in a culture that tends to pigeon-hole older adults according to their ability to produce, the church must consciously discipline itself to see its older adult members as legitimate participants in its God-given mission as they are and with what they bring to the table.

As described in the previous chapter, the ministry older adults undertake is perceived as more effective when pursued together with others. Prayer, practiced in purposeful community where relationships are nurtured, helps older adults set an environment of joy and a perception of value as normative for their pursuits of ministry. This is a natural conclusion, as it reminds us of the way in which Christ calls us to *partner* with him in the accomplishment of his purposes. Additionally, the communal vantage point for ministry the prayer groups offered also facilitate the fulfillment of a primary desire expressed by project participants. There was greater satisfaction in their sense of significance and value when they had an avenue for transferring their wisdom and experience. Begun in the small groups among themselves, they were pushed by their

insights from prayer to seek out others not in their immediate community with whom to share their blessings from God. It would be a worthwhile investment on the part of the church to seek out ways to nurture and support this desire of older adults. Who knows what ministry could be initiated if the church listened to older adults who are listening for God's direction on behalf of the church—and then helped those older adults participate in that ministry's implementation! Every stage of one's life, including older adulthood, provides opportunity for fruitful ministry. In seeking to let God direct us in this, and not preconceived notions of what that ministry *must* look like, we increase the possibility of multiplying the effect our efforts as more people are encouraged to share in them. We also strengthen the likelihood that our ministry will be better aligned with God's will.

Prayer, in pursuit of a relationship with God, in the context of Christian community, strengthens the understanding that we are called and capable of being part of something larger than ourselves. Opportunities for small groups such as those of this project provide a means of mitigating the isolation older adults can sometimes feel in our society. As older adults are made to feel truly a part of a greater whole, the church can validate the capabilities they have in pursuit of its larger mission by not forcing them to conform to all the ways that mission is manifested. The church can help older adults understand it is alright to be “a part.” As the cliché goes, because we cannot do everything does not mean we do not do something. Valued as a part of the whole, that “something” is given value. When the ways older adults use their capabilities for mission are treated as significant, they are more likely to continue seeking out such opportunities.

All that is discussed above is a byproduct and in terms of seeking after a relationship: with God, the church, and the larger community. Prayer as relationship on mission is a catalyst for this pursuit. A case example will help illustrate these conclusions.

In a desire to share the positive experiences of their small groups, several of the older adult project participants expressed a willingness to expand them beyond just a small cohort of their congregation's older adults. They envisioned the entire church being a part. A church leadership listening to such a group of its older adults, or an entirely different congregation wanting to initiate such a ministry themselves, could begin by drawing together several pilot groups of older adults within the church. Structured similarly to those of this project, these groups would have an added element. As a part of the initiation of these groups would be the agreement that, depending upon what group members experienced, they would have the opportunity to share those experiences by facilitating their own cohort of prayer-guided small groups. The church would necessarily and strategically provide the additional training for those older adults willing to serve in this way. Additionally, made explicit from the beginning would be the expectation that these groups would not be merely an activity for older adults. The expansion of the groups in a second phase would see them opened up to the entire church. Young and old alike would be led together in a new series of Scripture-guided prayer groups by those older adult leaders who had experienced the first groups. In this way it would be purposefully pursued as ministry *among* and *with* the congregation's older adults. In developing the ability to listen to God in pursuit of his will among intergenerational groups, representatives of the entire body of Christ could develop ministry to undertake

together. Remaining in their groups as they served, they could continue listening to God and each other as correctives are made to continue meeting ministry needs in the church and community.

APPENDIX 1

Doctor of Ministry Project, MDiv. Student Questionnaire

PRIMARY QUESTION OF THE PROJECT:

If older adults are encouraged to (rightly) practice and recognize prayer as mission with God and on behalf of the church, in what ways will that impact:

- 1. their understanding of Christian mission?*
- 2. their ministry at this stage of their lives?*
- 3. using the capabilities they have for Christian mission?*

SECONDARY QUESTIONS YOU'VE BEEN "DRAGOONED" TO ASSIST WITH:

- How do older adults feel society and the church value them?*
- How does western, American society perceive older adults?*
- What are the perceptions of ministry and making use of their gifts for ministry at their stage of life?*

GUIDING QUESTIONS FOR YOUR DIALOGUE WITH OLDER ADULTS ASSIGNMENT:

- Ask your elderly friends to talk with you about how they feel society and the church values them.*
- Are there signals or messages that you notice that indicate to them that they are either valued or under-valued by the church?*
- What do they desire most to do and/or be for God? Are there impediments to making that a reality?*
- Are there types of ministry/service in which they feel underutilized? Explain.*
- If someone could get to know them better, what would they say that individual has most to gain?*

NOTE ON YOUR REPORT:

I will be comparing your submission along with your classmate's for any themes, ideas, and perceptions that might be "threaded" through them, collectively. It is through these threads I hope to answer the question(s) my project asks.

Figure 1. MDiv. student questionnaire



You're invited!

Please join me to learn how you can grow, make a difference for the church, and be vital to God's mission in the world . . . being who you are in this stage of your life.

As a part of my Doctor of Ministry degree with Emmanuel Christian Seminary, I'm leading a project concerning older adults, ministry, and prayer. I'd love for you to be a part of helping the church grow in ministry not only to but *with* older adults.

**August 30, 2017
6-7 PM**

Fall Branch UMC Fellowship Hall

Figure 2. Invitation to congregations

MDiv. Reports Coding Analysis Observations

OOF1	YOM1	OOF2	YOF1	YOM(2)	YOF2	OOF1	YOF3	OOF(4)	OOF5	YOF4
Stereo-typed vs. asset-based perceptions	Value by engaging in relational networks	Getting left behind by society	Society assumes goals/desires of old people	Effectiveness (ministry) measured in terms of physical capabilities of "prime"	Mission centered in family relationships	Translating wisdom and experience forward	Primarily experience being ministered to by church	Relational networks important to sense of value	Difficulty translating ministry experience to current season of life	Church's erosion of old peoples' worldview as being valuable
Value in relational network connections	Seek ministry of intergenerational discernment	Can't stay abreast of change	Relational connections indicator of engagement in world or isolation	Valued in terms of connection to community	experience transfer	Wisdom/ continual mission purpose, manifested dynamically as age	Expectations of value derived from family relationships	Optimal relationships are in empathetic partners	Loss of relational networks	Value dependent upon being able to hold on to preferred worldview
Significance in physical-assisted/ intergenerational service	Ministry supported/ empowered by prayer	Stoic vs. embracing of change	Desire for intergenerational engagement	Age brings valuable, "seasoned" wisdom to church's ministry	Healthy relationships = mutually-allowed nurturing	Valued in having thoughts and opinions seriously considered of equal weight to others	Discipling relationships begin with family	Heart of entrenched life paradigms	Loneliness addressed through stoic resignation	See engagement of preferred worldview by others as vehicle for being valued
Seek & evaluated on service of perceived significance	Value in terms of personal relationships	Value in terms of personal relationships	desire for wisdom/ experience/skill transfer		Struggling with loneliness		Altruistic desire for wisdom / experience transfer	Desire for wisdom / experience transfer requires flexibility in paradigms of ministry	Lack of direct usefulness among others equated to being burdened to them	Choosing self-isolation over engagement
Desire for wisdom/ experience transfer	Living in "old person" world (static) that currently doesn't exist	Living in "old person" world (static) that currently doesn't exist			Forced reorientation of relationship dependence (Christ vs. others no longer available)		Younger generations undervalue older's manner of life	Life paradigm entrenchment leads to loneliness and isolation		Regrets are either overcome or lived in
	relationship with Jesus contrasts relationship within church				Translation of mission from active engagement to "support"			Prayer is central mission for those who are unable to do otherwise		Loss of relational networks
							Seeking service that is/ offers sense of significance			Desire to relate to God functionally, and in same manner as in "prime"

