Revival without Revolution:
The Story of how a White, Agricultural Church Became a Multi-Racial, Multi-Generational Body of Christ

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Racial, Multi-Generational Body of Christ

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Acknowledgements

The following is a celebration of that journey. I’m grateful to the senior saints of First Church who trusted the Holy Spirit enough to call a 24 year old straight out of Seminary to be their Senior Pastor. I’m grateful to the Consistory and other leaders within the Church who were lavish with their grace and patient in their posture when I did not know what a “quorum” was and was ready to eliminate the Chancel Choir after one Sunday on the job. I’m grateful to the many new members, the burned out Baptists, the wandering Catholics, the people who grew up in the RCA and the people who have never heard of the RCA, all of whom responded to God’s call to travel with me in this journey.

I’m grateful for the staff that God has brought from many different walks of life into this journey of transformation. For Anthony, Corey, Nyla, Gerri, Carlos and Rich, I am grateful for their energy and steadfastness to the call that God has given to us. I’m also grateful for Rev. Mel DeVries, who was the 88 year old Pastoral of Congregational Care, who became one of my biggest cheerleaders and whose heart beats for reaching lost people. I’m grateful for so many faithful friends who through late nights over a good glass of wine shepherded me through disappointment and frustration. I’m grateful to my wife Sarah, who put up with me when I was more invested in the Church than in our family and whose capacity for love and grace truly makes me want to become a more faithful follower of Jesus.

Above all, I’m grateful to God for His providence, His mercy and His grace. This project is by no means a celebration of Matt Waterstone as pastor, leader or preacher. In a lot of ways, this project is a celebration of what God has done in spite of an impatient, stubborn, Type-A to a fault, sinner saved by grace. May this meager project be an attempt to give God thanks for all that He has done and continues to do in the life and witness of the First Reformed Church of South Holland, IL.
Abstract

Nestled along the Little Calumet River, 20 miles south of the city of Chicago, lies the 165 year old First Reformed Church in the historically Dutch village of South Holland, IL. With a rich and proud history as a flagship congregation in the Reformed Church in America, “First Church” has experienced a quarter of a century decline in membership, an exodus of younger families to more affluent areas in the Southwestern Suburbs of Illinois and into Northwest Indiana, and a lull in congregational morale amidst a rapidly diverse community that now is nearly 70% African American. Dynamics of sharp change experienced in racial migration resulting in a changing community, the legacy of past, consistorial leadership and in corporate worship haven given voice to charter a course for a future season of ministry.

As a result of racial migration, conflict in worship and a growing sense of congregational despair, First Church was forced to confront their ecclesial mortality in their given context for ministry. Together, they entered into a corporate journey of transformation that changed their congregational composition and renewed their congregational structures and practices which have led to a more robust sense of their identity as God’s diverse people and their purpose in God’s kingdom. This is a story of revival without revolution and a story of how a white, agricultural congregation became a multi-racial, multi-generational body of Christ.
# Table of Contents

Acknowledgements ...................................................... i

Abstract ................................................................. ii

Table of Contents ........................................................ iii

Chapter 1: Russ’ Restaurant

Russ’ Restaurant ......................................................... 2
628 Blackbass ................................................................. 4
The Onion Set Capital of the World .................................. 8
A Relic of the Past .......................................................... 11
First Impression to Second Marriages ............................. 13
My Place in the Project ................................................... 16
Why This Story is Important .......................................... 21
Not a Recipe for a U-Turn Church .................................... 22
A Painful Process .......................................................... 24

Chapter 2: A Good Story

Open Secrets ................................................................. 28
Framework of Grace ....................................................... 32
Location, Location, Location .......................................... 33
Finding a Foundation for the Future ............................... 38
Coffee, Cookies & Methodology 40
Dr. Latini’s Counsel & Care Class 42
Retaining a Listening Ear 44
The Growing Edge of Patience 53
Standing on Holy Ground 54
Theological Framework 55
Next Steps 56

Chapter 3: A Relic of the Past

For Religious Freedom 60
From Humble Beginnings 62
Soy Beans & Onions 63
Boomers 65
Conservative Character 67
White Flight 70
A Village of Faith, Family & Future 71
Biological Growth 73
Decade of Decline 76
Utter Despair 78
You’re at the Wrong Church 80
Where To Go From Here?  81

Chapter 4: A Scary 6-Letter Word

By the Numbers  84
One Hour, One Day a Week  86
Beyond Traditional & Contemporary  88
Hour of Power Revisited  92
Sin Still Needs Confessing  94
Okay to Clap?  95
Anthony The Enlivener  98
Victory from the Pulpit  100
The Full Breadth of the Atonement  102
Not Watering Down the Gospel  104
Pain Knows No Color  107
Jan Ton  109
Change is at the Heart of Christianity  111
Risk & Reward  114
Offices of Service  116
Humbly Thankful  120
Chapter 5: Cough Medicine & Tomatoes

Cough Medicine or Tomatoes 122

An Old White Farmer & A Young Black Criminal 124

The Call to be One 126

The Church as Mosaic 130

We’re All Adopted 132

Oneness & Mission 134

A Hospitality of Grace 135

The Kingdom of God in Sisters & Stillborns 137

Colored People are more Friendly 139

Cultural Competency 143

Multi-Cultural Learning Through Shared Experiences 145

Not Up to Us 149

Hopeful & Prayerful 151

Russ’ Restaurant Revisited 152

Epilogue 153

Bibliography 159
Chapter 1: Russ’ Restaurant

“The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.”

Job 1:21
Chapter Overview

This chapter paints a portrait of an old, struggling church and a young pastor thankful for a job and hopeful to bring about a renewed sense of identity, purpose and vision. I will introduce the First Reformed Church in South Holland, IL and also share briefly my role in the focus of this process. I will also articulate why telling the story of how a white, agricultural congregation became a multi-racial, multi-generational body of Christ is so important for the larger ecumenical community. Lastly, in a spirit of humility I will share my hopes and dreams that this project will be a companion in sorrow, a comfort in joy and a strength in need for fellow pastors, colleagues, church leaders and followers of Christ.

Russ’ Restaurant

We sat in a corner booth at Russ’ Restaurant right at the split between 8th Street and Chicago Drive in Holland, MI. Across from me was one of my professors, who just so happened to be arguably the best preacher within the Reformed Church in America. Directly to his right was the President of one of the leading radio ministries and audio scripture ministries in the country. Both of them had last names that carried weight in our denomination and both had pastored the First Reformed Church of South Holland, IL. It was a few weeks
earlier that the profile for First Church popped up in the Office of the Dean of Students at Western Theological Seminary. Being a first semester senior who was soon to be married, looking for a real job making the Classis minimum of $33,000 a year with the golden ticket of health insurance, I was eager to explore any and all pastoral opportunities.

I had brokered a lunch meeting with these individuals for the purpose of doing a bit of reconnaissance work about First Church. Their church profile was recently sent via email to all the seniors at the seminary as a potential call in to ministry. I had stopped by the Admissions Office that housed the giant filing cabinet that was like a treasure chest for all the would-be job opportunities. I wanted these two former pastors to share with me what this church was like. What was their experience? Were there solid people to pastor in South Holland? What was the community like? Most importantly, would they recommend I turn in my candidate profile to the chairman of the search committee? So, I began with what I thought was an open-ended question: “So tell me about First Church.” The professor of preaching looked at me square in the eye and said, “Matt, going to First South Holland is like going to see your grandma in the nursing home. She kind of remembers you and every once in a while she looks up with a twinkle in her eye, but then she goes back to being feeble.”
I raised one eyebrow, took a deep breath and tried to visualize what he described when the President of the audio scriptures ministry responded. He looked out the window facing Chicago Drive, took a deep breath and blew out all the air at once, puffing up his cheeks. “Oh, First Church,” he said. “They really should just sell that old building and move out to the suburbs.” On the bright side, my cheese broccoli soup was delicious and they picked up the tab for lunch.

628 Blackbass Ave

The story of transformation in a congregation on the south side of Chicago, IL began in the transformation of a boy on the south side of Holland, MI. I grew up at 628 Blackbass Avenue in Holland, MI, the oldest of three boys. Our three story big blue house was halfway up the hill just off the warm waters of Lake Macatawa. My brother Kyle is two years younger than I am and my brother Mark is six years younger. Kyle is the smarter, taller, stronger and better looking brother. Mark is the nicer, more patient, everyone’s-best-friend brother.

Home life was a whirlwind of sprinting home after church on Sunday mornings to watch Worldwide Wrestling Federation (WWF) and wrestling each other in the basement on couch cushions and chairs that served as our turnbuckles. Free time was spent rallying the neighborhood kids together and
playing tackle football in “the lot” one block over. Dinners were hot dogs and potato chips in the back of a mini-van heading from one practice to another. Everything was a competition. Relentless teasing was somehow a sign of love and admiration. When it came to school, it was simply assumed we would get As, and if Mom did see an A- on the report card, it certainly wasn’t due to a lack of effort. Our three story blue house was full of love, support and encouragement.

I don’t remember a life that wasn’t associated with following Jesus. I grew up in a Christian home. I went to church. I went to Sunday School. If it was a good Sunday, I would get to accompany my Mom to Sunday night worship. I remember thinking it was just about the most beautiful, holy and reverent thing in the world when I was old enough to stay up for the candle-light 11:00pm Christmas Eve service. Growing up, I think I committed my life to Christ at least six times. I vividly remember at my birthday party for my “golden” eighth birthday when I blew out the candles and made my wish; I wished that I would give my life to Christ and one day enter into heaven. I think I set a record at Calvary Reformed Church for being the youngest person at age ten (I was in fourth grade) to make Profession of Faith. I wore a red tie with racecars on it and recited the Beatitudes. It wasn’t like I thought the first time didn’t take; looking
back on it now, I was just a little boy that was seriously in tune with the church and was trying to figure out what it meant to follow Jesus.

My Father left when I was in fourth grade, but my parents weren’t divorced until after I graduated from high school. Every time my Mother was close to filing, she would hear a sermon on the radio by Dr. Dobson reminding her of the importance of a father in the life of his sons. They didn’t divorce until I was 17 years old after I called my father in Florida only to have his mistress whom he had illegally married answer the phone. My Mom, as she puts it, “had her hand forced,” and went ahead with a divorce. My Dad made cameo appearances throughout my junior and high school years, but it was my Mother who graciously and sacrificially played the role of a single-parent in my life. Her parenting motto was “keep them busy enough so they don’t get into trouble and when they do have time, they’re too tired to get into trouble.” We swam. We played baseball. We played soccer. She never, ever allowed the fact that my Dad was not in my life to be an excuse to get a C in AP English, to become a Minor In Possession of alcohol (MIP), or to get a girlfriend pregnant. We found fathers in baseball coaches, friends’ dads and youth pastors. I am forever grateful to her for her resolve, steadfastness and faithfulness.

We grew up on a steady diet of church on Sunday followed by Sunday School, and a mad dash through the drive-thru at Hot N’ Now for burgers and
fries. We went to Kid’s Club on Wednesday night and were very involved in the Youth Group. Growing up, I was the little kid that the pastor had to delicately tell to be quiet during the Children’s Sermons. I loved going to church. I loved sitting in front of Mr. and Mrs. Bauman every Sunday. I loved getting Werther’s Originals from Mr. Naber that I inevitably ate before worship even began. I loved listening to the sermon and imagining how I would have told that story. I loved Communion Sundays when I was old enough to read “This Do In Remembrance of Me” on the communion table in Old English font, and actually begin to understand what that meant.¹

The same joy I had growing up at Calvary Reformed Church was not always shared by Mom. After my parent’s divorce, she was told by an elder in the church that she probably should not take Communion. The only Sunday I hated going to church was on Father’s Day Sunday when I had to listen to the pastor talk about the great game of catch he was looking forward to with his Dad later on that afternoon like he was living the “hey Dad, can I have a catch” scene from the movie Field of Dreams. Maybe I was different than other adolescents, but I truly enjoyed being a part of a faith community.

I knew in places that I had a hard time describing that I had a family in the church. I had a family in all of the old ladies that smelled weird and told me to

¹ I found companion in my formation for ministry in Eugene Peterson’s Memoir The Pastor. His candid reflections, specifically in chapter 5 on Christ and culture were not only encouraging, but also a refreshing analysis of the work of a pastor.
slow down in church, but I knew loved me and prayed for me. I had a family in all of the Sunday School teachers that taught me about our Risen Savior through golden wrapped parable boxes and felt cut-outs of Jesus. And I had a family in all of the zannie youth group leaders who taught me about grace using a glazed donut and enjoyed singing out-of-tune worship songs. I knew these individuals were an integral part of that family that I needed and was a part of. These experiences and relationships became formative in cultivating a deep value for the diverse nature of community that is possible in the Body of Christ.

The Onion Set Capital of the World

First Reformed Church of South Holland, IL has been praying, praising and proclaiming the Gospel at 15924 South Park Avenue for over 166 years. In 1848, W.C. Wust became the church’s first senior pastor as the congregation worshiped in the back half of a barn. Built on the back-bone of Dutch immigrants, First Church began her humble ministry as “Low Prairie Church” in the mid 1800s. Now nestled on nearly five acres of ground between South Park Avenue and the Little Calumet River, First Church remains a staple in the Village of South Holland. Many members trace their roots back seven generations to the Widow Paarlberg herself whose husband died on the voyage from the Netherlands to the United States. One rumor suggests that after her husband
took a good look at her, he jumped overboard! After overshooting their mark of Holland, MI, the widow and her battalion of small children settled down in what today is South Holland, IL.

Like many Reformed Churches, First Church rode the wave of biological growth all the way to becoming one of the largest congregations in the Reformed Church in America. The recipe was simple and effective. Dutch families have children, who in turn marry other Dutch people and have Dutch children that all go to the same church. In the 1950s, First Church planted Calvary Reformed Church less than a half mile to the South on the same street. Later that decade, they also planted Faith Reformed Church less than two miles away.

Dutch farmers perfected the trade of harvesting onion sets and put South Holland on the map making her “The Onion Set Capital of the World” by the mid 1970s. As a result, sub-divisions began sprouting up all over town. Farm land quickly turned into prime real estate for homes post-World War II. First Church’s membership swelled under the pastoral leadership of individuals like Ted Zandstra and Arnie Punt, whose names are still spoken with a hush reverence. To this day, there is not a denomination gathering that does not include at least one person or pastor with a direct connection to First Church.

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Even the RCA’s annual session, General Synod, was referred to as a “family reunion” for elders and pastors that were part of First Church. The cabinet holding the pictures of all of the pastors who have ever served First Church is something of a “who’s who” list within the Reformed Church in America.

As the church grew, so did her impact in ministry. Dozens of missionaries came from her ranks. Entire weeks dubbed “Mission Weeks” were dedicated to Missions and Missionaries with a culminating service to raise thousands of dollars for foreign missionaries. Still, mission was synonymous with foreign mission. Up until the 1990s, the central dividing question in town was whether one was a member of the Reformed Church in America or the Christian Reformed Church in America?