Table 2. MDiv. coding analysis observations

Table 3. Initial questionnaire observations, Fall Branch UMC

Question #	Participants / Respondent Codes							
	YOM1-FB	YOM2-FB	YOF1-FB	YOF2-FB	YOF3-FB			
1-P	Daily; opportune times of relaxation and "downtime"	Accomplishment; daily Bible reading and prayer time	Regular intercession for needs of family & friends	Some regular rhythms of prayer; primarily intercession in moment of need	"Present" in times of corporate prayer; part of intercessory "prayer chain"	Routine Rhythm of Bible & devotional reading & prayer	OOF2-FB	OOF3-FB
2-P	Corporate worship gatherings only	Weekly prayer group; personal fulfillment	Corporate worship gatherings/services	Weekly prayer group; trusting in God to act	Weekly prayer group; personally encouraging & "therapeutic"	Weekly prayer group & corporate gatherings; gain sense of personal well-being	No; lack of experience	As part of church-initiated program(s)
3-V	Sees OT in terms of church teaching & equipping function (connect to Bible / grow in faith / prompts encouraging of others)	Church appreciates in what I do; (no mention society)	Valued in activities, orgs., & groups chosen to participate in	Church does things / holds events I enjoy	Feel part of something bigger by association with and participation in church activities	Through friendships	Feel appreciated; have been though most of life	Feeling more "passed by/over" as get older
4-M	Welcoming & hospitality at corporate church gatherings	Children's Sun. School; greeter at church services; work fundraisers for mission	Committees, formal leadership position, music ministry	Partaker of ministry offered to me; participate in church-planned programming	Women's relational & mission groups; support of church's mission efforts	None	Member of women's church groups; corporate worship; meals for shut-in's ministry	Women's group participant; outreach meals leadership
5-M	Sharing God's universal love (sharing word; teach love; non-judgement; open arms)	Being a supportive entity/institution for those needing help	Make disciples (feel a failure) & love/nurture Christians (feel competent)	Bring people to Christ; invite people (unsuccessfully) to church worship services	Hospitality & relationships promoting value of recipients of ministry; providing for material needs in community	Saving and finding God	Making disciples of Jesus Christ	Lead others to salvation; serve surrounding community
6-M	Personal enrichment in relationship with God (peaceful path; close to God)	Show devotion to God through serving others	Live life of discipleship to Christ (daily struggle)	Being a good, Christian person; participating in Church life/activities	A faithful servant, but have physical impediments to greater involvement in service	Don't know		Spread God's word to others; Christian life example to those with whom have relationship
7-M	Personal discipleship; divine connection & love others	Supporting role in church's mission; financial support	Connection to UMC; mission by assent; disconnected/frustrated in terms of involvement	Mission centers around attending & inviting to planned services (i.e. corporate worship)	Promotion of what the church programs; our dedication is example enlisting others to join in	Don't know how connected		Desire to point others to Christ & engage in good works of service
8-M	See self as "gap-filler"	No	No	No—believe all are welcome to participate if choose	Feel lack biblical & theological knowledge to serve better; utilized as much as able/competent to do so	Don't know		Feel ministry open to everyone who wants to participate.
9-V	warm/caring/honest/truthful—in terms of witness in church participation	Friendly support in times of need	A caring personality with integrity (i.e. no attempt to manipulate)	Friendly (relationally-focused)	Sympathetic; trustworthy, non-judging friend			I'm easy to get to know if people so desire
10-V	Personal attention & concern, especially for accomplishments	Feel valuable as/when able to "contribute"	Not concerned for outside signals/demonstrations of my value; internally realized	Verbally appreciated for what I do to improve/maintain aesthetics of facilities	Being specifically asked to serve/help; being given training to serve successfully		Mobility assistance	Church open to all who want to participate in programmed ministries and committees

Initial Questionnaire Response Observations – Colonial Heights UMC

Question #	YOF1-CH	YOF2-CH	OOF1-CH	OOF2-CH	OOF3-CH	OOF4-CH	OOF5-CH	OOF6-CH	OOF7-CH	OOF8-CH	OOF9-CH	OOF10-CH	OOF11-CH	OOF12-CH	OOF13-CH	OOF14-CH
1	Regular rhythms of prayer; life is context for prayer, especially acknowledging God's gifts	Inconsistent	Incessantly; as needed through day	"Daily" (quantity, * in terms quality)	Daily devotions and prayer with spouse (regular rhythms); intercession in moments of need	Set aside times daily (description of quantity, no quality)	Private; daily	Significant, regular rhythms of prayer with spouse; incessantly prayer daily as needs arise								
2	For church's ministries, self & others; experiment with forms of prayer in addition to intercession (i.e., "centering," "contemplative")	Not currently, but have in past	Only in group meetings (formal to other purposes of group)	As part of corporate, formal worship gatherings	In times of gathering for larger/ other purposes; prayer-back/ positive assent to others' prayer	As part of other church gatherings; personal fulfillment/relationship with God	Not currently, but have in past; uplifting/personal fulfillment	Corporate worship; part of incessantly prayer group via email								
3	Society values based on "production"; older adults seen to take resources from others who have more "faith"; to invest in Church values "active" members	Seen in terms of "production;" experience not valued; described except when no other options for help	Great! All are valued.	Great! All are valued.	Hopeful that see me as willing if asked to help (in terms of what others' feel; hesitant?)	Blessed by church friends (no mention of society)	Little, if any	Pining of young vs. old, because young generations "don't want to face their future." Church only values as financial contributor								
4	Teaching adult life skills; visitation & caregiving/connection teams; church treasurer	Women's groups, older adult social activities; corporate worship (especially music)	Women's groups, older adult social activities; corporate worship (especially music)	Corporate worship; weekly	Visitation and hospitality in various contexts; attend corporate worship	Committees, Sun. school, worship service greater	Traditional, programmed avenues of corporate worship and bible study; greater for services	Many formal leadership positions in past; visitation and hospitality groups currently								
5	Sharing salvation I received; emails modeling Christ for others	Make disciples by spreading gospel (no description)	Make disciples; "sniff" capable (able but underutilized)	Evanglism (no description how involved)	Attracting/inviting to institutional church's activities	Personal discipleship that leads to witness	Plant "seeds" of gospel in community through service; church not doing, but would if asked	Disciples making "productive" disciples; connected in terms of time-in-grade in church								
6	Make space for God vs. only doing for God; difficulty balancing life priorities	Serving God according to his will	Want to be valuable/worthwhile; doubt value; physical impediments	Living life for God (generalized/moralistic)	A good witness to Christ; hampered by sin	Evanglism (no description)	Community outreach; mobility impediments and church not providing opportunity	Not to be a stumbling block to another's discipleship								
7	Being part of something larger than myself; supporting one another in that	Desire connection, but feel held back; blame self	Programs of church that participate in	Prayer	Obligation to follow because scriptural; (in abstract/theory)	Behind-the-scenes support and prayer	Don't feel connected to mission	Recognizing need to meet material/crisis needs before or in conjunction with need to witness/teach gospel								
8	Not underutilized, but open to God leading me to another area of service	If so, blame self	Fairly certain "found calling"		Called to relational hospitality, but no programmed outlet by church for non-member visitation; want to be connected, but not given opportunity	No	Non-relational acts of service behind-the-scenes because "not blessed with people skills"	Feel serving at current capacity (time and energy)								
9	Have love to share in caring for people	Have love to share in caring for people	Loving, empathetic friendship	A friend	Generous person who loves Lord and church family; frustrated that church, younger generation not value what older adults have to offer via relationship	Sympathetic Love	A caring, helping friend	Caring person willing to help others achieve their best self/potential								
10	Simple, personal acts of connection to another	Other women value because of leadership in women's groups; "others" (men) not acknowledge competence/knowledge	Other women value because of leadership in women's groups; "others" (men) not acknowledge competence/knowledge		Flexibility in perceiving and including opinions of older adults; snubbing what matters to older adults	How knowledge and life experience acknowledged or not and to what degree	Not being asked to do anything by church	Feel valued by other older adults; find value in intergenerational relationship building; treating all as people								

Table 4. Initial questionnaire observations, Colonial Heights UMC

Secondary Questionnaire Response Observations—Fall Branch UMC

Question #	Participants / Respondent Codes					
	YOM1-FB	YOM2-FB	YOF1-FB	YOF2-FB	YOF3-FB	OOF3-FB
1-P	Trusting in God's power, even when I can't see it, can actually talk to God about problems and concerns	Expansion of prayer (intercessory) beyond our group/ church to the world	Seeing connection between Scripture and prayers (grounding), and praying for the church's ministries	Expanded my expectations of what prayer impacts in world and life	Practical: developing a regular habit of prayer and focusing on prayers of praise more	More aware of how to pray and when to pray
2-P	Increased interaction with this group of people	Grew in sense of unity and outward focus on others	Spiritual closeness with group members	Growing comfortable praying aloud within group vs. only personal, private prayers before	Strengthening participant relationships (bringing us closer together)	Learning from questions other group members asked and how I offered my thoughts in response
3-M	Showing love and caring for needs doesn't have to be big or complicated	Visitation of shut-in's more and listening to their experiences; prayer for them	Praying specifically for the church and its mission	Provide sense of safety and secure belonging within church	Inviting others to be aware of and experience ministries already involved in; (especially our women's groups and their service)	Expanding current outreach program(s)
4-PM	God has been faithful to me and I can share with others that he's patient with our doubts	(Evangelist) ministry venues during summer months (outdoor)	It would be interesting to share experiences among various participant group members to see if they had similar insights as mine	Creating environment to read Bible more and foster desire to do so	Although I feel lacking (competence and health), I trust God to lead me toward and into ministry as he desires	Serving the community
5-M	Remember that Christ died for our sins and tell others the same	Teaching our kids about the Lord (intergenerational discipling)	Creating family of love, care, and support among those called into discipleship	More community around church comfortable sharing life with church; providing for community needs (personal involvement)	Continue church for future generations and trust they will do likewise; participate in as much church activity/ministry as possible	Serving our community through hospitality; in particular, children in our local school
6-M	Expanding current ministries—especially those providing for those in need like shut-in's and poor; relationship and provision	Specifically asking older adults to participate in Christ's ministry	Strategically providing pathways of opportunity to begin serving in mission; helping people see the "what" and "how"	Providing means for participation in church activities by those who cannot do so themselves (dr. rides to events, etc.)	Develop additional learning and training around the Bible to prepare for ministry	Invite more people to visit and join the church
7-PV	More appreciation for how others see things differently in light of Christ's valuation of everyone	Increase my efforts to welcome those who visit church services	Already felt valued and useful; prayer groups didn't change that	Sharing gratitude and concerns among group	Confidence in prayer; especially comfort in praying aloud among a group	Opportunity share concerns of our lives and have others take up those concerns as well
8-V	I have a better appreciation of those I support and help		No	No	Reminded me of fears many have of growing older ("physical pain" & decline), but comforting and supportive in coping by sharing with others facing similar experiences	No