Both the church and the Village of South Holland grew on parallel tracks. As the Village grew, First Church became known as the church where the community leaders went. This bolstering relationship saw civic, business and community leaders call First Church home. The past three mayors and half of the Village Board of Trustees all were active members of First Church. If there was a fire on Sunday morning between 9:30-10:30am, one would see four or five firemen in the congregation quietly get up and leave the sanctuary to serve the
Village. From worship, to mission, to service, life and witness were good for the First Reformed Church of South Holland, IL.3

A Relic of the Past

However, First Church learned that biological growth can only last so long. A generation previous found families leaving communities like Roseland, IL and Pullman, IL and moving into South Holland. Now, those same families were leaving South Holland, IL for communities like Orland Park, IL to the west and Dyer, IN to the east. By the late 1990s and on into the early 2000s, the congregation began to steadily decline in membership and influence. Caught in the cross-hairs of worship wars over style and arrangement, change came to be another four letter word. Pastors ran out of ideas. Consistory members were discouraged and stopped serving. Young deacons were confronted with the established order that what was always done must continue to be done. Elders’ meetings were a monthly roll call of families who were transferring, often times to the daughter church, Faith Reformed Church in Dyer, IN, now dropping the “Reformed” and just going by “Faith Church.”4

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3 The First Reformed Church 100 Years Book (The Shopper: South Holland, IL, 1948).
4 For further analysis of the history of Faith Church, see “U-Turn Church” by Bob Bouwer. While I celebrate the growth of Faith Church, I also lament that so much of this growth has been through an attractional model of ministry that swallowed up members from many Reformed and Christian Reformed Churches throughout the South Chicago and Northwest Indiana areas.
Faith Church moved out of the Village of South Holland in 2003 and began sucking up members from First Church and other local RCA and CRC congregations like a vacuum. They broke ground in Dyer, just 15 miles away on the corner of where three wealthy, predominantly white subdivisions were being built. Their all-contemporary worship service and state of the art children’s ministry (equipped with a palm screening to pick up your child from the nursery) appealed to younger families. In the early 2000s, Pastor Jim VanZetten, then serving First Church, made a public goal of growing by 50 members in one year. He achieved that goal when Faith Church eliminated their adult choir and decided to go with an all-contemporary worship service. Those 50 members at Faith transferred with frustration and anger to First Church and Pastor VanZetten reached his goal. A spirit of jealousy, mixed with bitterness and coupled with desperation began to sink into the spirit of First Church. Today, Faith Church is the largest church in the Reformed Church in America.

By the mid 2000s, First Church was a relic of her once proud self. The majority of the congregation was over the age of 70. The church had lost so many young families, there was little need for a children’s nursery. Even faithful members looked for reasons to stay at their cottages or condos and worship somewhere other than First Church. There was a growing sense of desperation mixed with uncertainty.
First Impressions to Second Marriage

The stories of transformation within a young, soon-to-be seminary graduate and a fledging Reformed Church collide on February 2, 2008. When I told my wife Sarah that I was preaching at First Reformed Church in South Holland and that we needed to pack our stuff for Sunday morning and hit the road she looked at me with a puzzled look on her face and said, “why are we leaving so early to go to South Holland?” She thought we were traveling to the south side of Holland, MI, and not two hours away to the far Eastern tip of Illinois.

It snowed the whole way down and I don’t think we said more than two words to each other. I got off on the wrong exit and after listening to my Garmin tell me “recalculating…recalculating” for what seemed like an eternity we finally got back on track and were heading West on Route 6 off of Exit 73. We drove by a motel that had a dilapidated windmill outside, Shark’s Fish & Chicken, Baba’s Steak & Lemonade (I never knew those two went together) and what seemed like at least five car dealerships that had gone out of business.

After a few miles we finally arrived at the home of the chair of the search committee and his wife. They lived in a big, beautiful home right next to the church and kitty-corner from the parsonage. Don and Nyla DeGraff were in their mid 50s and while I didn’t know what they thought of me, I had an immediate
sense that they would become close friends. They gave us a tour of the giant, white stone church that literally sat in their backyard. It was dark out and there weren’t any lights on the church. I just got a sense of power and prominence from the vaulted ceilings and beautiful stained-glass windows. The church sat on some five plus acres and the sprawling building never seemed to end. It was a maze moving from room to room and wing to wing. I thought I needed a breadcrumb trail to figure out what door we came in and how to get out. They wined and dined us at Aurelio’s Pizza in Homewood, IL and introduced us to the rest of the staff – the Director of Music, the Secretary, and one of the few couples in the Church under the age of 35.

Later that weekend we were given a tour of the Village of South Holland by the one black women in the church, Trina Taylor. She told us she wanted to give us a tour from a black perspective. We climbed in her big Chevy Tahoe that reeked of cigarette smoke and drove west from South Holland, IL into Harvey, IL. In the three miles it took to enter a new Village, the landscape changed from something that was familiar to me – older homes with nicer lawns, to something that looked as if it was from the Kandahar Province in Afghanistan. Vacant buildings with broken windows. Run down homes with overgrown lawns. Boarded up businesses and countless liquor stores. Packs of black kids walking down the center of the street. Homeless people shuffling down the sidewalk
pushing shopping carts full of what must have been every possession to their name. It was as if I were in a different world.

I preached a recycled sermon from the book of Philippians. I was a seasoned veteran of pulpit supply engagements. I had my sermon down and my jokes all lined up. I looked out and saw roughly 150 people sprinkled through a massive sanctuary which once had to have seated more than 600 people. The mostly blue-haired group looked at me as if I was their grandson. While I got the usual “good jobs” and “thank yous” as I shook hands from the center aisle following the service, I think more than anything, they simply seemed amazed that a 24 year old could actually be in his last year in seminary.

The worship service was mechanical in nature. Everything was stiff and was sung and said with a lull in speech almost as if they were saying “do we really have to say the Words of Assurance?” Immediately following the service, I was ushered into the pastor’s study to meet with the entire search committee. I was grilled for about 45 minutes on my vision for ministry, my perceived strengths, my ability to lead at such a young age and my level of interest in a second date with this 159 year old congregation.

I did take them up on that second date. We got married in late May of 2008 and I’ve been the 25th Senior Pastor of the First Reformed Church in South Holland, IL for over six years. Now my photo, that still looks something like a
High School Senior Picture, is hanging in the cabinet. On the last weekend of May in 2008, Sarah and I loaded up everything we owned into both of our cars and a borrowed church van and moved into the large and empty parsonage, and into the large and empty sanctuary of First Reformed Church.

My Place in the Project

When I was a student at Western Theological Seminary, we were told in our Leadership Class that when we graduate and are given the responsibility to pastor congregations, that we should not change anything in the first year, but we better change something by the third year. The idea was that we shouldn’t come in to congregations with a Machiavellian approach to leadership and eliminate projects and people in one fell swoop within the first three months and inevitably ignite controversy within the ranks of the congregation. However, we also should be willing to change something by year three or else the congregation would become too set in their ways and resist even the slightest change. It made sense at the time.

If someone would have offered me a part-time Youth Pastor job back in Holland, MI during the first year of ministry in South Holland, IL, I would have taken it and not batted an eye. The changes that happened during my first year at the helm were so difficult, so painful, and so depressing. Even the Interim
Minister that served First Church prior to my coming admitted that he “left me a mess.” I knew significant staffing changes needed to be made and it did not take long to realize that some of the staff were not going to take kindly to a 25-year-old being their new boss. Within the first six months of being the Senior Pastor at First Church, the Consistory of the Church, at my prompting, released the Director of Worship, released the Pianist and released a Church Secretary. By my second year on the job, the Consistory of the Church, also at my prompting, also released the Kids Hope Director and cut the job and pay of the Church Janitor in half (he made more than I did for the first two years).  

Looking back on those late meetings in the old library apprehensively making difficult decisions that would eventually lead to disgruntled families leaving the church, I am still grieved to this day. I will admit my lack of patience and will confess my spirit of stubbornness. I know I battled a season of inner darkness, doubt and perhaps depression. I can see God’s hand of guidance during that difficult time. I still pray for those disgruntled families that left the church and to this day go out of their way to not speak to me. I wonder if things could have been different. I wonder if I could have done more. I wonder if I could have waited longer. This baptism by fire into the world of human

\[5\] During this difficult time, I found affirmation through Susan Scott’s book *Fierce Conversations.* Her fourth principle of fierce conversations states to “tackle your toughest challenge today.” She encourages readers to “travel light, agenda free.” While this was a wilderness time for me both personally and professional, Scott’s voice was an encouragement to stay the course and to live in the present.
resources was not exactly covered in my Leadership Class in Seminary. By God’s amazing grace, we moved forward.

Change was not only by subtraction, but also by addition. By my third year on the job, the Consistory of the Church, at my prompting, also hired a Director of Worship & Student Life, a Director of Mercy & Justice Ministries, a Director of Pastoral Care & Counsel, a Church Accountant, an Assistant Director of Worship, a Church Administrator and a Church Janitor. Needless to say, one role that I have played throughout this project is an instigator for change. It should also be noted that I am forever grateful to the men of the committee formerly known as “The Admin Team” who did their best to shield me from the inevitable verbal and emotional assault that naturally comes with such quick and obvious staffing changes. While I might have crafted new job descriptions and encouraged this new direction, they carried them out with resolve, patience and grace. I am also indebted to my “Wise Men” who met every Thursday morning in the balcony of The Blueberry Field Restaurant and listened, prayed and encouraged me relentlessly throughout my first two years in ministry.

Much of the focus of this project is a conversation in change. The change has not been manipulated through some sort of affirmative action campaign. The change has not been forced through programming. The change has not been drilled into the congregation’s head during sermons on Sunday morning. Rather,
my role as instigator of change has been to ignite change organically, subtly and patiently. We do not talk about change. We don’t even use the word. Rather, we talk and preach and live the reality of change on a daily basis. The fruits of this project began with an honest assessment that change was needed, that something had to be done, that what worked in the 1970s, will not work in 2014.

Another role I have played throughout this project is one of active listener. I did not enter this project with an agenda how to manipulate change of a pastor’s aspirations at the church’s expense. I did not talk over the still small voice of the Holy Spirit, or the still small voice of the 86 year old widow, or the still small voice of the 21 year old black college student. I also did not tie a nice bow on everything and have a clear plan for success, however success is defined. Instead, my place in this process has been to listen. To listen long and to listen well. In fact, citation has been somewhat difficult in this process. It is hard to properly cite information that I have gathered over countless cups of coffee in living rooms, along bedsides in hospitals and on the golf course. I’ve prayed at dozens of 50th wedding anniversary parties, met literally hundreds of grandkids and ran well over 5,000 miles with people from First Church all in an effort to be what I believe a pastor is to be. Throughout these experiences and more, I have
been an active listener, constantly gathering stories, collecting emotions and
discovering more and more of God’s amazing grace.⁶

Above all, my role in this project has been one of pastor. I deeply care for
the flock of people God has entrusted to my care. As a pastor, I take on much of
the joy and the sadness from the individuals that I have the highest privilege of
walking alongside. Consistory members have become more than key stake
holders in the church, they have become my friends with whom I play golf, go to
White Sox games, and go out to dinner.

I’ve recited the Lord’s Prayer with widows, widowers and even to
families who have had the unthinkable pain of having to bury their children who
took their own lives. I’ve gone on mission trips to places like Annville, Kentucky
and picked up a sledge hammer and helped knock down walls when the
basement of the church was being redone. All of these experiences helped shape
and form what it means to be a pastor: not perched above in an ivory tower, but
walking alongside people in the trenches and foxholes of life. That has been one
of the greatest joys of my life, and also one of the most humbling experiences.

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⁶ Throughout this project I have engaged in the tension between modern and post
modern claims of truth. Alvin Goldman’s book *Knowledge in a Social World* has been a voice that
has helped me find both positive and negative aspects of a post modern worldview that reveal a
greater ambiguity for claiming knowledge. While this project is a rooted in the voices of a pastor
and a congregation, I also draw upon the wisdom of the greater tradition and larger Church.
Another helpful voice in this conversation has been Crystal Downing’s book *How Postmodernism
Serves (My) Faith*. I am also grateful to Dr. Kyle Small for his handouts on “Claiming Truth.”
Why this Story is Important

Telling the story of how a white, agricultural congregation became a multi-racial, multi-generational congregation is an important story to tell. It is important for me personally and for our congregation as a whole, so that we may be better equipped to learn from our past, celebrate our present and be hopeful for our future. It is important because the Reformed Church in America is a historically Dutch denomination comprised of congregations in communities that have experienced tremendous racial change and are ill-equipped to engage gracefully in diversity. It is important because of events like the ones that took place in Ferguson, MO that remind our nation that issues such as race and ethnicity continue to be polarizing ones.\(^7\) Lastly, it is important because woven in the fabric of the Good News of Jesus Christ is a call to engage, embrace and worship in multi-racial and multi-generation communities.

\(^7\) For more information, the RCA’s website at rca.org has been an extremely helpful resource for me. In addition, in the weeks that followed the events in Ferguson, MO, Tom DeVries, the General Secretary for the RCA wrote a blog highlighting congregations in communities similar to that of Ferguson in terms of their racial composition. First Church in South Holland, IL was one of two that were highlighted. A helpful voice in this conversation has been Eric Law’s book *The Bush was Blazing But Not Consumed*. Specifically in chapter 1 he draws upon the experience of the 1992 race riots in Los Angeles. Spanning more than 20 years, race riots in Los Angeles and Ferguson has been catalytic in nature for sparking dialogue in and outside the church.
Not a Recipe for a U-Turn Church

It is my hope and prayer that this project is a humble and celebratory story of redemption. Redemption in a people. Redemption in a ministry. Redemption in a community. After six years with me as their Senior Pastor, and their 166 of years in ministry, First Reformed Church of South Holland is a microcosm for many bread and butter congregations, not only in the Reformed Church in America, but also across denominational lines. Churches that are desperately trying to be faithful to God’s call in ministry in aging buildings in changing communities with limited financial and people resources. Churches that are trying to do ministry with the shadow of a glorious past looming large over their present and future. Churches that will not sell their souls to a consumeristic, individualistic and materialistic ecclesial culture.

As I attend more Classis meetings and talk with more pastors, I sense this growing frustration of “just trying to do the best we can with what we’ve got.” Most congregations can’t afford to attempt a satellite ministry in another community. Most congregations can’t add three new staff members with benefits in next year’s budget. Most congregations cannot just up and trade in their aging Senior Pastor for some young, trendy, hot-shot preacher with wire-framed glasses and a tattoo revealing he’s had a past in an attempt to become more relevant. No, the reality is that a great many congregations are in changing
communities, worshiping in beautiful, old buildings with aging congregations. It is my earnest desire that this project will be a source of hope for those kinds of congregations. Congregations and leaders might find a glimmer of hope in learning that change does not always have to be negative, organs can complement with guitars, and being a diverse congregation doesn’t mean we have a “gospel service,” and a “traditional service,” and a “contemporary service.”

I truly believe that while we hear and read more and more about the church multiplication movement from both denominational leaders and large-church pastors turned authors, there is a growing sense among pastors and congregations who feel they have no voice in that story. To make matters worse, to speak up against Classis assessments being directed more and more towards church multiplication or to ask the response, “why are we planting more churches in affluent white sub-divisions” portrays the attitude of “Oh, you must be against Church multiplication.” Nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, I believe that categories like revitalization and multiplication do not have to be mutually exclusive. Rather, I believe they can learn and grow from and with

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8 I have sensed the pursuit of “the magic bullet” for congregational transformation most powerfully in Classis and Regional Synod gathers of pastors. Books like Thom Rainer’s Breakout Churches are referred to as a recipe for success for congregations clinging to the past and fearful for their future. At an 2013 Synod of Mid-America meeting it was suggested that congregations that are struggling numerically use Faith Church’s Senior Pastor, Bob Bouwer, as a consultant. This suggestion only speaks to a larger sense of despair, lack of self-awareness and fear felt by so many congregations.
one another. In 2008, I was something of a Church Planter. I came and planted a 
new church within the shell of a 160 year old congregation. I was just given the 
benefits of a staff, a budget, a building, and a Consistory. I want both the 
multiplication and revitalization movements to find a source of hope in this 
story.

Undoubtedly, this will not be an easy recipe to turn a church around. This 
will not be a 1-2-3 step plan to success. This will not be complete. This also will 
certainly not be without flaws, without frustrations or without failures. I have 
been referred to too many books written by pastors heralding all the wondrous 
things God has done in and through their ministries, as if to say “if you do what 
we are doing, God will bless you and you will have a faithful ministry.” We do 
not have revitalization, multi-cultural ministry, or multi-generational ministry all 
figured out. Far from it. Moreover, this project seeks to chronicle the messy, 
patient and fruitful work of transformation and renewal.