Table 5. Final questionnaire, Fall Branch UMC

Secondary Questionnaire Response Observations—Colonial Heights UMC

Question #	Participants / Respondent Codes							
	YOF1-CH	YOF2-CH	OOF1-CH	OOF2-CH	OOP3-CH	OOM1-CH	OOM2-CH	OOM3-CH
1-P	The interrelated nature of the Bible and prayer—that God speaks to us (in Scripture) and expects us to respond; that prayer is a “natural response to reading” (the Bible)	Prayer is a richer discipline than originally imagined; God listens to even the “little things”	I think I already had a broad understanding of prayer	Variety and diversity of practice in prayer	Deeper sense of power of prayer; realize God wants connection, not perfect words!	Realized a legitimate diversity in manner and methods of prayer—even in same small group	Prayer can be different than just “The Lord’s Prayer” (legitimate variety in prayer)	Greater sense of God’s interest and intentions for how I live my life; that my life is a gift from God
2-P	Grounding Bible study in prayer; opportunity of more intimate relationship with group members	Growth in discipling relationships (“closer relationships in a Godly manner”)	Getting to know my small group in a more personal way	More intimate and personally involving prayer (vs. “overhearing” prayer in corporate worship service)	Closer relationships; outward-focused concern for others and feeling valued when prayed for	Discovery that people who are different (and pray differently) love God as much as I do	Fridding relationship with people who sincerely cared about me	Comfort in vulnerability in small group over potentially larger group
3-M	Many were “pleasantly surprised” they “liked” this experience; natural way such practice leads to spiritual growth	Purposeful prayer groups strengthen ministry (especially outward-focused) and should be a staple discipline of white congregation	Working at having a Scripture-directed life (Bible as “core curriculum” of life)	Have more small prayer groups	Possible to grow closer together (across dividing lines) and be vulnerable with one another; prayer fostered that and could help our mission/be part of accomplishing it	Even small groups can accomplish ministry because/when Christ is present with them	“Non-clique” prayer groups can help unify church across demographic lines	Small groups modeled valuing everyone for who they are; participation by larger church could have similar effect—discipline of mutual valuing of all by all
4-PM	Did not discuss and specific opportunities in my group	I want to be God’s servant, according to his will. I think I need more courage and assurance to do so	Listen to God for the mission he has for us and then make sure we embody the gospel we are called to share	Praying for all, as all have needs that should be recognized	Purposefully focusing on others in prayer helps recognize needs that church can address	Everyone needs to be part of a group in which prayer (that intends to drive mission) is primary activity	Serving as a prayer group facilitator; goal of loving one another better throughout church	Want to transfer experience in these groups intergenerational
5-M	Sharing the gospel to make disciples, as we’ve been instructed in Bible and by Holy Spirit	Listen to God for the mission he has for us and then make sure we embody the gospel we are called to share	Telling the story of Jesus to others	Leading people to God; prayer	Sharing life of Christ with others, through prayer connections	Making disciples of God through interactive witness and by virtue of your presence with them	Teaching God’s love as much as I am currently able to (in word and deed)	Make people recognize that we should and can go to heaven when we die
6-M	Focus on mutual support and equipping for intergenerational mission, so that come to see ministry as a focus of our whole life; make this an attitude of whole church	Don’t know, but do have more trust in God to give us what we need to accomplish his mission	Feeling connected to the larger church; recognition of having gifts to offer like others	Work to find ways of including in all ministries of church (support or otherwise)	Visit to shut-ins for prayer and short devotion; share connection we had in groups	Expect older adults to continue serving and acknowledge their knowledge and experience as valuable	Sharing experience and leadership, particularly with teens and young adults	Purposefully develop connections across age groups; church must understand older adults want to serve and need allowance and validation to do so as their capacity allows
7-FV	I feel valued by my group members and those I serve with in church kitchen, but group has made me recognize we could be so much better at it	Praying together makes me feel more accountable and perhaps a little more focused on others’ needs	Begin wondering if value experienced comes mainly in more intimate relational settings of church (like small groups)	Seeing church as an “all,” not partitioned or segmented according to age, because praying for all	Prayer makes aware of God’s presence, brings out best in us (formation) and is demonstration of love and concern for others (when prayed for)	Value comes through commitment to others; praying together (as a community) promotes that	More valued by other prayer group members, if not by church as a whole	Praying with and for one another help realize they really do care about our spiritual growth and well-being (older adults)—being valued comes from such experiences
8-P	Strengthened and encouraged by reaction of other participants’ positive experience in groups	Wider experience in prayer being purposefully connected to Bible; learning from others’ experiences			Thanksgiving feeds our faith, so more time for that in such groups should be for specifically thankful prayers for God grace and presence during the week		Formative to allow bible to more directly inform my prayers	Sharing different emphases from Scripture in discussion deepened and enriched understanding of all

Table 6. Final questionnaire, Colonial Heights UMC

Theme	Initial Questionnaire		Second/Final Questionnaire	
	Composite Concepts	Synthesis	Composite Concepts	Synthesis
Prayer	<p>Functions Primarily as means of seeking God's help in moments of personal need</p> <p>Something "accomplished as part of tasks in daily life or corporate religious rituals</p> <p>Experienced primarily in corporate, church-initiated settings</p> <p>Provides a personal, therapeutic effect</p> <p>Default practice is intercession at moment of need</p> <p>Focus is on quantity/periods of prayer, rather than quality of prayer</p> <p>Participate as "observers" of prayer in corporate environments</p> <p>Prayer in group settings usually NOT primary purpose for gathering</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Prayer is bent toward discreet acts of seeking intercession. As such, it can be somewhat of a tangential act of one's overall discipleship and/or sense of mission 	<p>Broadened understanding of prayer beyond that of immediate intercession</p> <p>Prayer properly impacts wider world and I have a part in that through prayer (for world & church)</p> <p>Prayer draws me into deeper connection to others as we focus on work of prayer together</p> <p>Scripture intake and guidance in prayer have greater connection that previously thought</p> <p>Greater breadth and depth to practice and experience of prayer that previously thought</p> <p>God is more intimately concerned and present in the details of my life</p> <p>Prayer groups are catalyst for greater intimacy with God and group members: movement from "observer" of prayer toward "participant/partner"</p> <p>Powerful formation can take place when you allow Scriptural insights to direct prayer in context of Thanksgiving</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Prayer is a practice of relationship development and maintenance with God and others, thereby becoming vehicle for impacting/affecting others and the world The understanding and experience of prayer is broadened when guided by Scriptural insights
	<p>Society largely passes older adults by</p> <p>Church values older adults primarily in terms of production in ministry or ability to receive production of others through participation</p> <p>Understood by older adults in terms of loyal, sympathetic relationships</p> <p>Acknowledgement of accomplishments and training in/for competencies among older adults = corollary to value in terms of production</p> <p>Church values people in general in terms of production</p> <p>Older adults perceived as competition with others for resources by those who "produce"</p> <p>Blame self / lack of capacity in equal measure with church's viewpoint for not being more utilized in ministry</p> <p>Key element of friendship = wanting to help others achieve their best</p> <p>Key element of personal value = Relationships in which asked to be part of planning, implementing, and evaluating ministry</p> <p>Conveyed in perception by others as having experience and opinions worth listening to</p> <p>Primary ministry participation derived from church-initiated hospitality activities</p> <p>Ministry seen in terms of "support" roles</p> <p>Two-fold goal of serving needs of surrounding community (for which feel capable) and making disciples evangelistically (for which feel lacking in capability)</p> <p>Devotion to God manifested in struggle to serve others and in feelings of personal enrichment</p> <p>Mission is acknowledged, promoted, and supported, rather than actively led by older adults</p> <p>Church does not "restrict" participation in ministry by age, but by personal capabilities, competencies, or choosing not to volunteer</p> <p>Primary involvement = ministry of "presence" (i.e. visitation & hospitality) connected to corporate worship</p> <p>Mission = disciple-making</p> <p>Participation in mission is in waiting to find way to engage</p> <p>Desire to serve God described mostly in generalized, non-specific terms</p> <p>Doubt own capacity to serve God as desire</p> <p>Ministry understood in relational terms (hospitality / service to others)</p> <p>"Supporting" role is what most hope for as feel either lacking in capability or held back by church</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ability to "produce" and relationships are intertwined keys of older adults' perception of being valued by church and society Perception of personal value effected by being able to add or produce value in others/ group, with whom have relational connection Relationships that do not allow older adults to "co-define" production within that relationship are perceived as devaluing Older adults feel two-fold mission of church is evangelistically making disciples and serving their surrounding community Because mission seen as outgrowth of relationships, service revolves around hospitality and presence attached to corporate church gatherings Mission and ministry understood in terms of "support" (i.e. acknowledge and promote) from the margins, due to doubting capabilities for more active engagement 	<p>Valued in having specific environment to share concerns and listen to those of others (i.e. groups)</p> <p>Listening to others, in groups geared toward that, meant listening to me as well</p> <p>Valued in others caring about and seeking the best for my life and holding me accountable for living into that</p> <p>Groups helped focus outwardly on others in ways that don't have to be big or complex to be effective</p> <p>Older adults can and should be involved in ministry that promotes faith development in others</p> <p>Church exists to serve community in such a way that they are invited into the life of the church as well</p> <p>Church needs to provide strategic training and pathways for older adults to serve, specifically</p> <p>Cultivating mutual vulnerability in small prayer groups cultivates environment of valuing others cross-demographically</p> <p>Growth in a more outward focus of mission/ministry aimed at expanding small prayer group experience to larger church, that they, too, may begin seeking mission together</p> <p>Recognize need to seek outward mission/service focus and do so as a whole church</p> <p>Sharing gospel in order to make disciples through relational, embodied presence in another's life (i.e. taking time have, to give time to another)</p> <p>Church needs to create environment that expects older adults to serve, recognizes their possession of capacities that are viable for service, and equips them to be participants in church's mission</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Relationships purposefully geared toward mutual and accountable listening develops sense of personal value Mission is outward-focused sharing of what one has been given in the way one can offer it The church best fosters mission engagement by older adults in relating to them through the underlying expectation that they will Older adults desire to be synergistic partners within larger church seeking God's mission for them all Faithful and effective ministry impact does not require complex, large-scale programs
Value				
Mission				

Table 7. Data synthesis on prayer, value, and mission

Table 7 continued

Theme	MDiv. Questionnaire		Check-In Interviews	
	Composite Concepts	Synthesis	Composite Concepts	Synthesis
Prayer	<p>"Physical capabilities of "prime" of life is metric of ministry value and effectiveness</p> <p>Valued in terms of relational networks</p> <p>Sought after significance of life fostered through wisdom and experience transfer to others</p> <p>Older adults have sense of isolation, or "stranding," in a world that no longer exists</p> <p>"Loneliness is a symptom of mission disorientation, based in relational networks (i.e. inability or lack of desire to more fully engage contemporary culture)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Value based in relational networks measured in terms of production Personal value sought in sharing what do possess with others 	<p>Group allowed to learn new disciplines/skills</p> <p><i>Relating Bible to prayer for purpose of guidance; discussing insights easier than having them direct prayer(s)</i></p> <p>Fall Branch UMC <i>Group relationships aided in focusing and relaxing in prayer when feared "not doing it right"</i></p> <p><i>Shift in experience and expectations of prayer from individual to group/collective; manifested in overcoming anxiety in praying aloud in group</i></p> <p>Understand wider experience of what prayer is / can be</p> <p><i>Heart of prayer begins and ends with gratitude</i></p> <p><i>"Recognized God deeply active in life"</i></p> <p>Colonial Heights UMC <i>Learning new practices of prayer, such as praying aloud with group</i></p> <p><i>Desire more flexibility for how much time spent in each area of practice during group session</i></p> <p><i>Richer intake of Scripture leads to richer life of prayer</i></p> <p>Companionship of group relationships is term in which other experiences measured</p> <p><i>Greater realization that church is more than just aggregate of individuals; stronger sense of "body" of Christ</i></p> <p>Fall Branch UMC <i>Unity in prayer empowering in seeing self as part of greater whole in which make a difference (i.e. personal significance)</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Learning new skills and insights in discipline of prayer <ul style="list-style-type: none"> God already deeply active in mission, of which participant(s) feel a part Richer Scripture intake, purposefully pursued to guide prayer, enriches and enlivens relationship with God and others, through that prayer Prayer draws us into something larger than self; center of gravity of participant focus shifting to wider, collective life with God
			<p>More conscious of relationships and their importance for spiritual life and mission</p> <p><i>"Recognize God deeply active in life;</i></p> <p><i>Prayer in midst of relational connections leads to greater feelings of support</i></p> <p>Colonial Heights UMC</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Experiences in group (spiritual, focus on mission) measured in terms of relationships <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Relationships centered on experience of prayer (for mission) engender feelings of being supported, as believe are part of larger church making a difference in the world Personal significance analogous to significance attributed to church/group of which a part
Mission	<p>"Physical capabilities of "prime" of life is metric of ministry value and effectiveness</p> <p>"Loneliness is a symptom of mission disorientation, based in relational networks (i.e. inability or lack of desire to more fully engage contemporary culture)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Inability to produce according to metrics of younger stage of life leads to feelings of disenfranchisement from mission 	<p>Mission in terms of relational connections</p> <p><i>Growing focus on others</i></p> <p>Extending attention to group relationships outside of group meetings</p> <p>Fall Branch UMC <i>Focus on witness through ministry of hospitality and friendship among church members</i></p> <p><i>Personalized ministry, in context of relationships, breeds sense of ownership and responsibility</i></p> <p>Groups increase sense of connection to church</p> <p><i>Foster love for church, even in midst of its "imperfections"</i></p> <p>Recognize needs and shortcomings of church when praying for its faithfulness</p> <p>Colonial Heights UMC <i>Because sense of belonging increased, desire to expand prayer group experience to wider church/ congregation</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Because ministry experiences measured in terms of relationship, prayer focused on empowering church's mission to others pushes participants outward in "relationship-seeking" ministry Praying for church's faithfulness and fruitfulness in mission fosters love of church, healthy recognition of its shortcomings, and desire to promote effectiveness Mission understood in relational terms manifests its necessary outward focus in areas of hospitality activities

Concept	"From"	"To"
Prayer	Discreet, somewhat tangential act	→ Broader, more central rhythm of discipleship
	Gross/generalized intercession	→ Relationship development and maintenance (divine-human)
	Moments of impact	→ Impacting flow of life
	Distinct discipline from Scripture intake	→ Mutual enrichment of life for God
Value	Found in "production"	→ Seeking a form of production that leads to value
	In terms of receiving (from)	→ Greater sense of mutuality (with)
Mission	Support of ministry by church to older adults (and others)	→ Co-designers of ministry with church (for all)
	Desire for church to be faithful to them	→ Desire for church, of which a part, to help be faithful to mission
	Doubting competency to serve in significant ministry	→ Growing trust in God to use competency for ministry
	Ministry (hospitality-based) within current church programs/structures	→ Hospitality (relationship-based) beyond current church structures and programs

Table 9. Shifts in participant understanding, beginning to completion of prayer groups

APPENDIX 2

Interview Transcripts

Fall Branch UMC Check-In Interview

December 5, 2017

Interviewer: David G. Tully

Transcribed by: David G. Tully

(**I** = Interviewer; **R_** = Respondent)

I: How would you describe your experience during the prayer group so far? What's been most valuable to you? And, is there anything you'd consider perhaps least valuable?

R1: I don't feel I've contributed anything, really, but my presence.

I: Do you think that's been valuable in some way?

R1: I hope so. But I don't know. I hope being here has helped some of the others. It's been good for me to, I guess, just being with them.