A Painful Process

Ultimately, this project will chronicle a story of a congregation in 
transition. As author Max DePree writes, “Transition is a great deal more than a 
change. It’s a growing and a maturing and an understanding and wisdom-
gaining process. Transition gives us the opportunity to rise above polarization.
Transition is a marvelous polishing of our intellectual and spiritual and emotional faculties. It’s a process of learning who we are.”9 Throughout this project specific areas of transition will be analyzed in hopes of better understanding who we are. Each will add to the larger story of transition of a white, agricultural congregation becoming a multi-racial, multi-generational body of Christ.

I will also use the language of “journey of transformation” and “change” to reflect this growing process of tracking who we were to who we are and to what we did to what we do. Ultimately, this process is difficult, painful and God ordained. As author C.S. Lewis writes:

If we let Him – for we can prevent Him, if we choose – He will make the feeblest and filthiest of us into a god or goddess, a dazzling, radiant, immortal creature, pulsating all through with such energy and joy and wisdom and love as we cannot now imagine, a bright stainless mirror which reflects back to God perfectly (though, of course, on a smaller scale) His own boundless power and delight and goodness. The process will be long and in parts very painful, but that is what we are in for. Nothing less. He meant what He said.10

This project is a journey of becoming those “dazzling, radiant creatures” God has called us to. As a result of racial migration, conflict in worship and a growing sense of congregational despair, First Reformed Church of South

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Lewis also cites a powerful metaphor from George MacDonald about God, as a builder, creating change in our lives. I found this metaphor helpful in thinking through the magnitude of transformation within the culture of a congregation.
Holland was forced to confront their ecclesial mortality in their given context for ministry. While this self-awareness was painful, it also gives birth to a capacity for a new vision of possibility for the future. Together, we entered into a corporate journey of transformation that changed our congregational composition and renewed our congregational structures and practices that have led to a more robust sense of our identity as God’s diverse people and our purpose in God’s kingdom.

A plaque just outside the sanctuary commemorating the donation of land given by Hendrik DeYoung reads, “to God be the glory.” Above all, this project hopes to add a new flavor to that glory. Understanding loss, experiencing racial tension and ethnic migration were not mutually exclusive to giving God glory. Rather, this project uncovers how creating a self-awareness of these realities, along with infusing specific Spirit-prompted transitions such as the role of liturgy, preaching, and leadership, First Church was able embrace a new, multi-racial, multi-generational identity. This texture not only reflects more clearly the Village of South Holland, but also the unity of Christ. To God be the glory.
Chapter 2: A Good Story

“I had always felt life first as a story; and if there is a story there is a story-teller.”

G K Chesterton
Chapter Overview

Throughout this chapter, I will lay the foundation for the journey of transformation in the life of First Reformed Church. I will detail the methodology used in capturing the story of a congregation in the midst of racial and ecclesial change. This methodology includes awareness of the larger context of ministry, along with the long history of First Reformed Church. However, a narrower methodology of narrative inquiry will be reflected in outlining specific steps for gathering data through focus groups. Finally, I will also introduce a theological framework that will shape the course of future ministry.

Open Secrets

I first read Richard Lischer’s Open Secrets when I was still in Seminary. I laughed. I smirked. I rolled my eyes. I was also afraid that his experience in rural Illinois would be my experience right out of Seminary. Little did I know that, in many ways, I would find an emotional, spiritual and mental companion in this delightful memoir of faith and discovery. In the years that have followed, I have oftentimes referred back to specific chapters and experiences as therapy for the similar experiences Lischer and I experienced early in ministry. As this project has evolved and taken shape, I have begun to dream that it would be a 2014

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1 As a young pastor, Open Secrets, along with Eugene Peterson’s Working the Angles, have been extremely helpful pastoral resources in my formation of ministry.
version of *Open Secrets* set along the Little Calumet River just 25 miles south of
the Willis Tower. Like the faithful folks of New Cana, family names run deep at
the First Reformed Church in South Holland, IL. Conflict is unavoidable and
navigating an uncertain future is daunting. A new pastor shows up on the scene
“full of piss and vinegar”\(^2\) and armed with enough ideas to ignite a second
Reformation. Not unlike Lischer, it has been my hope and prayer all along that
this project would pay close attention to space, place, people and Spirit.

Serving a faithful congregation with a large and gaping shadow of the
past who are being forced to confront the four letter word of “change” head-on is
a humbling task. As a pastor and shepherd, I have prayerfully been sensitive to
the particular changes in congregational composition, structure, and practices
that have occurred in the life of First Reformed Church in South Holland, IL
between 2008-2013. While, the rich 160 year history of the congregation, along
with the history of the Village of South Holland are key components in this
narrative, they provide the foundation for a focused analysis of a five year
transition. Specifically, I wanted to know what changes have become catalysts to
a more robust sense of identity as God’s diverse people and an ecclesial purpose
in God’s Kingdom. Following chapters will sharpen that focus around areas of
liturgy, preaching, and leadership.

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3 My good friend and WWII veteran, Les VanDeursen gave me this expression. I had no
idea what he was talking about. I still don’t know what this expression means, but it sounds cool.
Prior to 2008, pastors and interim pastors used the word “change” from the pulpit almost as much as they did the word “grace.” Congregants felt as if they were being forced, or coerced, or manipulated, or even beaten over the head into being someone and doing something they were not. The interesting piece is where this project focuses on substantial changes in the life of a congregation without championing change for the sake of change. Rather, this project will explore through the methodology of case study the changes that have occurred organically, subtly, and still concretely in the life of First Reformed Church in South Holland, IL. I will also seek out other voices in this most important conversation of becoming a multi-racial, multi-generation congregation in hopes of critiquing and learning from the great cloud of witnesses.

Creating a common language becomes crucial in understanding the foundation of this project. Specifically, understanding terms like “congregational composition” and “congregational structure” become important for greater clarity and unity. Together, these terms mirror that of conversations related to the form and function of an organization or congregation. For the purposes of this project, I understand “congregational composition” to mean the individuals that make up the congregation. Thus, Gwen, the 50 something African American woman, Jason, the 8 year old biracial second grader, Tom, the mid 70s Caucasian
man and Katrina, the early 30 year old Caucasian woman are part of the congregational composition in First Reformed Church.

The congregational composition also includes individuals from different socio-economic statuses, skin colors, ages, ecclesial traditions, and genders, along with their unique stories and experiences. I understand “congregational structure” to mean the practice of ministry that the congregation participates in to live out more faithfully the call of God in their particular context. This includes the complexities of a typical Sunday morning worship service, the leadership structures, and the missional involvements within the life of the church.

Both of these phrases become foundational in understanding the specific changes that have occurred in the life of First Church and key elements of our transformational journey. While they are certainly not complete, but rather are ever evolving, the intrinsic relationship between composition and structure, will be critical throughout this project. In addition, the ethnography of First Reformed Church and the demographics of the Village of South Holland will be analyzed and assessed as markers for change in this journey of transformation within a multi-racial and multi-generation congregation. Ultimately, this project will gather not only data, but personal perspectives and attitudes in hopes of articulating a more robust and diverse framework of the Kingdom of God that will cast a new vision for ministry in the next five years.
Framework of Grace

Setting on the corner of my desk in my office is a framed painting that my two year old son, Willem, made for me for Father’s Day 2013. Inside the frame is a poem that my wife Sarah found about the role a Dad plays in a son’s life. Serving as a backdrop to the poem is his tiny two year old hand print in paint. The wooden frame is a smearing of red, blue, green, purple, and orange paint. It is a typical Father’s Day present from a two year old. In a lot of ways, it looks terrible. It’s uneven. It’s blotchy. It’s a mess. There’s no order, symmetry or shape. Colors overlap, smear and blur together. Still, it is a frame that holds Willem’s love.

This project and the journey of our Church is a similar frame. Transitioning from a white, agricultural congregation to a multi-racial, multi-racial congregation was not a smooth process. There’s not a recipe for success. There’s not a clear path to follow. There’s not a model for the right “U-Turn” church. Rather it is a Spirit-prompted collaboration of stories and shared experiences. It is a melding of cultures and colors. It is a smearing of brokenness and grace at the First Reformed Church in South Holland, IL. Perhaps a color from the frame or insight from the project will stand out to pastors and congregational leaders in their own contexts. A particular insight of cultural understanding, or a tangible practice of music, or even a question to ask around
the consistory table, will hopefully become clear at some point in time for certain pastors or congregational leaders. This project will look at those pockets of change along the journey of transformation for a particular congregation in hopes that the larger Catholic Church will increase in its effectiveness and the Kingdom of God will come on earth as it is heaven.

Inside our frame is the Good News of Jesus Christ that has been prayed, sung, and proclaimed on the same plot of ground for over 166 years. Ministers have come and gone, but the same Gospel story is being told and re-told. Instruments have changed from the voorsinger to the organ to the piano to the drums, but the same amazing grace is poured out. The kind of people who dawn her doors have changed in age, skin color and ecclesial tradition, but their stories of pain in need of redemption have not. Still, there is beauty, and hope and grace in the message and in the messengers.

Location, Location, Location

The context of this project is rooted in the voices of the First Reformed Church in South Holland, IL. Congregants who have been members their entire lives, and congregants who are new to First Church and to the Reformed Church in America, play a key role in this project. These newer congregants are primarily
coming from Roman Catholic and Baptist traditions. Many grew up in the church from an early age, and even went to Catholic High Schools. Others have been super-saturated with church from a young age and know the routine of a worship service, but do not know the meaning behind and in a worship service. However, the majority of these individuals have not been a faithful member of any particular church in many years. They are coming with foggy memories of what church used to be in their minds and the hope for what church could be in the forefront of their minds.

While I always knew that a congregation existed before I took the reins of the pulpit, subconsciously, I have just naturally put greater emphasis on our present and on our hopeful future. This assumption was met with extreme resistance as I read through *Narrative Inquiry: Experience and Story in Qualitative*

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3 A helpful resource in the assimilation and discipleship of individuals that have come from the Catholic tradition has been Chris Castaldo’s book *Holy Ground: Walking with Jesus as a Former Catholic*. Specifically, chapter one addresses fundamental differences between Protestants and Catholics and outlines reasons why some Catholics have left the Catholic Church.

4 During a new members class, I asked the question, “when you come to church, how do you feel?” An individual responded by saying, “I feel dumb.” This hollowing comment has been a faithful reminder for the gifts that God is bringing to us. As a helpful guide in these challenging circumstances, I have often times referred to I. John Hesselink’s book, *On Being Reformed*. This book has been helpful to delineate stereotypes and misconceptions about what exactly it means to be a Reformed Christian, not simply someone who is of Dutch heritage.

5 In the summer of 2011 a “visual portrait” of First Reformed Church was put together to provide a thick description of the culture of First Reformed Church between the years 2008-2013. While it is important to understand parts of the larger ethnographic story of First Church, the specific focus of this project chronicles a five year transition.
Throughout this book, authors D. Jean Clandinin and F. Michael Connelly create what they refer to as “a three-dimensional narrative inquiry of space.” This three dimensional understanding of a congregation has provided me a rich template from which to draw as I uncover my role as pastor in this project.

Clandinin and Connelly use their three dimensional framework to narrate a holistic understanding of a social institution. A first dimension of understanding is its place and situation. This is an important foundational piece in understanding a congregation, but what Clandinin and Connelly suggest is that a particular ministry context can be understood in terms of concentric circles. The inner circle would represent the specific address and neighborhood of a congregation. Subsequent circles would represent the community, region and State levels. For this particular project, the address of 15924 South Park Avenue would be considered by many the “nicer” part of South Holland. The church is set back nearly a quarter of a mile from the road and is directly across the street from the largest and most beautiful park in the Village. Following circles in our ministry context would be the Village of South Holland, the region on the South Side of Chicago and along with our neighbors to the East of Northwest Indiana.

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The second dimension that Clandinin and Connelly describe is the temporal or continuing dimension. The obvious connection to draw is to look forward. How can we strategically plan the next five years? What are some of our long and short term goals with respect to the vision of the church? Where do we want to be with God’s help in five years? These are natural kinds of implications for the second dimension, and, as a 25 year old graduate fresh from Seminary, the natural tendency was to lean into this vision for the future. I remember being pulled by members of consistory to spend time vision casting for the future. The unspoken reality was that now that we have this young senior pastor, we now can begin to launch into our new future.

The final dimension that Clandinin and Connelly describe is the personal and social element to a congregation. These are the interpersonal relationships that exist within a staff of a congregation, within members of a congregation and then are bled out to those outside of the congregation. This project is rooted in these types of diverse relationships. Their voices, experiences, joys and dreams become the chorus of this narrative.

Another group of people who are involved in the fruition of this project would be the residents of the Village of South Holland. As this project will explore in chapter three, the journey of the Village of South Holland and the journey of First Reformed Church share many similar elements. While a majority
of the members of First Church still live in the Village of South Holland, as I will explore later, we are broadening our reach of influence to more communities in the South Suburbs and Northwest Indiana. That trend, coupled with demographic changes in the Village have all impacted who we are as a congregation in relationship to the plot of ground in which we worship and serve. It is also critical to understand how it is assumed that First Church will remain in the Village of South Holland and continue to participate in corporate worship as one body at the same time on Sunday mornings.

It is my hope and prayer that the congregation of First Church will benefit from this project and will celebrate their past, gain more clarity on their present position in ministry and be encouraged for their future ministry in South Holland. While transparency is at times a bitter pill to swallow, I believe this transformational journey will help us see who we are in light of Jesus’ message to His disciples before He was taken from them in a cloud to be “witnesses in Jerusalem, in all of Judea, and Samaria, and the ends of the earth.”

7 It is our prayer that we, as a body of Christ, would more faithfully through word and deed bear witness to the resurrected Jesus. We will see where we have fallen short, where we have room to grow and where God is leading us moving forward.

7 See Acts 1:8.
Additionally, I would hope that similar congregations serving in changing communities are committed to renewal with limited resources, both physical and financial and would find a hopeful and humble example that is accessible for their own contexts. Again, this project is not written from a perspective of narrow success; rather, it would be another voice in a larger conversation of how congregations can experience renewal and transformation. Whether out of a motive of survival or not, there seems to be a growing trend among pastors and colleagues to become congregations that are more reflective of their communities.

Finding a Foundation for the Future

I am grateful to Western Theological Seminary and the Doctorate of Ministry Program for both the authenticity and autonomy they willingly provide. This project has greatly shaped not only a congregation, but also a pastor. Every square inch of my formation for ministry has been touched by the scope of this project. From those with whom who I break bread, to the kinds of sermons I preach. All have been impacted by the fruit of this project. The freedom each Learning Unit has provided proved to create the most meaningful impact on my learning and on the congregation. Throughout this journey of
congregational transformation, each Learning Unit has intentionally examined pockets of transformation throughout the life of our congregation.

Beginning with an ethnographic analysis of who we are, I then focused on understanding differences among cultures, followed by a unit on the importance of consistorial leadership, a unit on understanding the homiletical differences among atonement theories, and finally, a unit on the role liturgy plays within the life of a congregation. Thus, each Learning Unit has served as a foundational piece for chapters of a project summarizing each pocket of transformation, while looking for common currents of change, along with being a launching point for a more in-depth case study forecasting future movements in transformational ministry. The Learning Units have served as both retrospective and prospective pieces in this project.

Learning Units were designed and implemented with care and precision for how best to facilitate this journey of transformation. The final form of my project is a detailed case study of the First Reformed Church in South Holland, IL. It will summarize and compare the differences in the congregational composition with respect to race, ecumenical background, socio-economic status, the structure of leadership in relationship to ministry and the practice of congregational life. It is my sincere hope that a final summary of learnings from this project will be a catalyst of a new season of strategic planning for our
Consistory in hopes of casting a vision forward in the practice of ministry. Even since the conception of my first Learning Unit, there have been significant changes to both congregational composition and congregational structure that have drastically impacted our transformational journey.