R2: I've learned a lot. I've enjoyed it.

I: Someone else?

R3: The best part for me has been praying for others in my group. I feel supported by them when they pray for me, too. I get encouraged because of Christ. I'm thankful to be a part of this, my, group.

R4: Yeah, companionship. Being with other people.

R5: I guess directed prayer was good, but being closer to my group members was better. I got a greater awareness of the problems and stress through answering the questions together; what we, you know, discussed. Especially what we're most and least grateful for. It made me start looking for my group members outside of our Tuesday meetings; to check-up on them and see how they're doing.

R2: Members of my group made me want to remember to get there on time and remember the group meeting schedule.

I: OK. Let's look a little closer at your group participation. What effect, if any, has your participation in the group had on your experience of prayer?

R5: I think it's been more difficult praying out loud. And It's harder for me when we were praying off of the Bible passages than in just praying for others. The Old Testament verses were tougher than the New Testament ones. Maybe that's just me?

R3: It was hard for me, too, to relate the Bible passage to my prayer. I was afraid I wasn't doing it right!

R1: This was a whole new experience for me. I haven't really been a part of anything like this before. Just going to church. I need more practice. That's up to me, I suppose.

R6: Connecting the Bible readings to prayer, I think . . . yeah, it was hard for me. Learning to pray out loud is a new experience for me, with other people of a group.

I: OK. Making those connections was difficult. Has your time in the group meetings brought up anything else about how you pray? What it means to you?

R3: It was helpful to a part of others praying both silently and out loud. I was able to relax in prayer. I had sense of peace being myself with others.

R4: I get more out of it by praying silently; those times when we prayed silently in the group instead of just out loud. It sticks more.

I: What do you mean by "sticks?"

R4: I'm able to concentrate more. I feel more focused.

I: OK. Thank you. Anyone else? {No responses} Do you feel the prayer groups have benefited you a lot? Or would you say it's benefited you some? Or a little? Not made much of a difference?

R6: It was helpful to hear someone else's thoughts on things we talked about. And prayed about.

R4: It grew on all of us. I know we didn't want to let you down!

I: I appreciate that. What difference has it been making for you, if any?

R4: I think we got more comfortable doing it. We liked being together to do something like this.

R3: I look forward to coming. I always was counting down the days until the next meeting.

R1: Other peoples' enthusiasm for the group helped me overcome my lack of enthusiasm; how I felt at first.

R4: I liked the casual, loving, getting together. I don't have to look like or bring anything.

R3: I made new friends.

I: Thank you. Others?

R6: I do prayer throughout the day, but it is good to have time to focus on prayer in a group. As parents, we all do—did, I guess—prayer with kids; dinner time, bed time, but somewhere along the line, we lose the habit of praying aloud. We're more comfy with silent prayer.

R3: It grants me a peaceful feeling to come hear the prayers and thoughts of others.

I: Do you feel you spend more time during the group sessions discussing observations, from Scripture readings, life situations, etc., or more time in offering prayer?

R6: We spend more time discussing. And offering prayers because we were told we had to. I don't have problems praying for each other, but targeted prayers are more troubling.

I: Could you explain what you mean by "troubling" and, maybe "targeted?"

R6: It's easier to just, you know, pray for someone when they have a need. You pray for them, that need. Knowing what you're supposed to pray about, a topic, that's harder. Tying all that in with the Bible that we're trying to have us target the topic is harder. I never really thought that much about praying about what the church is doing, as a whole group, before.

I: Thank you. Someone else?

R5: The short, "unison" prayer that we did at the very end all the time. Praying that way really seemed, for me, for us, to put it into your heart. What you were praying about.

I: OK. Anyone else? {No responses} If you were to start over and be a part of these prayer groups again, what would improve your experience?

R2: I think it was better when you was directing, supporting, or maybe suggesting what was the best.

I: What do you mean by "the best?"

R2: To help us see what the Bible means. You helped show us how it can lead us in prayer.

I: OK. Thank you. Someone else—what would you like to see different that would help you?

R3: Having you lead us more. I was always wondering if I was doing it right. If it was what you wanted us to be doing, if you were here. We followed and tried when we were by ourselves.

R6: I think the group would be helped by an explanatory paragraph about the Bible passage. You know, to give us a summary that could lead us into how it's supposed to connect us to our prayers about the topic or theme.

R5: Yeah, the Bible reading challenged me to go deeper. That's when it got tough.

R6: Maybe time to prepare and read over the Scripture ahead of time for prayer gathering would have helped more with the prayer. Some Scriptures were easier to pray out of than others.

R2: If we didn't all have the same translation it could lead us away from what you wanted us to understand.

R4: If we do these groups again, maybe every third or fourth time, meet as a whole group instead of just in the, what did you call them again? "Triads?" Maybe all together for the Bible study part and then we could break up for prayer.

I: Do you participate better in your group sessions when they are led by the facilitator, or the group with the guide alone?

R2: With You.

R4: Definitely with you.

R3: I think with you, yes.

I: How so? Why was that more helpful?

R5: I think I can speak for everyone by saying that it helped us to narrow down where we needed to go. We're new to putting the Bible together with prayer like we're supposed to. You helped us get started on the right foot; head in a good direction for prayer.

I: OK. Thank you. Let me ask you about the church. Where do you feel most connected to the church? Or when? Maybe among what group of folks do you feel most connected to and engaged with the church?

R5: When someone asks me where I go, I tell them Fall Branch United Methodist Church. When I'm running down the hill in the early morning and see the lights on the church. I say, "That's my church."

R6: When I'm walking in with the choir; singing the opening and closing hymns. I think how special those people are to me.

R2: Seeing the smiles on the faces of people communicating before the service starts. It's 11:00 AM and people are still walking around and socializing.

R1: Feeling that everyone wants to be with one another.

R5: When I give out candy to the folks on Sunday morning. ____ gets two pieces of gum. ____ gets a butterscotch. ____ gets a peppermint. Miss ____ gets two peppermints.

R4: In Sunday school, when ____'s explaining the lesson. I read it the night before, but don't get it all down. He's a good teacher.

R5: There's something to be said about a small church. I know that the preachers want to have every pew filled, but that everybody knows you. In a big church you're a drop in a bucket. Here we all have roles. When new people come, we can notice and we can welcome them.

I: Anyone else? {No responses} OK. In what ways, if any, is your connection God different because you have been a part of these prayer groups?

R6: I feel closer because I'm understanding Scripture better and praying for other people. I don't feel any different with God, but with these people—yes.

R3: I feel closer to God. I've been out a while. I can see and do things a little better. I'm deciding to do things that make me feel a lot better. God hit me to go to these groups, even when I didn't want to go. And I've enjoyed it.

I: If you don't mind expanding a bit on that, what things are you doing better? What are you seeing better?

R3: I guess that the Bible, how the Bible can direct our prayers. I'm getting together with church members more and they're my friends, closer friends. Like someone said

earlier, praying for what the church is supposed to be doing. And I see things more peacefully, from my perspective, I guess.

I: Thank you. Someone else—how do you see your connection to God now? Any difference?

R4: Not really. No great change.

I: Anyone else? {No responses} How about from another angle—is there anything your experience in these prayer groups have made you more aware of about yourself? about the church?

R6: That I don't pray for the church enough. It hasn't been a part of my daily prayers. I prayed for people in the church, but not the church body.

R5: I'm not being boastful, but I try everyday now to do random acts of kindness. These directed prayers remind me of that. And I see others like that too. _____ slides me three dollars a month to buy more candy for the service.

R1: People helping an old woman like me home is a big thing. It means a lot.

R2: I, you know, start seeing that no matter what you preach on a Sunday morning, the basic idea of every sermon is that love of neighbor.

R3: I feel stronger than before. I feel more accountable to something for myself. Putting it in God's hands to be a better person.

R5: I have to come out of meetings feeling good; what I did and about others. I about gave my friend a heart attack. I told him "I'm in a prayer group." He said, "You're in a what?!?" {group laughter}

R4: I don't want to be the leader of these groups. I just want to be with others doing this.

R5: I picked up others prayer habits; getting to facilitate others in prayer as a part of a group. To be with my "angels."

R1: It's been a good experience. I never really had the opportunity to do, be a part of, a class like this. It's interesting.

I: Thank You. Is there anything we haven't talked about this evening that you want to share? that I should know about?

R5: I hope we didn't fail you in this.

I: Not as long as y'all were honest about what you think and experienced! Anyone else have anything they'd like to share? {No responses} OK. Thanks so much for your time tonight. And let me say again how much I appreciate y'all being a part of these groups.

Colonial Heights UMC Check-In Interview

December 10, 2017

Interviewer: David G. Tully

Transcribed by: David G. Tully

(I = Interviewer; R_ = Respondent)

I: How would you describe your experiences during the prayer group, so far? What's been most valuable? What's been least valuable to you?

R1: I would like to say that the groups that I was with; I really got to know the people I was with—what they're talking about, what they're praying about—and how they handled themselves, it's been beautiful.

I: When you say, "handled themselves?"

R1: In their prayers, in relation with the peoples that's in the groups.

I: OK. Thank you. Someone else . . . how would you describe your experience so far?

R2: I feel closer to these people in these small groups. You know, you don't say everything in a big group, but a little group we can tell each other. And I just feel closer to my friends.

I: OK.

R2: Even though we known them for years—all out lives—but when we together and go over the Scriptures and how it worked in our lives. It was always a little different, you know. Then we would pray for each other and that made me all week think about them too.

I: Uh huh. OK. Anyone else?

R3: I don't know how you went about choosing who was with who, but I felt like I was with two very good people. It was great. I enjoyed the two I was with. At the end, I felt that I had a chance to get to know them a little bit better. Maybe a little bit different way. It was great.

I: OK. When you say, "different," do you mind describing what you mean by, "in a little different way?"

R3: Well, we're in choir together, things like that. And, so, but in talking in the small prayer group type of setting, it was That's what made it different.

I: OK.

R4: I liked the initial question about gratitude. Because of, that set a good tone for the whole study. And then several Scriptures you know, were about how much God loves us and so forth. So you end by thinking about the week. And what we were grateful for.

I: OK

R4: I thought was a good lead in.

I: So beginning the week was good. Anyone else, how would you describe your experience of the prayer group so far? What are you most grateful for? Maybe something you're least grateful for?

R5: I think that was a good question, to ask about what you were least grateful for; because there are a lot of things each week we're least grateful for. Things that happened in your life.

I: So, you say that was a good element to add. Why do you think that is?

R5: Well, it uh, it's just like when you say what are you grateful for, you can, you know, can think of several things, and you can think of the thing you're not grateful for, and you say, "Well, gee, I got thorough this week even though these things hit me. I've got more to be grateful for, than to not be grateful for."

R4: And it also underscores our need for God.

I: We asked this question already; what effect, if any, has your participation in the groups, had in your experience of prayer overall in your life, if any?

R2: It really became more personal in your groups, praying for each other; praying for the person on your right. And them praying for you also. It's very humbling sometimes when somebody prays for you.

R3: That's right.

R4: When you're sitting there with them.

R2: That's what I said to (name of R3), cause when we were together and we prayed for each other that, uh, we didn't know, really, how they felt, well we know we liked each other but when they prayed for you you felt much closer to them and to God.

I: Anyone else? Would anyone say you don't think it's had much effect on your prayer life thus far, being in a prayer group?

R6: I think it has helped me with my prayer life. I'm not a person who, you know, doesn't pray out, in a group. I can do it at home. But in a group, I don't know, I don't feel secure maybe. I don't know.

I: When you say "pray out," what do you mean by that?

R6: In a group while you're standing, pray. It's uh, it feels . . . she's taking it over and she did most of it and I appreciate her for that.

I: Anyone else? OK. Would you feel the prayer groups, for example, would you say a lot, or some, a little, or maybe not made much difference at all.

Multiple: A lot. We'd say a lot.

I: OK. Anyone else have something . . . ?

R3: Learn something about someone that happened early in his life and it, uh, at the time it was troublesome for him, but he shared the experience that he came through it with the help of the Lord and, uh, it made him a better person. And I admired him for sticking with the mistake he had made early, but it turned out OK. That probably doesn't make any sense, but.

R4: I feel that it helped me in a different way, I guess, but by using Scripture with it and some of the stories in the Bible and so on. I guess I can make a better connection with the word of God. And it's helped me in that way.

I: Do you mind describing a little bit, you said, "made a better connection with the word of God." Do you mind describing that?

R4: Reading some of the stories in the Scripture. It can better help me to relate. And, um, somehow then it's helped me in prayer life as well. It's hard to explain, but, I remember thinking about other people going through some of the things they did in the Bible. But it's hard to describe.

I: OK. Anybody else? 08:32:59 Do you feel more time in your groups discussing your observations from Scripture or discussing circumstances of your lives, or do you think you spent more time in prayer?

R2: I think about the same. About the same.

R4: I agree. All of the above. I think we spent a lot of time in prayer, but we also talked about events happening in our lives. That it made us think about what we were reading from the Scripture and being made aware of what we've been like.

R2: And realize that other people had problems, you weren't the only one. They might not be big problems but to you it might have been. And you can just relate more to everyday life of the group. Even though we've known them for years?

I: Anyone else? You felt like you spent more time in the Scriptures, or in prayer, if you had to weight it one way or the other? 09:54:25

R7: Probably more time discussing.

R4: The discussion seemed like prayer, too. Even though it wasn't like a formal prayer, that's to me a type of prayer.

R7: It is a type of prayer.

R4: I think formal prayer is standing up and praying for people you normally think.

I: Anyone else like to share? Here's one: if we were to start this all over again, this whole process from scratch, knowing what you know now, experiencing what you've experienced, what would you improve your experience of the prayer groups? 10:58:58

R7: I think, if we were to start all over again, I might like to branch off somewhere else, rather than be in the same room with all the groups. Um, I believe that would work better for me personally, but I'm not sure about everyone else. Um . . .