Coffee, Cookies & Methodology

My Grandpa, Don Brinks, has been one of the most influential people in shaping my call to ministry. He and his late wife, Arlene, were pillars in the Trinity Reformed Church in Kalamazoo, MI. My Grandpa sang in the choir, chaired stewardship campaigns and served for a decade as a member of the consistory. In all of his years serving the church, his most proud experience was chairing the search committee that called the then green horned pastor fresh out of Harvard Divinity School, the Rev. Dr. Dennis Voskuil. Dr. Voskuil served as Trinity’s pastor for a handful of years before taking a professorship at Hope College. My uncles still love to tell the story about bringing their high school friends to Trinity to play pickup basketball over Thanksgiving Break. After their friends took an elbow to the ribs they would ask, “who was that guy out there throwing elbows.” They would smile and say, “Oh, that’s our pastor.”

My Grandpa still loves to tell the story of how a brilliant theologian and scholar came to Trinity and couldn’t preach a ten minute sermon to save his life
and that it didn’t even matter. Within the first few months, Dr. Voskuil endeared himself to the older ladies at Trinity by never missing coffee and cookies during the week. Those simple moments of fellowship and time spent listening to the stories of the living saints of the Church became far more important than any sermon Dr. Voskuil preached.

I’ve hung on to that story throughout the work God has called me to in South Holland, IL. I’ve thought of Dr. Voskuil sitting in the parlor of my great aunt’s Corneile’s house on Cork Street having those cookies that are in the shape of windmills over a cup of coffee. I’ve pictured him asking good questions and leaving room for people to tell about their grandkids serving in the military or how they met their husbands. Also, I can image the difficulty in playing “Dutch Bingo” with so many families that are related!

I find myself in a very similar situation. I serve a congregation that is rich in tradition and steeped in heritage. Who your parents were still carries weight within the families of the congregation. Baptisms go back seven generations. What your last name is still holds importance to members of our congregation. How we try new ministries or launch new programs is always held in the light of what we did in the past. This is not bad, or good, or in between. It is simply the reality that I find myself in, and as a result, the methodology of gathering information is intrinsically tied to my identity as pastor.
Dr. Latini’s Counsel & Care Class

In putting my finger on the pulse of the transformational journey that First Reformed Church has been traveling in this last season of ministry, the gathering of stories has been a critical first step. This collection of data can take many shapes and forms; however, the methodology of a focus group has become the most effective way of gathering these precious stories. Not only does a focus group provide a more relaxed, open ended atmosphere for conversation, but it also falls more in line with my gifts as a communicator.

I can still remember as an inexperienced seminary student in Dr. Teresa Latini’s Introduction to Counsel & Care Class the fear and anxiety related to my lack of ability with respect to the specific counseling skills needed to effectively empathize and minister to individuals. I remember that after my taped final exam during a mock counseling session in which I was sure I failed to practice any real counseling techniques, Dr. Latini confessed to me that indeed I lacked the specific skills to be a counselor; but in the end, I was a good listener and made people feel comfortable in conversation and that really was half the battle. While I still feel she was only trying to comfort me and let me down easily, I still appreciated her encouragement.

With Dr. Latini’s encouragement coupled with the insights from continued reading in the field of narrative inquiry, the foundation of this project
has been through a focus group setting. Specifically, each focus group was a targeted series of interviews. One of the key insights into the formation of a good interview is to first articulate a clear and concise goal.\(^8\) This becomes crucial throughout the interview process. As James Spradley suggests, the goal of an interview is to learn from others, rather than simply study others. With the formation of a clear and concise goal, I entered into the learning process, rather than projecting my already preconceived ideas and beliefs on others. Through the collection of stories, it became important that I do most of the listening through a series of open-ended questions that all support the goal of the interview. As this project is rooted in the voices of the members of First Church, my goal throughout these focus groups was simply listen to how individuals have experienced, both theologically and emotionally the transitions that have taken place in the life of the Church within a five year time span.

While the goal of the interview may be concise, the stories and experiences of those that I interviewed were multi-faceted and expansive. As 19\(^{th}\) Century author GK Chesterton once wrote “I had always felt life first as a story: and if there is a story there is a story-teller.”\(^9\) There is a story here. There is a story from the past and there is a story emerging for the future. The stories of these friends

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all point to a greater Story-Teller that has been bringing an old Dutch Church on
a journey of transformation.

Above all, as the interviewer, I have gone into the interview process with
an open mind and open ears to be a fellow travel companion on a trip through
memories and experiences within the lives of the members of First Reformed
Church. The methodology for gathering stories through focus group settings
became an organic way to collect data, engage with the participants and together
discern the journey of transformation that we have been on at First Reformed
Church. ¹⁰

Retaining a Listening Ear

Throughout my doctorate of ministry work, I have continually been
refining my learning through questions and conversations within the body of
Christ. I am so thankful that the congregation has been an integral part of this
experience and can hopefully see themselves in this process. As a result, I have
drawn on their experience and wisdom throughout my Learning Units and their
voices became the primary vehicle for gathering data. Thus, this project is a

¹⁰ Another helpful guide in the research phase of the project was Dorothy Valcarcel
Craig’s book Action Research Essentials. I referred to this book in designing research questions and
in helping me analyze data that was gathered.
collaborate celebration of their story, identity, hopes and dreams as living out God’s mandate on the south side of Chicago.

One key learning for which I credit one of my learning unit mentors, Dr. George Brown, was the question of whom I should seek out to interview. While I immediately thought the best individuals to be part of these focus groups would have been elder members of the congregation that were born here, baptized here, made profession of faith here, got married here, raised their kids here and will one day be buried here, Dr. Brown offered a different perspective.

Undoubtedly the rich heritage of members that can trace their lineage back seven generations will be able to provide a very unique perspective. However, there is also wisdom in including the stories of newer members to the life of the church that do not carry with them the long history of the church or the community. The perspectives of newer members has been helpful in gauging both some of our strengths as a church and some of the growing edges we still need to attend to. I also was intentional about including diversity of age, vocation, gender and race in the interview process. As a congregation that has a growing number of African American members and visitors, the inclusion of their stories into this transformational journey was vital. As these individuals will play the role of teacher, the lessons I was able to learn were as diverse as the teachers themselves.
Specifically, I believed that focus groups would be the best way to gather information. My goal was to ask twelve members of the congregation, ranging in age, gender, race, ecumenical background and longevity of membership, to be part of the three focus groups. I prayerfully combed through our most recent Church Directory and trusted the Holy Spirit’s leading in comprising each focus group. We met on three consecutive Saturday mornings in February of 2014 in the Genesis Room of First Reformed Church. We sat in a semi-circle on a couch and four oversized chairs. Above all, I wanted to assume the posture of active listener. As Richard Osmer writes, “Priestly listening is, first and foremost, the activity of the entire Christian community, not just its leaders. It reflects the nature of the congregation as a fellowship in which people listen to one another as a form of mutual support, care and edification.”\(^{11}\) I prayerfully went in to each session asking that the Holy Spirit would give me ears of an elephant to be that kind of priestly listener. It is in that spirit of mutual support, care and edification that we gathered. Here are the names of the focus group participants and a brief summary of their background.

Focus Group #1

Bill grew up in First Church and was active his whole life until a farming accident left his only son paralyzed. For thirty years, Bill did not attend services. The Sunday after his son’s funeral, Bill was back in worship. His wife Barb cannot be present in worship due to physical restraints. Bill is a white male, a lifelong farmer and is in his mid 80s.

Clint also grew up in First Church and currently serves as the Deacon Chairman. Clint works in the financial industry. He is married to Merley, who was born in the Dominican Republic and together have two bi-racial children, Ian and Nicole. Clint is a white male in his upper 30s and lives in the Village of South Holland.

Barb joined First Church in 2012 with her husband, Rich, who serves as our Director of Pastoral Care & Counsel. Barb has worked as both a nurse and a licensed Christian Counselor throughout her professional career. Barb is a white female in her early 70s who lives in the Village of South Holland.

Trina is the wife of the first African American family who joined First Church in 2007. Trina works as a nurse at Mercy Hospital in the City of Chicago. She is currently going through a divorce from
her husband Howard and together they have two children, Aaron and Alisha. Trina served on the search committee that brought Sarah and me to South Holland in 2008. Trina is black and in her mid 40s. She lives in South Holland.

**Focus Group #2**

**Keith** grew up Catholic and joined First Church in 2010. Keith and his wife Aubrey have a one year old daughter, Anna. Keith works as a salesman for the Lansing Sport Shop. He currently serves as a Deacon. His grandmother, Harriet Santefort, played the organ at First Church for over 60 years. He is a white male in his mid 30s and lives in nearby Thornton, IL.

**Dacia** came to First Church through our campus ministry to South Suburban College, “First Campus Ministries.” She works as a nurse’s aide pursuing her Associates degree. She became a member of the Church in 2013. She currently is part of the Worship Team and volunteers with the youth group, Oasis. She is a black female in her mid 20s and lives in neighboring Riverdale, IL.

**Dorothy “Dort”** has been a member of the church for nearly her entire life. She lives right next door to the Church and currently serves as the luncheon coordinator for funerals that takes place at
the Church. Dort’s husband passed away over ten years ago. She is a white female and is in her late 80s.

**John** has been a member of First Church for most of his adult life. He and his wife, Gay, raised their children in the Church and lived in South Holland. They currently live in Palos Heights, IL, which is roughly 20 miles from South Holland. Throughout his professional career, John was an architect. John is a white male in his early 70s.

**Focus Group #3**

**Glenn** is a life-long member of First Church. He taught in the public school system for his entire professional career. Glenn lived the majority of his life in South Holland and now commutes back to First Church from neighboring New Lenox, roughly 25 miles to the west. He is currently part of the Elder board and sings in the Chancel Choir. He is a white male in his early 60s.

**Emily** grew up at First Church. Both her parents and grandparents are members of the Church. Emily is currently pursuing a degree in zoology. She is actively involved in the young adult ministry called “NeXt,” along with the ministry at neighboring South Suburban College called “First Campus Ministries.” She is currently dating
another member of the Church who serves as a Deacon. She is a white female in her early 20s.

**Dave** lives in Thornton, IL. He was extremely active in the life of the Church for many years, then drifted away from the Church. Through much prayer and visitation, Dave and his family have since come back to the Church. Dave has two adult children and one daughter entering high school. He works as an auto-mechanic and currently serves on the Elder Board. He is a white male in his early 50s.

**Corey** currently serves as a Chaplain with Chicagoland Prison Outreach and is on staff at Church as our Director of Mercy & Justice Ministries. Corey is an ordained Elder and is nearing completion of the Commissioned Pastor Program with the RCA. Corey is currently in the process of becoming divorced. He is a 33 year old black man who lives in South Holland.

Prior to each Saturday morning together, I emailed each individual a set of questions that would serve as prompts for our discussion. In some instances, we covered each of the questions, and in other sessions, we did not. Some specific questions became catalysts for deeper conversation with tangentially-
related topics of conversation. For each focus group, Nyla DeGraff, who serves as our Church Administrator, graciously served as my Research Assistant. She was paid $15 an hour for her time and hosted each focus group setting with an array of coffee and pastries. She also made sure that each session was being recorded properly. During the focus group setting, Nyla sat off camera and took meticulous field notes. The questions that I used as discussion prompts are listed below.

1. What brought you to First Reformed Church?

2. If you could summarize the history of First Reformed Church in one word or phrase, what would it be and why?

3. How did you feel as First Reformed Church continued to decline in membership?

4. Given the three options below, what were your feelings surrounding the life and witness of First Church in the early to mid 2000s?
   a. Sell the building and move out to the Suburbs following racial migration further West and East.
   b. Remain in the Village of South Holland, but make no changes in congregational composition, structure or practices and slowly embrace your ecclesial mortality.
   c. Remain in the Village of South Holland and embark on a journey of transformation and change.

5. How has First Reformed Church been able to experience such marked changes in congregational composition? Specifically, what are some of the changes that have been catalytic in nature to the growth of First Reformed Church?
6. Specifically with respect to liturgy, how does the corporate worshipping life on Sunday morning compare to your previous worship experiences both at First Reformed Church or at a previous Church?

7. What role does the preaching of the Word have within the life of First Reformed Church and how has this shaped your life?

8. What have you learned theologically, biblically and practically about the inclusion of people of different races, ecumenical backgrounds and socio-economic statuses within the body of Christ?

9. How has the transformation seen in the life of First Reformed Church impacted your understanding of the Kingdom of God?

10. What role has leadership played in the corporate transformation of First Reformed Church?

11. What is your fondest memory of being a part of First Reformed Church?

12. Where do you see First Reformed Church in 5, 10, 25 years?

Each focus group session lasted roughly two and a half hours. I earnestly attempted to be an active listener throughout the process. While I took my own field notes, I diligently attempted to be present, patient and persistent in asking questions and follow-up questions. Each focus group conversation began and ended with prayer. We took a ten minute break roughly an hour into our time together. I explained to them the purpose of our time together and a bit about my journey in the Doctorate of Ministry program at Western Seminary. I also shared with them that I would be filming our conversations for my own records, so that
I would be more free in the dialogue process. While each session began with participants somewhat apprehensive, their level of comfort quickly eased and their level of clarity quickly deepened. Perhaps one of the biggest blessings of the focus group setting has been the fostering of deeper relationships among the participants, specifically the older participants and the younger participants. They now reach out to one another on Sunday mornings as friends and no longer as strangers or random faces in the Church directory.

The Growing Edge of Patience

Another formative insight into the methodology of an interview and focus group conversation is the importance of patience throughout the process. I will wholeheartedly admit that I lack patience. This continues to be a growing edge in my life and in my role as pastor, preacher and leader. While I come by this lack of patience honestly, it continues to be something that I hope and pray improves with experience and age. However, throughout the focus group process, patience and active listening become either the conduit for a fruitful interview, or what suffocates conversation and hampers an interview. While I do lack in patience, I was intentionally sensitive to the verbal and nonverbal cues of individuals in conversations. As Richard Osmer points out, being sensitive to these cues

through a calm and patient demeanor, will not only make others feel more comfortable, but will also increase the freedom and candor of responses. An obvious point of interest is to make sure throughout the interview process that I do far less talking and far more listening. Patience in asking questions and in allowing time for thoughtful responses is absolutely critical in this process.

Standing on Holy Ground

I truly considered it a humbling privilege to hear the stories and testimonies of the people of God in South Holland. As former General Secretary of the Reformed Church in America, the Rev. Wes Granberg-Michaelson once told me at a conference of emerging leaders within the denomination, “when we hear each other’s stories, we are walking on holy ground.” Not only for three consecutive Saturday mornings, but for the past six years, I have been standing on holy ground. The methodology of a focus group with a series of targeted interview questions was the appropriate venue to share, to listen and to grow in the grace of Christ. Relationships were forged. Vision was sharpened. Dreams were imagined.
Theological Framework

Upon completing each focus group setting, I set out to prayerfully reflect on what I heard, what I did not hear, and how I heard what I heard. While the focus groups became the primary research vehicle, theological discernment following each focus group became the next step in the project. I reviewed the recorded material along with field notes and began to notice common currents throughout the conversations. I also retraced the tenor of conversations, along with any outlying comments. I paid close attention to larger theological implications such as understanding how a church can experience renewal amidst changes in composition, structure and practice that broaden an ecclesial vision for the body of Christ and sharpen a congregation’s identity to more clearly reflect the diversity in the kingdom of God. In my fifth and final chapter, I will deal specifically with the implications and insights of how, as a congregation, our understanding of the kingdom of God has been impacted by our journey of transformation.

Theological questions are closely connected to theological convictions shared, held and celebrated at First Church. Moreover, we believe that Jesus calls the Church to be the anchoring vessel to share the Gospel to all nations. We believe diversity of age, background, socio-economic status and skin color are to be embraced and celebrated within the body of Christ. We believe the Bible gives
room for a wide expression of Christ-centered corporate worship. We believe pastoral and consistorial leadership are essential in casting a vision for future ministry. These theological convictions were affirmed throughout the focus group setting. This project has been both a theological affirmation that we are on firm theological footing, as well as a challenge for us to grow deeper and reach wider as a body of Christ. Throughout this project there has been a cyclical path of discovery, questioning and further revelation that has impacted not only who we are in the light of God’s grace, but also the kind of ministry God is directing us to in this particular time and season.

Next Steps

The following chapters are the prayerful fruit those focus group settings revealed in the life of the church, along with leaning into the larger community of ecumenical scholarship as a voice of encouragement. In subsequent chapters, I will explore the specific ethnography of First Church and compare it to the current demographics of the Village of South Holland, IL. Through the gathering of stories, reflections and insights from focus group participants, I will share the emotional tenor of the congregation as they coped with the painful reality of their ecclesial mortality and the changes that were brought about to combat that reality. In that way, I will then explore what transformation has looked like
within the context of a multi-racial and multi-generational Church on the south side of Chicago. I will share how theological convictions such as diversity within the body of Christ are something not only called for by the Bible, but are actually something to be celebrated. Lastly, I will prayerfully vision how shifting from a white, agricultural congregation to a multi-racial, multi-generational body of Christ has and will continue to impact our formation for ministry while retaining the same Biblical and theological authority.

Like the frame sitting on my desk, this project will look and feel different to different people. For some, the journey of transformation is riddled with lament over the past, over what once was, over more and more change. For others the journey of transformation is one that has challenged their ecclesial vision for what a church should look like and what a church should do. For others the journey of transformation has confronted their own spiritual commitment not merely to talk about change, but respond positively when change occurs. Still, for others this journey of transformation is one of audacious hope filled with uncertainty and ripe with possibility. While the anticipated outcome of this project for our congregation will be entering into a more focused season of strategic planning and visioning, the anticipated outcome for others will look much different. Still,
the Good News of Jesus Christ is proclaimed through broken vessels like the church, all filled with broken people of different walks of life.
Chapter 3: A Relic of the Past

“For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven.”

Ecclesiastes 3:1
Chapter Overview

This chapter will look back to the history of both First Reformed Church, which dates back to 1848 and the Village of South Holland, which dates back to 1846. I will provide an ethnographic portrait of the church throughout the last 160 years. I will explore the demographics of the Village of South Holland and compare South Holland to surrounding communities. This chapter will also pay special attention to the emotional tenor of loss and despair as the church dwindled in membership, influence and missional impact. As I will detail, this sense of despair led the Church to come to grips with their ecclesial mortality.

For Religious Freedom

Whenever something arises in ministry that simply causes me to stop and scratch my head, my friend, prayer partner and current Elder, Jim, gives me a goofy grin and says, “you wanted to come to South Holland.” That feeling was shared 165 years ago. Individuals desperately wanted to come to South Holland. When Dutch immigrants first set eyes on the Chicagoland area there were no houses, no highways, few bridges, no railroad, no industry, no drilled wells, no pumps, not even kerosene lamps. However, what these brave individuals did encounter was poverty, disease, lack of medical aid, trackless country, malarial swamp land, heavy timber, un-bridged streams, snake-infested brush and
howling wolf packs. This was the reality for the earliest pioneers to South Holland, IL in the mid 1800s.

What brought these adventurers to endure this difficult life was quite simple. Religious freedom. They had the whole assurance and the strongest conviction that the United States would be a country where they could worship God in accordance with their training and dictates of their conscience.

For five to ten weeks aboard a ship, religious pilgrims would travel to ports like New York where they would begin long pilgrimages to places like Holland, MI; Milwaukee, WI; or Chicago, IL. Despite contagious diseases, pestilence, especially small-pox and cholera, and even the fear of run-ins with Indians, emigrants from Noord Holland, Zuid Holland, Groningen, Noord Brabant, Zeeland, Gelderland, Vriesland and other provinces found refuge in the Midwest. Their pilgrimages from Europe were marked with pain, suffering and hardship. Yet, their resolve and devotion to their religious convictions led them to found villages like South Holland, IL. Their resolve led them to endure tremendous hardships all for the sake of a better life and religious freedom.¹

¹ The First Reformed Church 100 Years Book. This book has been a tremendous resource throughout this project and a great source of pride within the congregation. In addition to a book, commemorate plates and blankets were made to celebrate 100 years of faithful ministry.
From Humble Beginnings

Founded in 1846 and incorporated as a village in 1894, South Holland, IL retained much of its ethnic and agricultural heritage for over 100 years. The earliest recordings from the United States Census Bureau report that by 1900, there were 766 individuals living in South Holland, IL. Those first settlers literally looked to the ground for their livelihoods. Dutch farmers were attracted to the flat stretches of prairie in the Calumet region. Those who arrived in 1846 and 1847 along with a few other families the following year became charter members of the lone religious community in the village. During the next few years more families arrived, some to join themselves to High Prairie, now the Roseland Community, and others to continue in Low Prairie, now South Holland, just six miles farther South.3

Long before becoming a multi-racial, multi-generational body of Christ was the preferred reality for First Church, it first was nothing more than a small house-church (or more appropriately a “barn-church”). The inception of the Village of South Holland is synonymous with the inception of First Reformed Church. Seeking an opportunity to freely follow their faith, fourteen families formed the Low Prairie Church, led by Rev. W.C. Wust, who traveled from the

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3 The First Reformed Church 100 Years Book.
Netherlands to establish the Church. The gathered families first met in a barn until 1848 when the first building was constructed on land donated by Hendrik de Jong. The Low Prairie Church was later named the First Reformed Church and held religious service in the native tongue of Dutch until the 1940s.¹

Soy Beans & Onions

Not only was First Church a white congregation, but it was also a white, agricultural congregation. Agriculture literally was planted into the DNA of the vocational identity of First Church. Before coming to South Holland, I had never heard of an onion set, much less a community whose roots grow in fertile agricultural soil. It is sad to even admit this, but during one of my first pastoral visits to a member who was a farmer I asked him what he farmed and his reply was “beans.” I quickly responded by saying, “oh, like beans for baked beans.” He looked at me as if I was joking and when he realized I was serious he said, “no, those are soy beans.”

These settlers first pursued self-sufficient, independent farms, then moved into market gardening, and then to supplying the growing city of Chicago with fresh produce. While soy beans are the predominant crop in 2013, back in the late 1800s, the crop of choice was the onion set. In 1892, Dutch and German farmers

¹ Carrie Steinweg. Images of America: South Holland, 6.
began raising onion sets, which are small onion bulbs ready for planting. These onion sets quickly became the dominant crop for production and distribution. By mid 1900s South Holland’s green thumb was leading to an increase in population within the village. In just 30 years the population more than doubled to 1,873 individuals, of which 100% were white and 12.7% were foreign born.\(^5\)

The onion set industry more than blossomed in South Holland. It has been said that for many decades the ripe aroma of onions would be smelled throughout the rural Village of South Holland. The pioneer of the industry, Charles Waterman, first developed the onion set industry in the 1890s. Prior to 1910, South Holland farmers raised and harvested their own onion sets, each their own business. This led to competition with the farming community over prices. In the early 1940s a group of farmers decided upon a co-op plan on onion production. They organized the first grower’s association, and it was incorporated under the name of Dutch Valley Growers.\(^6\) Waterman contracted with 60 farmers and shipped his onions sets throughout the country. By the late 1930s, there were 200 onion set farmers in South Holland and even more by the


1940s. South Holland was soon producing over half of the onion sets in the United States and earned the title “The Onion Set Capital of the World.”

Boomers

Post World War II, South Holland began to experience a boom in population, economic activity and housing developments. Several factors contributed to this increase in population and suburban life. One key factor was that individuals were fleeing from neighborhoods in the City of Chicago and villages on the boarder of the City of Chicago. Once Dutch communities like Roseland were now experiencing a shift in racial composition and as a result, the Caucasians in those communities found refuge in places further South, such as South Holland, Dolton and Lansing. As I will detail later, history has an ironic way of repeating itself. Many of these families that have left Roseland for South Holland in the 1960s have now left South Holland in the 1990s for places further South and West.

Another factor in this migration was that the once open farmlands of South Holland began to serve as a bedroom community for the city of Chicago. Farms and famers gave way to subdivision and families. Specifically, two building companies, VanDeursen Builders and Jacobs Builders, both of whom

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are members of First Church, were responsible for the vast majority of home construction in South Holland. By 1960 the population in South Holland had reached nearly 10,500 individuals, of which 99.8% were White, and only 4.7 were foreign born.8

Lastly, state and federal construction projects such as the building of Interstate Highways 57 and 94, which made traveling to the commuting to the City of Chicago or other larger metropolitan communities more accessible. These construction projects encouraged greater transformation within the community for individuals that were now commuting into the City of Chicago for work. All of these factors led to a shift in how people lived their lives, from where they worked to where they worshiped.

However, not all of these changes were welcomed with open arms. As African Americans began to move into South Holland, many individuals saw this change as a negative, rather than a positive. There is a longstanding rumor in the community that the former Mayor of South Holland died while burning down the home of one of the first African Americans to move into South Holland. Others, such as Earl James, the Director of Multi-Cultural Ministries for the Reformed Church in America, reflect back on South Holland and contend

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that in terms of racial bigotry and hatred, his perception was that South Holland was worse than Birmingham.\(^9\)

\(^9\)Early residents of South Holland recall the once-common sight of onions drying in the fields. Taken about 1935, this picture shows the scene behind the First Christian Reformed Church, where the South Holland municipal building and other village offices now stand.

Conservative Character

From her earliest beginnings, South Holland was founded on conservative religious principles. The shift from being a predominantly agricultural community to a bedroom community to the City of Chicago did little to change that conservative character. This conservative character manifested itself in how residents lived their lives. Blue laws were first introduced in 1959. These laws prohibited certain businesses from being open on Sunday, a ban on all alcoholic beverages, and zoning restrictions that disallow apartment buildings and

\(^{10}\)Earl James made these comments to a group of First Church members while on a Sankofa Bus Tour through the RCA in October of 2013.

\(^{10}\)Carrie Steinweg, *Farming*, 1935, South Holland Historical Society.
condominiums have all helped shape and maintain a religious, family-oriented lifestyle. Village ordinances were put in place to keep the Sabbath completely free from virtually any economic activity. The following ordinance demonstrates the strict avoidance from any potential infringements on spiritual discipline of Sabbath:

*Wholesale and retail mercantile and merchandising establishments.* It shall be unlawful for any person to engage in the business of selling, dispensing, renting or distributing, at wholesale or retail, goods, wares or merchandise of any kind or description from an established place of business on the first day of the week commonly called Sunday within the village, provided that this subsection shall not be applicable to the sale of drugs or medicine, the sale or dispensing of articles of food and drink for human consumption from vending machines, the sale or dispensing of articles of food and drink for human consumption from premises whose sole purpose is the daily preparation of food and drink for retail sale to the public, the intent being to allow food and drink dispensing from retail establishments that are commonly known as restaurants, the sale and distribution of newspapers and magazines, the sale of milk, ice cream, ice, gasoline, lubricating oil, or the sale of articles and products necessary to meet the emergency needs of the public on Sunday in the village.11

What is interesting to note is the inclusion of “ice cream” as necessary product to meet the emergency needs of residents. (I did not realize the importance of ice cream as dessert on Sunday afternoons.) However, in the spring of 2014, a partial lifting of the blue laws was approved by the Village Board allowing some businesses to have more flexibility with their hours on

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11 *Closing Businesses on Sunday.* Article 1, Section 9-3 A of the Municipal Code of the Village of South Holland, IL.
Sundays. This conversation has continued to cause much tension within various organizations such as the South Holland Ministerial Association, the South Holland Business Association and the Economic Development Commission.

Mayor Don DeGraff has hosted community conversations around this issue in hopes of gaining a greater sense of clarity on the wishes of the community. He has remained firm on his position about his the willingness to make changes to certain laws without changing the Christian character of South Holland.\textsuperscript{12} What is interesting about the challenging of the blue laws is that it comes predominantly from the white populations pushing for more expanded economic opportunities on Sundays, whereas, black population has tended to voice a more restrictive opinion when it comes to these laws.

This conservatism was most notably challenged in 1969 when elementary School District 151, a part of which resided in South Holland, was ordered by the federal government to desegregate, the first school district in the north to be ordered to do so. This mandate caused much backlash in the community as the school district integrated later that year.\textsuperscript{13}

\textsuperscript{12} I am currently the President of the South Holland Ministerial Association and have had ample talks with Mayor DeGraff and the chairman of the Economic Development Commission regarding this matter.

\textsuperscript{13} I gleaned this information from Mr. Mike Nylen, who served on the School Board for District 151 and is a part of the Commission on Education in the Village of South Holland. Mike joined First Church in 2014. Education is a major issue in the Village of South Holland. Not only have churches fled the area, but so too have schools. Most notably, in 2014, the Board of Illiana-Christian High School approved the building of a new, $29 million dollar private school in St.
White Flight

By 1990 the population of South Holland had doubled again in 30 years to 22,105. The significant change was that now, 11.6% of the population was African American. As African Americans migrated from the City of Chicago seeking refuge from violence and liquor stores on every corner, many white families took this as a sign that their village was changing for the worse. Fear of decreasing home values, dilapidated care for property and the anxiety surrounding racially mixed education became a perfect storm for families to move out of South Holland.

Ten years later, while the population increased by just 42 residents, the percentage of white individuals dropped from 85.9% in 1990 to just 45.0% in 2000. Significantly, African American individuals were now the majority, making up 50.8% of the village’s population. In 2013, the U.S. Census Bureau reported that South Holland’s population reached 22,170 individuals, of which just 20.5% were white and 74.2% were black. It is interesting to note that the Hispanic population rose from virtually zero to 5.8%. Recent census tracking shows an increase in the number of Hispanic individuals spreading into surrounding suburb communities. Harvey, which neighbors South Holland to the west is

John, IN, leaving their current, more urban location in Lansing, IL. This move is just another layer of religious, racial and community tension.
75.8% black and 19% Hispanic or Latino. Calument City, which neighbors South Holland to the east is composed of 15% Hispanic or Latino individuals.\textsuperscript{14}

South Holland continues to be a bedroom community for the City of Chicago with the average commute one spends to work is 34 minutes, which is 15% longer than the average commute of an Illinoisan. The median value of a home in South Holland is $169,100, where the median household income is $64,285. What makes those numbers interesting is that the average home in the state of Illinois costs $190,800, whereas the median household income is just $56,853.\textsuperscript{15} This numbers only accentuate the changes in the community that ultimately become factors for how effective a ministry can be for First Reformed Church.

A Village of Faith, Family & Future

Despite all of these changes, South Holland has retained a distinctively Christian environment. When drivers make the curve on to I-94 heading into the City of Chicago, they can clearly see the giant water tower to their right with the phrase “South Holland, A Community of Churches.” Underneath that phrase is a pair of white hands clutched together to suggest a posture of prayer. The only

thing I would suggest changing would be to paint one of the hands white and
the other black. From village government to observance of the Sabbath, South
Holland has not shied away from being a city on a hill.

These Christian characteristics have manifested themselves through daily
life in South Holland. Presently, South Holland is enjoying the lowest crime rates
in her history.\textsuperscript{16} There continue to be no apartments or condominiums in South
Holland, and there is absolutely no sale of alcohol anywhere in the village. What
once was farmland as far as the eye could see has now been replaced by a large
industrial park on the west side of South Holland. Instead of soybeans, meat
companies such as the Miniat Corporation and the Carl Buddig & Company now
provide South Holland with greatest economic opportunity. Despite wide-
ranging changes in the economic and social way of life, South Holland continues
to be an oasis of peace and prosperity in the south suburbs. Signs leading into
South Holland advertise South Holland as “the most livable community in the
South Suburbs according to Forbes in 2007.”