I: Do you mind sharing why that would be for you?

R7: I think that my voice carries and I'm aware that I might be bothering someone else. The kinds of small groups I've been associated with in the past, you expected loudness. But I was conscious of maybe discussing Scripture while someone else was trying to pray, because they heard my loud voice.

I: OK. Thank you. Someone else: if we started all over, what would be an improvement for you in the group?

R3: I think to rotate the groups.

I: Rotate the groups?

R3: Yes.

I: Can you give me an idea of why you think that?

R3: To be in a group with different people: I mean, I liked the group I was in, don't get me wrong . . . well, we had a wonderful experience together. But I feel like, maybe, it gets old after a while, if that makes any sense, and you need a new perspective.

R1: You are old! (multiple laughter)

R3: And we like our group members, though. I didn't say that!

R2: We just had a good experience. When we prayed, we grabbed hands and prayed softly. And we could hear other groups, but that really didn't, you know, bother us?

I: Are there other things in the process that could improve the group experience?

R4: I'm kinda like (name of R3), I think people, when you share a lot, well they're tired of hearing me talk. And if you moved around, and you had a number like 1, 2, or 3's and you moved around, with a little variation.

R2: We've decided that we're not moving. We just all go along together.

R8: I've been married 59 years and it didn't take me long to learn to go along. (multiple laughter)

R5: I realized maybe in our group, we spent more time in the first, uh, part of the Scripture intake. Actually delving in the Scripture, talking about it; talking about God and his purpose and all that. We did get to how we're challenged and all that, but I'm not sure we got as much of that as some of the other groups, either.

I: So you think doing more of that would be an improvement on the groups?

R5: I think devoting more time to that, I know we're all pressed for time, but I think we could have used more time.

I: Anyone else?

R9: Well as far as the Scripture is concerned, it's amazing how three people, we'd all take a certain verse and we'd all get something different. And then prayer's very private.

I: Anything else? Alright. Do you think you participate better in group sessions that were led by the facilitator/researcher, or in the groups by yourself? Do you think you participated better in one or the other? 15:45:79

Multiple: In the groups by ourself. Yes. In the groups alone.

R4: 'Cause we have the in-house facilitators.

I: Any ideas why that is, or why you feel that way about that?

R2: I don't think we've done anything much like this. And we might have had small groups in Sunday school. But just to be 2 or 3 together that read the Scriptures and see how that goes with your life. Hearing other peoples' problems.

R6: If you've ever been in a *Disciples Bible Study* before, you had that.

R2: Well I hadn't, so we enjoy.

R4: It's good when you go at your own pace, but when you go at your, a facilitator's pace; and you might want to spend a little more time in one area.

I: So the flexibility of week-in-week-out; we want to spend a little more time in Scripture or a little more in prayer, that's what you're describing? Anyone else? Anyone feel that they participated better in the groups when the researcher/facilitator was in the room leading that?

R2: Well when you were leading that was good too.

R3: I liked them both.

I: You're not going to hurt my feelings. I want to know what you all experienced. Let me ask you another question in a little different tangent: when, or where, or among whom, do you feel most engaged with the church? How do you feel most connected to the church? A particular circumstance? A particular group? A person that helps you feel that connection?

R5: Do you mean like the choir?

I: If that's what it is for you, the choir in which you feel a strong connection to the church.

R3: Overall Sunday night group.

R5: Many people don't realize our group began meeting at 6:30. Then we began coming in at 6:00, then we come in at 5:30. And now we're coming in at 5 o'clock. We like each other. It's the meeting before the meeting. Because it's important to us. The fellowship before the service. And our minister has been coming in, so a one hour Sunday night service has turned into a 2 hour service.

R2: It's a chapel service. It's really relaxed.

R5: And these groups came together probably much more easily because of that.

I: Were you going to say something earlier? No? I didn't want to cut anyone off.
19:33:30 Anyone else? Where do you feel most connected to or engaged with the church?

R5: R6 mentioned the *Disciples Bible Study* before. I've studied; I feel a close connection when I , you know, studying with people, praying with people. Makes me feel connected, more so.

R2: And you know you can't do everything in the church. I'm in the choir and we all have a good connection there. We all like to sing. Sunday School. We can't do everything.

R5: And it's a support group. And family, too.

R2: And we don't see a lot of people cause some go to early service. And some go to the 11 o'clock. So when we come here on Sunday nights.

R1: I was gonna say that Sunday night is special to me because of the people who comes, you know they want to be here. Not that they don't want to be here on a Sunday morning. But it proves that the discussion, reading the Bible, praying, it's all lumped into one. But it's a special group of people, to me. I love everyone of you.

I: Thank you.

R8: Most of us have been here 40 years.

I: Anyone else on that question?

R5: In my circle, I feel very close 21:40:32 to everyone in my circle.

I: When you say "circle?"

R5: United Methodist Women's circle. And I think the Bible study, we just share and tell each other everything. And it's just 5 or 6 people. And we're all old, one lady's 94. Another one's 90. And it's good to be with them. I enjoy their company, plus their religious beliefs we share with each other.

I: Thank you. Would you say over the time, in what ways, if any, your connection to God is different because of your participation in the group? 22:34:14

R5: My participation in my circle, is that what you mean what we're connected with?

I: Is your connection to God different because of your connection to *this* group? If not, feel free to say that too. I don't want you to feel you have to say something to make me happy. I want to know what you're actually experiencing. Your initial thought was not this group, but your other circle group. Do you mind me asking you what about that group?

R5: I guess the Bible study. When I prepare for it, I have a lot of commentaries and it's very uplifting and I've learned a lot. Because just reading this Scripture, like in the *Upper Room*, you don't get into it like you do; we use Max Lucado. And its very uplifting and you learn so much.

R8: I'm more aware that God's my helper.

I: Anyone else? Is there anything your experience in these prayer groups have made you more aware of about yourself or about the church? 24:38:07

R4: I'm aware that other people make mistakes in their life just like I've made ones.

R1: It's a group of imperfect people striving for perfection. And we'll never reach that until we get there.

R2: And it makes you love your church more. You know, all churches have their problems and we might hash'em over, but then down deep, we still love the church.

R4: And the people in it.

R2: I don't know what people do without their church?

R10: What do people do on Sunday mornings?

R2: If you've not got your church, you've got problems.

I: Anyone else? Well, as we close out, this interview time, is there anything else, a question I haven't asked, or something you'd like to share, about your experiences in the prayer groups?

R1: It's made me aware that in our prayer, when we start, we oughta start and we end with gratitude in prayer.

R2: I wish it could be more church-wide. It would be wonderful for our whole church. Doing this sort of thing. And I use music in my prayer life a lot. And music is extremely important to me in the church. But it's part of my prayer life as much as reading the Bible.

I: Thank you. Someone else? If there's nothing else, we'll close.

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