However, neighboring communities such as Dolton, Calumet City and
Harvey do not share the same current realities of safety, economic prosperity and
honest civil government. Rather, these communities have long standing histories
of political corruption and violence. In February of 2014, the Chicago Tribune ran

a series of articles chronicling the mismanagement, violence and apathy of residents and officials in Harvey. One editorial reported:

Year after year, Harvey has reported the highest rate of violent crime of any suburb with more than 500 residents in the six-county region — a rate that approaches some of Chicago's most dangerous neighborhoods. At the same time, the arrest rate has been lower than that of any other Chicagoland community battling significant violent crime, including Chicago's most troubled neighborhoods. From 2007 through 2011, Harvey had 54 slayings, with 16 arrests. That's less than one arrest for every three cases. During that period, Harvey recorded 2,446 other violent crimes, with 285 arrests, or nearly one for every nine cases.17

Despite these staggering statistics detailing the corruption and violence that is less than two miles away from First Reformed Church, the Village of South Holland has remained true to her motto of being a community of “Faith, Family and Future.”

Biological Growth

When South Holland was no longer a white, agricultural community, neither was First Church. The paths of growth, decline and racial change within the Village of South Holland can also be traced to life and witness of First Reformed Church. From her humble beginnings in 1848, the Church steadily grew as the village grew. Membership records indicate that in 1958 Church

membership was 843 communicant members, and it was not uncommon for extra chairs to be set up in the Narthex for the overflow of people on a Sunday morning worship service. Due to the size, influence and missional impact, First Church was considered by many a flagship church within the Reformed Church in America as recently as 1980, when First Church had over 800 communicant members. Both the current President of Western Theological Seminary and the President of Words of Hope pastored First Church together from 1981-1983.

As the church grew, its relationship to the Village of South Holland only strengthened. As a former interim minister of First Church shared, “I could go to the South Holland Bank and do my banking and church work all at the same place.” Currently, the mayor of South Holland, the Director of Communications and two of the eight Village Trustees are members of First Church. In a focus group setting, Glenn commented that historically “(First Church) was the place to be. First Church was the biggest church in the area. We had the biggest budget, the most members and held status in the community.” John commented that First Church “was the landmark Church in the region.”

These feelings not only created a great sense of pride within the church, but also made it difficult for outsiders to break into tightly knit Dutch enclaves. There was a growing sense that First Reformed Church was the “Country Club Church.” Dort shared that because she married a Dutchman and came into the
Church through marriage she never felt like she belonged. Others indicated that there were certain clicks within the Church that were built around economic status and family names. There was an unspoken mentality that “if you’re not Dutch, you’re not much”.

A story was shared during the focus settings that accentuates this characteristic of elitism. Dort shared that there was a time when First Church had “the fur ladies,” who all sat in church together with their long fur coats. Dort said she was made to feel that “she didn’t belong, or fit in.” While First Church grew in size and reputation, the church also became a difficult community in which to assimilate.

During the mid 1900s, ministries flourished. Sunday School classes were packed. Budgets soared. Most notable was the support of Cornelia Dalenberg. A daughter of First Church, she is credited with being one of the pioneers in the Reformed Church in America’s Arabian Mission. Mission Weeks were mobilized to raise thousands of dollars for foreign mission efforts of the RCA. It is without question that as the Village of South Holland continued to expand, so did the membership, missional impact and influence of First Reformed Church.

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Decade of Decline

However, biological growth can only take a Church so far. Throughout the 1990s and into the mid 2000s, membership steadily declined at First Church. Migrations further West and South left roughly 657 communicant members in 2000, and 392 communicant members in 2008. When I arrived in the spring of 2008, there were roughly 175 people spread out among the pews on a Sunday morning.\(^{19}\)

As a result, ministries sharply declined. The once thriving youth ministry was left to partner with the two other Reformed Churches in South Holland and form a co-op youth group called “S.W.A.P.” (Students with a Purpose for Christ). In 2008, there was only one infant baptism and it was for a daughter of the church whose family lived on the east coast because her husband was in the military. Bible study groups were completely decimated by one individual or couple leaving one after another. Despite the strong history of Christian Education, Sunday School classes nearly vanished. What was left of the Sunday School program was more like one-on-one parents reading Bible stories to their kids because there were so few children.

\(^{19}\) It should be noted that when I came to First Church in the Spring of 2008, the rolls of communicant members were full of individuals that had not been in attendance for years and some that lived out of state. However, there was a reluctance to upset anyone by removing their names from the active rolls of the Church.
In 2005, then Pastor of Congregational Care, Rev. Mel DeVries, suggested that the Consistory consider three options for the future. They could either sell the building and move to the suburbs. Do nothing and eventually succumb to their ecclesial mortality. Or begin a corporate journey of change. While they ultimately settled on the third option, Glenn, currently an Elder, commented that “I wanted to remain a thriving ministry in South Holland, but I didn’t know if we could make it.” Others within the congregation shared those same feelings of a desire to continue, but also a genuine sense of uncertainty on how to continue.

There were attempts to put band-aids on growing problems within the church. An African American staff member was brought on in hopes of attracting other African Americans to the Church. His ministry lasted less than five months and not one African American ever joined the Church during that time.\textsuperscript{20} It was also during this season when First Church was approached by the Shepherd’s Community Church about renting space for their ministry.\textsuperscript{21} Since First Church’s ministry was shrinking and there was plenty of space to be had, the leadership welcomed SCC with open arms and began a “Covenant of Shared Space” in 2007.

\textsuperscript{20} This individual was hired to work 40 hours a week. During a worship planning meeting around Easter of 2006 shared to the staff that he was not going to have an Easter service because he had already worked his 40 hours for that week!

\textsuperscript{21} The Covenant of Shared Space with the Shepherd’s Community Church lasted from 2007 until 2014 when they purchased their own building in Harvey, IL. Their pastor Rev. Willard High, continues to be a good friend and trusted mentor. I’m grateful to Willard for his help throughout my D.Min experience, specifically with his insights on better understanding the differences among white and black cultures.
Behind the scenes, there were already whispers of merging the two congregations. The thought was that First Church was told they needed to be black and the SCC brought 100 black people to worship every Sunday. While this idea was never realized, this did shape the context for ministry when I arrived in 2008.

This was an extremely discouraging time of ministry in the life of First Church. The morale of the congregation was bleak. The vision was unclear. The anxiety surrounding members continuing to leave was high. As one of my friends and current Clerk of Consistory, Russ, said, “there was a genuine feeling that the last one here would just turn off the lights.”

Utter Despair

Leaving behind the identity as a white, agricultural congregation was extremely painful and discouraging. Throughout this time of decline the emotional tenor of the congregation was one marked by tremendous pain, sorrow and loss. In some sense, this journey of transformation began by listening to people’s stories of grief as they saw one family after another request for transfer to another congregation, usually Faith Church in Dyer, IN. During my focus groups, I asked the question, “How did you feel as First Reformed Church
continued to decline in membership?” Their responses were poignant and
telling.

Dave said, “I was so discouraged. People were leaving because of racial
change. There seemed to be a lack of willingness to serve.” Glenn responded by
saying, “I was depressed. The hardest thing was to see young people leave.
Sunday School classes were just evaporating.” Messages from the pulpit became
scolding sessions on embracing and not embracing change fast enough. Glenn
went on to say that “every week you were made to feel guilty.”

Others were equally as candid and admitted that they looked elsewhere.
Clint, one of the few people left on the membership rolls under the age of 40,
remembered, “all my friends left. I didn’t even feel welcome here anymore. I
started to look at other churches. It was just depressing.” Emily, who was just a
teenager during this time, shared that “the church was dying. What was the
point of me being here?” Keith, whose grandmother was the church organist for
over 60 years, responded by saying, “just despair.”

Coupled with feelings of tremendous despair, there also seemed to be a
feeling of utter helplessness and perhaps a realization and acceptance of cultural
trends that impact the life of the church. Keith shared that it used to be that
families stayed living close to one another, but now families are much more
comfortable moving away from each other. John shared that the decline in
membership was “not unexpected. Change happens. It just happens regardless.” He went on to suggest that few people went to college before World War II. Now college seems to expand people’s choices in life and their ability to move away from home.” People realized that the church was heading in a wrong direction, and while feelings of sadness and lament were present, there was never a clear sense of what could be done to curb the trends of decline.

You’re At the Wrong Church

Still, God’s grace and goodness were prevalent during this time. African American individuals like Trina and her family found their way through the doors of First Reformed Church. Trina indicated that her neighbor Betty had been inviting her for years to join her for worship. Finally, she cracked. On an Easter Sunday morning, Trina loaded her husband Howard and two children in the car and went to worship at what she thought was First Reformed Church. Turns out, Trina did not drive north far enough and stopped at First Christian Reformed Church, less than a half mile south of First Reformed Church, also on South Park Avenue. When she and her family walked up the stairs into the Narthex before worship on an Easter Sunday morning they were greeted by a gentleman who said in the most sincere voice, “I think you’re at the wrong Church.”
The next Sunday, Trina and her family finally arrived at the right church. They joined in 2007, becoming the first African American members in 165 years of ministry. However, their assimilation into the life of First Church was not laced entirely with grace. “I felt like our family was used a bit,” Trina said. “Howard and I were ice breakers. We kept hearing phrases like, ‘it’s nice to have you people here.’ It bothered me, but I tried hard to look past it.” She went on to add, “We just felt like outsiders. Not just because we were the only black people, but because of the different cultures. We were the token black family First Church needed.”

Where To Go From Here?

These stories of loss, despair and uncertainty marked a very difficult period in the life of the church. While the leadership of the church had made a conscious decision to remain faithful in the Village of South Holland, the dream of becoming a multi-racial, multi-generational congregation would still be a long way from a motion approved on the floor of Consistory to a current reality. Questions surrounding how liturgy would be expressed and understood, what impact the preaching of the Word of God would have, and what role pastoral and consistorial leadership would play have still needed answering. Perhaps above all, First Church still needed to understand and embrace how a difference
in congregational composition would impact congregational practices as a body of Christ. The following chapter will tell the story of how specific transitions in liturgy, preaching, and leadership became catalytic in the process of becoming a multi-racial, multi-generational congregation.
Chapter 4: A Scary 6-Letter Word

“In worship an increased power steals its way into the heart sanctuary, an increased compassion grows in the soul. To worship is to change.”

~Richard Foster
Chapter Overview

The previous chapter looked closely at the life of First Reformed Church prior to 2008. This chapter will track the journey of transformation from 2008 through 2013. First, I will detail the congregational composition that is currently reflected in the ministry of the congregation. From there, I will examine how pockets of change within the life of the church became catalytic in nature, helping create a new culture within the congregation and aiding in their journey of transformation. Specifically, I will pay close attention to the nature of liturgical elements throughout Sunday morning worship services, the impact and centrality of the Word of God proclaimed, and how the role of leadership has impacted the life of the congregation.

By the Numbers

Before I begin to detail the journey of transformation within the life of First Church, it is best to analyze the present congregational composition and then look backwards to track how such transformation occurred. Currently, there are 352 confessing members at First Church, along with 22 adherents. Since 2008, 118 individuals have joined First Reformed Church. Of those 118, 18 individuals have joined First Church through transferring their membership from another
congregation. Of those 18, 14 transferred from another Reformed Church, two from a Christian Reformed Church and two from a Baptist Church.

Since 2008, 100 individuals have joined the church by way of Profession of Faith or Re-Affirmation of Faith. The majority of these individuals would classify themselves as “non-practicing Catholics.” Many of these individuals grew up in the Catholic Church, attended Catholic Schools, and then, for a wide variety of reasons, drifted from the Catholic Church. Another large segment of those 100 individuals have come from some particular sliver of Baptist denominations. Moreover, what unites the vast majority of these 100 individuals is that they were inactive in their former congregation.¹

Prior to 2008, racial diversity at First Church consisted of one African-American family of four, along with two Asian girls adopted into a Caucasian family. Currently, there are 71 non-white individuals on our membership rolls. This figure represents a combination of members, and adherents. Thus, the current body of Christ at First Church, including confessing members along with adherents, is 20.1% Non-White.²

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¹ It is interesting to note that the common phrase spoken by so many of these individuals is “I want to raise my kids in the church.” As a result, our primary Sunday School program has grown from four kids in 2008 to 32 in 2013. Our secondary Sunday School program has grown from six students in 2008 to twelve in 2013. To God be the glory.

² All of this information was gathered through the membership records of First Reformed Church. A special thank you to Gerri VanBaren, who serves as Administrative Assistant, for compiling this data.
One Hour, One Day A Week

For a long time, the leadership of the church thought that the way to keep younger families rooted in the life of First Church was to give them a worship service that was high-energy and contemporary in nature with respect to music. The idea was, “Let’s bring out the drums and watch the millennials flock to First Church.” However, since the sanctuary of First Reformed Church holds just over 600 people, and since there were literally a handful of people under the age of 40 in 2008, splitting the 175 people on a Sunday morning into two different services just did not seem realistic. This also assumed that all people under the age of 40 preferred a more contemporary over a traditional style in worship, an assumption that was quickly proved wrong. Keith reminded us of this during our focus groups when he said, “I love the choir and the organ.”

“Celebration services” that were more contemporary in nature were tested with limited success. It quickly became clear that the Holy Spirit was leading us to a new approach: one hour, one day a week, all together as a body of Christ. Authors Sue Roseboom and Cornelius Plantinga pick on this theme of unity amidst diversity in their work *Discerning the Spirits* when they write “We are one with Adam and Eve, and Abraham and Sarah, and David, Isaiah, and Ruth. We are one…Parthians, Medes and Elamites who were cut to the heart after hearing Peter’s Pentacost midrash one windy day in Jerusalem. We are one with the
martyrs, the reformers, and the revivalists. One with believers on every
continent, yesterday, today, and tomorrow.”\(^3\) It is this spirit of unity on which
expression of corporate worship was best modeled in the life of First Church. It
was our ardent desire that the racial, gender and age diversity represented in the
congregation all gather in worship together for one hour, one day a week.

As a result, significant but subtle changes needed to take place in Sunday
morning worship, specifically around how liturgy is used and understood. It is
important to note that the term “liturgy” is understood to mean the work of the
people, not simply an order of events in a bulletin. What is interesting to note is
that while there have been a great number of stylistic changes to elements of
liturgy, the same basic three-fold movement of Approach, Word and Response in
worship is present each and every Sunday. Glenn commented during a focus
group setting, “…the order of worship is the same. We continue to use the
Apostle’s Creed, the Lord’s Prayer and the Word of God remains central.”\(^4\) It has
been our hope to remove the stodgy routine from the continuity and
concreteness of the liturgy. The liturgy is accessible, not stuffy, and still draws
upon the riches of our tradition while acknowledging that the Spirit continues to

\(^3\)Cornelius Plantinga & Sue Rozeboom, Discerning the Spirits: A Guide to Thinking about

\(^4\) Today, the use of a Creed or Confession is used roughly every other Sunday throughout
the liturgy. This has been an intentional effort to inculcate newer members in the larger tradition
of the church.
service in the 1950s, are still present to this day. The difference is how they are engaged.

Beyond Traditional & Contemporary

So often in the conversations surrounding “church revitalization,” the thought is to equate revitalization with an electric guitar and a drum set. However, the journey of becoming a multi-racial, multi-generation congregation has also been a journey in lengthening the breadth of our liturgical understanding and implementation. Given the cavernous gap in ecumenical background among congregants, the musical pallet used on a Sunday morning must be reflective of this gift in diversity. Ultimately, a spirit of self-sacrifice was needed to accommodate the musical preferences of a multi-racial, multi-generational congregation.

While liturgy is far more than songs and musical elements in the life of a worship service, issues related to music tend to be the most explosive and potentially divisive. Historically, words like “traditional” and “contemporary” were more like grenades in the life of First Reformed Church. Specifically in terms of music, we do not use the word “blended” to describe the texture of a typical morning worship service at First Church, simply because we felt that “blended” is not an appropriate category for worship. Instead, we have leaned
into the riches of ancient hymnody along with the energy of modern day praise and worship. What has been reflected is a unique repertoire of songs, creeds, confessions, prayers and responses that greatly bring our multi-racial and multi-generational congregation together. The Ten Commandments, the Heidelberg Confession and the Apostle’s Creed are elements that are championed and are used to unite our congregation. As Tim Keller says so well, “I believe the solution to the problem of the ‘worship war’ is neither to reject nor to enshrine historic tradition but to forge new forms of corporate worship that take seriously both our histories and contemporary realities, all within a framework of biblical theology.”

Something that became helpful for First Church to realize was that worship is not confined to a three minute song or hymn. As Roseboom and Plantinga write, “It (healthy worshipping community) is defined not by whether Twila Paris, Johann Sebastian Bach, or Kirk Franklin moves us or offends us. It is defined first by the fact that we are together children of God, and that we bear the indelible watermark of baptism, the seal of our adoption.” Our unity in Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit is what unites the musical elements in a typical Sunday morning service. Practically every Sunday there are roughly two

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to three songs that incorporate the organ and two to three songs that incorporate an electric guitar, keys and drums in addition to at least one song that involves both sets of instrumentation.\(^7\)

While there have been some growing pains along the way, and while we continue to discern how the Holy Spirit is speaking, the congregation has taken a strong liking to the liturgical elements of a morning worship service. Dacia said, “When I came here I loved the way we incorporated the older hymns along with the newer songs.” Others like Bill acknowledged that “music has been a big change.” He went on to say that, “I wish we would sing more hymns and I would like to see the choir sing more.” Dave shared that he misses the hymnal as words are now projected on a screen. Still, Emily reflected, “…there is definitely a good balance. Our services are both traditional and contemporary.” Even John commented, “I enjoy singing hymns. I always enjoyed singing parts. I love the enthusiasm of the praise team along with Anthony’s (Director of Worship & Student Life) leadership.” Living in this tension is not for the faint of heart. It requires patience, grace and selflessness from those leading corporate worship to those participating in corporate worship.

\(^7\) One area of growth that we have yet to fully live into is the role of a gospel choir. While we have added African spirituals, as well as more gospel rendition of hymns, the inclusion of a full gospel choir is something that we long for, but have yet to experience.
As author and pastor, Tom Long writes, “Some don’t like the ‘traditional’ versus contemporary lingo either, because it swings the bias toward ‘traditional’ forms, implying that they represent the stable, weighty, and unchanging wisdom of the ages while ‘contemporary’ forms are whims of the moment.”

The balancing act of the guitar and the organ complementing each other on a Sunday morning is a collaborative effort of our Director of Worship & Student Life and myself to discern how best to bring more traditional elements such as an Adult Choir, Bell Choir, Special Ensembles and the use of the Organ alongside a more contemporary worship team that include drums, guitars, brass and woodwinds. The balance is difficult, but important in maintaining an authentic worship service that reflects the diversity of age, gender and musical preference in the life of the congregation.

To help in that process, a Worship Committee was formed of a dozen lay leaders from varying ages and musical preferences that work with the Director of Worship in planning, listening and reflecting on how our liturgical life is shaping our spiritual formation as a body of Christ.

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8 Tom Long, _Beyond Worship Wars: Building Vital and Faithful Worship_ (The Alban Institute, 2001), 3.

9 Perhaps no author has been as helpful to this project and to First Church than Jim Belcher and his book _Deep Church_. His chapter on “Deep Worship” has been of particular help. Here, he describes that church is more than just a few songs and a sermon. In 2010, the committee formerly known as “The Administration Team” read through this book in hopes of it being a springboard for future ministry.
Hour of Power Revisited

While music has historically been an explosive issue in the life of the Church, so too has been the length of a worship service. The Interim Minister who preceded me regularly preached so long that Viola, a 92 year old member of the Church, stood up from the pew, leaned against her walker, raised her hand and pointed to her watch during the middle of a sermon! Needless to say, the issue of time became a very important element in the life of the service. As Trina shared, “When we worshiped at a Baptist Church we were exhausted when we got home. When we worshiped at the Catholic Church the liturgy was so demanding. Here, I am motivated to respond.” Corey went on to add “…our worship services are much shorter now than what I was used to and far more liturgical. I don’t remember experiencing creeds or confessions before coming to First Church. Our services are more thought out and planned. Everything here seems sacred, but not stuffy. We can really experience the Holy Spirit working here.”

While the Spirit stirs, we also are sensitive to the reality that one hour, one day a week is the time commitment that our congregation is willing to offer for corporate worship. As Trina commented, “I appreciate the effort in making everything come together. Our worship services are not disjointed at all.” Thus,
from Prelude to Postlude, most services last 65 minutes in length. There is an intentionality in making sure elements flow as seamlessly as possible from one to the next in an effort to keep the congregation engaged, and to balance structure and spontaneity in worship.

Keith shared his own personal reflections when he said, “I went to the Catholic Church. It was so regimented and the services were so long. They would do the same service over and over and over again and the priest always sounded the same. It was so boring. Here it is fresh.” Since we are not only a multi-racial and multi-generational congregation, but also a congregation that is comprised of persons nurtured in many different denominations, we paid particular attention to how time is best utilized in worship. John commented, “…our service is less rigid and more meaningful. It is more realistic and accessible.” This accessibility takes into consideration a growing desire for greater time in fellowship immediately following the worship service.

More importantly, we understand that liturgy takes place after the Benediction as well. Author Leanne Van Dyk writes of the “liturgy after the Liturgy.” She goes on to write that, “the word (liturgy) seems to indicate that

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10 We have come to understand that as we become a multi-racial, multi-generational congregation, we also began to attract individuals from surrounding communities that commute, some more than 45 minutes to worship each Sunday. The commute, coupled with noon Chicago Bears’ games during the fall, are added motivation for us to be sensitive towards time in worship.

the liturgy of the Christian worship service is the actions and work of the people.”12 We have taken that literally. While our worship service is liturgical in the sense of printed elements of a service listed in the bulletin, we also acknowledge that the “Passing of the Peace” is first tasted in the sanctuary and it is best enjoyed over a cup of watered-down coffee in a Styrofoam cup and a home-made cookie. As Pastor Mel shared with me, “you can always tell the health of a church by how long people stay to have coffee after service.”13

Sin Still Needs Confessing

Throughout the focus group conversations, the role of confession kept coming up from participants as one of the most meaningful. Rather than denying sin for fear of offending, or coming across as pious or righteous, each and every Sunday, we confess our sins. Through congregational litanies, extended periods of silence, borrowing prayers from the Scriptures, or leaning into the tradition of the creeds and confessions, the importance of confession is woven into the fabric of a typical worship service at First Church. As Corey shared, “the Prayer of Confession is special. It’s deep. It’s acknowledging that we are sinful.”

13 Creating an ethos of hospitality and a community that genuinely cares for one another has been a gift from God and an intentional, but yet organic effort. In 2008, I instructed all Elders, when present in worship, to be in the Narthex before and the Fellowship Hall after to seek out individuals with handshakes and conversations. In 2013, the Elders were again mobilized on the first Sunday of every month to take the Sacrament of Communion to shut-ins and to members at nursing homes to again extend the liturgy of worship.
concurred by adding, “The silence in our confession of sin is very meaningful to me.” As a multi-racial, multi-generational congregation, we are sensitive to the specific of brands of sin that are unique to each individual present. We name systemic sins of oppression and confess sins of apathy for seeing injustices and doing nothing.

Our liturgy has given room to different ways of expressing, confessing, and praying traditional elements such as the prayer of confession. As Van Dyk writes, “For in the liturgy, kingdom patterns are described and embodied. It is in this way that liturgy is ethics, for participation in the liturgy helps us see and guides us into the true ends of human life.”\(^1\)\textsuperscript{14} The kingdom life of confessing our sins and being reminded of God’s mercy and forgiveness have been particularly formative throughout our journey of transformation.\(^1\)\textsuperscript{15}

Okay to Clap?

As First Church has shifted from a white, agricultural congregation to a multi-racial, multi-generational congregation, we have also shifted in how we experience and express the presence of God in corporate worship. On a typical Sunday, the liturgy leaves ample room for a wide variety of music, both vocally

\(^{14}\text{Van Dyk, A More Profound Alleluia: Theology and Worship in Harmony, 143.}\)

\(^{15}\text{Another helpful voice in this conversation has been James K. A. Smith’s book Desiring the Kingdom. Specifically, in chapter three he describes a “cultural exegesis of practices” that was creative and foundational in being aware of the different cultural nuances present in our liturgies.}\)
and instrumentally. While it has required the entire congregation to sacrifice parts of their own personal preferences and understand that worship is ultimately something that we give and not receive, it was interesting to note how people do and do not express emotion in worship, specifically related to congregational singing, or what would best be described as “special music.”

As Dacia commented, “clapping is not spontaneous here. I’m nervous about letting others see what I’m feeling.” Keith added quite candidly, “It’s hard when you (referring to the Worship Team) kick butt and no one claps.” Bill was even more candid when he shared, “I love the raising of hands, but I can’t do it. I want to.” He even admitted, “…am I being filled with the Holy Spirit?” Author Henry Mitchell touched on this idea when he wrote, “The ultimate price for failing to nurture authentic celebration is that joy inhibited in expression is joy diminished or outright lost.”

Thus, it has been a critical insight for us that robust liturgy and authentic celebration are not mutually exclusive. In fact, a more vibrant expression of celebration is a natural theological movement patterned around the third “G” of “Gratitude” in the Heidelberg Catechism.

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16 Mitchell, Henry. Black Preaching: The Recovery of a Lost Art (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1990), 31. It is important to note that First Church continues to struggle with expressing this joy in worship. The common phrase heard is, “I would raise my hands, but I don’t want to be the only one.” To which I reply, “if you raised your hands, you’d be surprised how many people would feel comfortable to do the same.” Ultimately, there is an awareness that this joy is needed and is lacking from our multi-racial, multi-generational identity.
While expressions in worship such as dance, shouting and clapping of hands may be Biblical, they are still somewhat uncomfortable for many at First Church. Ultimately, it is our hope and prayer that there is enough intellectual vigor and emotional fervor in a worship service that people of all different backgrounds and ecumenical traditions would feel welcome and comfortable expressing how the Holy Spirit is working in their hearts and lives. Emily shared a word of encouragement, “…now more people are involved in our worship services. We used to not have anyone leading singing. It’s encouraging when more people are up front. The worship services used to be stale and now it’s more spiritual.” Each Sunday there are roughly 15 individuals who are part of visible worship leadership and when the choir sings that number increases to 55 individuals.

Ultimately, these rituals and expressions in worship have helped cultivate a more welcoming, affirming and encouraging ethos within the congregation. Author and Pastor Tom Long picks up on this when he writes, “Rituals both transform existing relationships and forge new ones among people.”17 While individuals are still internally wrestling with feeling comfortable in emotional and physical expressions of worship, we have been confirmed that individuals

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17 Long, Beyond Worship Wars: Building Vital and Faithful Worship, 97.
are indeed growing closer to God and to each other. As a result, these rituals are indeed transforming existing relationships and forging new ones.

Anthony The Enlivener

Perhaps no greater transition was the hiring of a new Director of Worship. In the summer of 2010, Anthony Bolkema was hired as the Director of Worship and Student Life at First Reformed Church. At the time, Anthony was in his mid-20s and his responsibilities included not only leading the Youth Group, but also leading music on Sunday mornings and working with the Senior Pastor in planning worship services. Anthony grew up in the Christian Reformed Church and his spiritual gifts are wide and varied. He has been able to bridge cultural, musical, generational and racial gaps through weaving in both traditional and contemporary styles of music. He is able to conduct a 40 voice adult choir in classical hymnody and lead a worship team on an electric guitar. Author Michael Hawn describes these gifts as someone who serves as “The Enlivener.” He writes, “The first task of the enlivener is to bridge the gap between the established choir (choral ensemble) and the choir of the whole – those in the pew

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18 Anthony led worship at both Faith Church in Dyer, IN and at a large Christian Reformed Church in the western suburb of New Lenox, IL. Both congregations were extremely “contemporary” in nature. When Anthony was hired he shared with me that he “left his dream job for a dream.” As I have often shared with colleagues and friends, “it is easier to find a Senior Pastor than it is to find a Worship Leader that can wed the traditional and contemporary spheres of music in harmony.”
— so that all may join together in praise to God.”¹⁹ We give God thanks that Anthony so graciously and giftedly serves as our Enlivener.²⁰

Anthony and I believe that along the journey of transformation in the life of First Church, when it comes to music in liturgy, it is not either/or, it is both/and. Anthony understands what Tom Long writes, “On the one side, many trained church musicians are aware of the great theological depth and musical treasures in the church’s wide repertoire and are as heartsick about the trivialities of contemporary worship music as many preachers are about the low-calorie, self-help bromides that pass for sermons in many churches these days.”²¹

It became clear to us that one of the key catalysts of transformation has been the ability to wed the traditions of ancient hymnody to the expressions of modern day praise and worship music.

Victory from the Pulpit

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²⁰ One of the fruits of this project has been to begin to dream about a network of congregations that are intentional on multi-racial, multi-generational ministries and who are seeking Worship Leaders as Enliveners. While Seminaries produce gifted pastors and preachers, we are experiencing a longing for more Worship Leaders who can lead with integrity and grace. If you are one of those congregations, please find out more information at www.frcsh.org.

Along the journey of transformation, the proclamation of the Word of God continued to be at the center of a morning worship service, and also at the heart of transition. However, one of the critical understandings came through an acknowledgement of how different atonement theories are used and understood by individuals of different racial and social groups. Traditionally, white preachers filled the pulpit at First Church and preached sermons that focused on a “Substitutionary Atonement Theory,” namely, that Jesus was the substitute for all of us on the cross, which becomes the central symbol for the entire Lenten Season.²² This was the only way to interpret the events of Good Friday and Easter Sunday. Conversely, as author Denny Weaver suggests that African-Americans tend to resonate more with a “Christus Victor” atonement theory which celebrates the victory over death where the empty tomb becomes the primary symbol of hope throughout the Lenten Season. He writes:

If God is a liberator, then Jesus, who reflects the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and the exodus, can be nothing other than liberator. When African Americans read the Bible, they did not find a docile Jesus teaching a spiritual salvation. Rather they discovered Jesus the liberator, calling his people to freedom and working for their liberation…thus, liberation is the essence of black religion, both in its content and its form.²³

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²² A helpful resource in understanding how different seasons of the church can more richly be experienced in the context of a multi-racial, multi-generation congregation is Laurene Beth Bowers book Becoming a Multicultural Church.

This has been the case at First Reformed Church. As more and more black individuals came to First Church, we began to realize that the liturgy of a Sunday morning worship service needed to reflect an understanding and an appreciation for both a Substitutionary and Christus Victor atonement theory. We began to see the need to embrace the victory we have in both the cross and the tomb.
While the cross still hangs in the sanctuary, the presence and power of the empty tomb became an integral part of our worshiping life together. By solely giving emphasis to a Substitutionary atonement theory, we were not only excluding the story of a group of people, we were also diminishing the power of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Weaver goes on to write:

The narrative Christus Victor thus finally becomes a reading of the history of God’s people, who make God’s rule visible in the world by the confrontation of injustice and by making visible in their midst the justice, peace, and freedom of the rule of God. The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus constitute the culmination of that rule of God, and also the particular point in history when God’s rule is most fully present and revealed.

This difference became critical for creating a hermeneutic that reaches a multi-racial and multi-generational congregation. We believe that words create realities. Thus, developing a greater breadth in the language we use in worship

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24 To the chagrin of some of the older members of the congregation, we now take the cross the down from the sanctuary two Sundays after Easter. We do this because we believe that space, liturgical elements and visual enhancements create a powerful reality for the congregation. We also believe that removing the cross two Sundays after Easter only adds to the sanctity and importance of the cross during the holy season of Lent.
25 Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, 68.
begins to impact the congregation’s spiritual formation. As a result, Sunday
morning worship began to reflect more of the victory in Christ. We began to sing,
preach and pray the victory we have in Christ. As Corey commented, “sermons
and sermon series are very creative. What is preached can be remembered. I can
be involved in the sermon.” Another African-American, Dacia, commented, “I
can relate as a young adult to your sermons. Your sermons relate to all ages. You
touch on many issues of my life.” As a result, sermons and sermon series began
to reflect the greater victory individuals have in Jesus Christ by the power of the
Holy Spirit. Victories over addictions, relationship divides, emotional bondage
and health worries began to be named and celebrated.26

The Full Breadth of the Atonement

The nuances in different atonement theories have not only broadened our
theological capacity, but also our ability to experience the full breadth of the
atoning sacrifice of Christ. We believe the victory in the tomb is not mutually
exclusive from the victory on the cross. Rather, there is power, beauty and
meaning in each of these central theological symbols. As a result, we have
become more intentional on leaving room for the victory in each. As author

26 As an older Dutch member shared with me, “when we grew up, we just didn’t talk
about those things. It wasn’t anyone’s business.” As First Church has become a multi-racial,
multi-generational congregation, there has been an intentional effort from the pulpit to talk about
these kinds of struggles and victories.
James Cone writes in his book *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, “‘The final word about black life is not death on a lynching tree but redemption on the cross – a miraculously transformed life found in the God of the gallows.’” Not only is there death on the cross, but there is also life and life abundant on the cross. Reclaiming a more robust sense of the atonement has not only cast a wider theological net onto the congregation, but has also impacted our identity as a body of Christ.

Along with the victory we have in the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus, we also have experienced conflict. Ultimately, we believe that the full breadth of the atonement confronts everything from the way we worship to how we spend our money to whom we break bread with. Author James Forbes picked up on this idea when he wrote, “If we dare to preach the gospel of the kingdom; dare to make plain the social, economic, and political, as well as the traditionally defined spiritual consequences of pursuing that kingdom, we should expect conflict.” The wide variety of stories and experiences present challenged me not to shy away from the power of the Good News of Jesus Christ to transform lives, families, societies and even old churches. The relationship between a blood-stained cross and an empty tomb have the capacity to impact the spiritual formation of individuals, families and the congregation as a whole.

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Trina shared, “…the preaching has shaped a lot of me. It has had a major impact on me and my behavior. I have changed a lot. I still lack in my prayer life, but I feel more grounded.” She went on to share that the preaching of the Word has become “intellectually attractive preaching that moves to the heart.” The preaching of the Word has remained the focal point of a Sunday morning worship service at First Church. Preaching has been a marriage of head and heart which has been a catalyst for a people of varied ecumenical backgrounds to gain traction and grow in their faith. The awareness of different people groups represented on a Sunday morning, each with a different history and story to tell, have all led to a greater sense of the victory we all share in the full breadth and power of the atonement.29

Not Watering Down the Gospel

One of the major difficulties in crafting sermons that connect to such a wide breadth of Biblical and theological understanding within the congregation was the conviction to not minimize or water-down the Gospel in any way.30 We

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29 Another helpful resource in understanding the nuances of African American preaching has been Mark Barger Elliott’s book *Creative Styles of Preaching*. Specifically, chapter 2 that highlights sermons from Valerie Brown-Troutt and Samuel D. Proctor. While I have been intentional to retain my own voice from the pulpit, it has been formative for me to listen and read sermons powerfully given by African American preachers.

30 One of the voices that have been impactful in this conversation has been Christian Smith’s *Soul Searching*. In this book he coins the phrase “moralistic therapeutic deism,” that refers to the theological narrative that a growing number of American teenagers are living in. In this
do not believe that the proclamation of the Word is simply a three-point and a poem motivational speech, nor is it a five-step plan to be a more effective parent. We do not shy away from acknowledging the depravity of our souls, the narrow path of salvation in Jesus Christ, or the free gift of grace offered to all. While we have celebrated that there are many new converts in the Christian faith, still the majority of those present have been faithful followers of Jesus their whole life long. This has posed some interesting and challenging dynamics in preaching sermons that relate to the 20-something mechanic and newcomer to the faith, alongside of the 60 something banker and life-long follower of Jesus.

Keith commented, “Your (my) relating to people of all ages is what makes preaching good. In the Catholic Church, you felt you had nothing in common with the priest.” John added, “Your preaching has style and content. Content remains the same, but style can be different. Another variable is quality. It’s very important and it’s working well here.” This balance became an intentional effort that was prayerfully considered in the planning and implantation of the Word proclaimed and woven throughout the worship service. I became intentional on breaking through the ivory tower of ministers standing behind a giant wooden

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theology, individuals are encouraged to live moral lives, be happy and go to heaven when they die. Within this framework, God is not necessarily directly involved in one’s life except when summoned to resolve a problem. This is the kind of theology that threatens to minimize the power of the Gospel in an attempt to be welcoming, uplifting and comforting to all who hear a sermon or engage in a worship service.

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pulpit and reading manuscripts. I began to focus on the presence of the preacher and congregation over the precision of dictation in a sermon.

While the Word is not diluted to some self-help guide or motivational pick-me-up, it did become critical for me to retain a listening ear to the experiences and life-stories present on a Sunday morning. Additionally, sermons began to reflect cultural and social issues present in South Holland, as well as in Chicago. From political corruption, to school board issues, to gang violence, sermons, as well as liturgy began to reflect this narrative of a broken world in need of redemption. As author James Forbes wrote, “To be an anointed preacher is to understand and for us to listen to the people in our culture and in our world. To preach requires divine discernment of what all these people are saying.”

This is the kind of holy listening over coffee at McDonald’s or around the bedside in the hospital that have shaped my preaching voice. I have learned that there is a direct correlation to the effectiveness of the preacher’s ears to the preacher’s mouth.

Making the transition to a multi-racial, multi-generation congregation has brought different voices to what people are saying. Our tendency to simply assume Millennials and newer Christians simply want a rock band and a self-help sermon is not only inaccurate, it’s a detriment to the Gospel. Rather, by

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31 Forbes, The Holy Spirit & Preaching, 64.
keeping an open ear for the places where the Good News can impact people’s lives, we have actually been able to study, reflect and pray through larger theological issues in a pastorally sensitive way that engage individuals in their particular context. We understand the victory on and the cross and in the tomb can never be limited to a therapeutic faith, but rather, are always challenging us to confront the social, political, communal and personal issues combating the Christian faith.

Pain Knows No Color

Another powerful implication in the shift in how a sermon is delivered and heard in the context of a multi-racial, multi-generational congregation has been in how pain is understood and embraced. This awareness has become a tremendous unifying factor for us as a body of Christ. As a result of remaining an active listener to the stories of those present on Sunday morning, I have heard and experienced pain that knows no color. What has come out of this has been an authentic awareness of pain, brokenness and need for the Gospel to impact people’s lives. I quickly began to realize that just because people looked nice on Sunday morning and drove a nice, clean car to church does not mean that their lives are not riddled with pain and desperate need for the Good News to impact their lives and the lives of their family. I was keenly aware of the pain present
and hope needed to create a culture that both individually and corporately began to be more comfortable with lament.

This understanding became critical in relating to different cultures. Frank Thomas wrote, “The central question for African-American homiletical exegesis is: what meaning (assurance) does the gospel shed on the human condition of suffering through the particular biblical text to be preached?”\textsuperscript{32} We gleaned from that wisdom throughout these past five years. From the pulpit to prayer, we have embraced suffering and disbanded the fallacy of the country club congregation where everyone is perfect and no one ever experiences pain and brokenness. As Thomas goes on to write, “Fundamentally, African American preaching is about helping people experience the assurance of grace that is the gospel.”\textsuperscript{33} In this journey of transformation the Holy Spirit led us on, it was not only African-American preaching, but rather, Biblical preaching that by the power of the Holy Spirit injected the saving grace of Jesus Christ into broken people’s lives.

Thus, the role of pain became a double-edge sword in the life of the congregation. Pain not only infused carnage into individual’s lives, but it also brought a greater sense of unity and equality among the congregation.

\textsuperscript{32} Frank Thomas, \textit{They Like to Never Quit Praisin’ God} (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 1997), 67.

\textsuperscript{33} Thomas, \textit{They Like to Never Quit Praisin’ God}, 3.
congregation began to respond to honest awareness of pain in our lives as individuals and families of God. Naming a reality of pain and the need for hope became a turning point in our journey of becoming a multi-racial, multi-generational body of Christ. As author Lenora Tubbs Tisdale reaffirmed, “The world of ours desperately needs hope, and prophets are uniquely equipped by God to bring it. In the midst of lies and half truths and doublespeak that are prevalent in our culture, prophets speak truth.”34 This truth acknowledges the death of the cross, but also the victory of the tomb and the hope we have in the resurrected Jesus.

Jan Ton

Just south of the parking lot of First Church is a large stone monument and two railroad ties that were constructed as an Eagle Scout project for a young man in the Village of South Holland. The monument was erected to honor the life of Jan and Aagje Ton. The monument reads:

This site is dedicated to Jan Ton and his wife Aagje, Dutch immigrants who settled on a farm two miles north of this site on the Little Calumet river. They were among the early leaders of this First Reformed Church and the pioneer settlements that became South Holland and Roseland. Prior to the civil war (1861-654), they opened their home to help freedom seekers escaping from the bonds of slavery in the south, making their way to a new life of freedom in the northern states and Canada. White

and Black Abolitionists who opposed slavery risked fines and imprisonment by organizing networks of safe houses or “stations” that became known as the ‘underground railroad.’ We honor all those who demonstrated the spirit and courage to take a stand against the injustice of slavery.

I drive by this monument every day. However, rarely do I truly embrace the great suffering African Americans endured just a few hundred years ago. I rarely reflect on the inability of my black brothers and sisters to vote just fifty years ago. I rarely reflect on the experience of my black friends who are pulled over by policemen for what they describe as “Driving While Black.” As author James Cone writes:

The sufferings of black people during slavery are too deep for words. That suffering did not end with emancipations. The violence and oppression of white supremacy took different forms and employed different means to achieve the same end: the subjection of black people. And Christian theology, for African Americans, maintained the same great challenge: to explain from the perspective of history and faith how life could be made meaningful in the face of death, how hope could remain alive in the world of Jim Crow segregation.

The subtle and not-so-subtle forms of suffering shape the narrative of so many of the black friends that are increasingly becoming active in the family of First Church. One of the key understandings for our congregation has been to simply be aware of our past as individuals, as communities, and as a nation and

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35 This has been the experience of Howard Taylor, the first African American elected to the Office of Deacon. Howard shared with me that he has been pulled over without cause on numerous occasions by police officers on his way to work.

36 Cone, The Cross and the Lynching Tree, 3.
also to be aware of the pasts of our brothers and sisters who do not share our last name. Rather than seeking to solve systemic problems of suffering and racism, simply acknowledging that privilege, racism and suffering are not things of the past but still exist today has been a great source of relational building in the life of the congregation.  

Change is at the Heart of Christianity

Acknowledging systemic brokenness begs questions surrounding change. Author Richard Foster wrote, “In worship an increased power steals its way into the heart sanctuary, an increased compassion grows in the soul. To worship is to change.” Changes were not only experienced in the preaching of the Word, but also in the art of leadership. Specifically, issues related to the who and the how of leadership had tremendous impact within the life of the congregation. As Glenn shared “…leadership used to come from families that were the most dominant here. Now we have a broader spectrum of leadership.” Clint agreed when he reflected, “…it used to be like a silo. Few people involved and now much more

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37 This awareness did not come without the pushback from older, white members of the congregation. In the spring of 2009, I preached a series of sermons titled “Letters from Prison,” pairing the book of Philippians and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s Letters from a Birmingham Jail. One couple came to me and said, “Do we have to hear that again? Isn’t it enough we lived it?”

38 Richard Foster. The Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth. (HarperSanFrancisco, 1988), 173. This book has been extremely helpful to me as a compass for my own spiritual growth and discernment. I would highly recommend to every young pastor to read this book once a year.
of a shared responsibility.” As First Church shifted into a multi-racial, multi-

generational reality, the stake of control, influence and power were all up for
grabs in this new season of ministry.³⁹

Additionally, Dort commented, “Now no one person is running the show.” This has been reflected in the average age of those currently serving on Consistory. In 2008, the average age of a Deacon was 49 years old. By 2013, that number dropped by 12 years creating an increased capacity for new ideas, fresh perspective and an eagerness to serve. Additionally, three African-Americans are currently serving in roles of both Elder and Deacon.

Ultimately, these changes were intentional efforts to cast a new vision for what ministry should look like within the context of a multi-generational and multi-racial congregation. As Glenn reminded our group, “...change is at the heart of Christianity.” However, there are still certain aspects of change related to diversity that have yet to be met. The issue ordination of women to the offices of Elder and Deacon is something that has happened in the life of First Church, but that gender diversity has yet to be reflected in the Consistory in the past five years.⁴⁰ As Barb shared, “I would like to see women serving on Consistory.”

³⁹ A helpful resource in this conversation of leadership and change has been Mark Lau Branson and Juan Martinez’ book Churches, Cultures & Leadership. In chapter ten titled “Leading Change,” Branson details the specific work of leaders with respect self-awareness, civic trends and personal imagination.

⁴⁰ In 2005, the first female was ordained and installed to the office of Elder. Unfortunately, she and her husband moved out of South Holland and out of First Church during
While change may be at the heart of Christianity, it is not always the smoothest transition.41

Changes in leadership composition began when the Consistory approved the call of a 25 year old Senior Pastor right out of seminary with little experience. After four major staff changes in the first nine months, hiring a 25 year old Director of Worship & Student Life, along with a 30 year old African American to serve as a Director of Mercy & Justice Ministries became additional bold steps of change in the life of the congregation. While these changes have been substantial, older members of the congregation shared their confidence and affirmation in the leadership and direction of the Church. John observed, “My confidence in the leadership has been strengthened.” Glenn added “Matt’s leadership along with bringing in new staff and their leadership has brought change.” A critical understanding for the Consistory has been learning how being a good listener has built up the pastoral capital to earn the trust and confidence of the congregation to plan and execute change.42

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41 While the scope of this project is specific to the years 2008-2013, in 2015 two women were elected to serve on consistory, one as a deacon and another as an elder. To make matters all the more beautiful, the one woman deacon is also an African American.

42 Wes Granberg-Michaelson’s book, Leadership From Inside Out, was a helpful voice in the conversation of leadership. Specifically, chapter ten on changing organizational culture was of particular interest and assistance. In this chapter, he outlines four “vital signs” of health in any organization. They are power, identity, conflict and learning. His insights on how identity is shaped both individually and as an organization as a whole were particularly helpful.
While staffing changes were sharp and decisive, there has been a transition in these changes. It is important to note that literally hundreds of hours of meetings, countless prayers and enough conversations to last until Christ comes again were had to tease out such visible changes in the life of the congregation. As author and former Herman Miller CEO Max DePree wrote, “Transition is not easy, and it’s not assured. There’s uncertainty and ambiguity. There are honest differences, there is hostility, and sometimes there are insufficient resources...Yes, there will be insanity, but there will also be eminently sane compassion and good works”\(^\text{43}\) I will attest that threads of insanity were experienced during those long and arduous conversations surrounding staffing changes. Transitioning away from four staff members within the first six months on the job brought about great hostility, conflict and fear. That process of change was extremely painful. Still, God’s grace sustained us in the desert and led us towards greater self-examination and discovery.

Risk & Reward

Before this journey of transformation to becoming a multi-racial, multi-generational body of Christ was set in motion, there was a Sunday morning meal

\(^{43}\) Max DePree, *Leading Without Power* (San Francisco, CA: A Wiley Imprint, 1997), 37-38. DePree also refers to a definition of inanity attributed to Einstien that “insanity is when you do the same thing over and over and expect a different result.” I have shared that definition on numerous occasions with our consistory in hopes of wrapping flesh around a larger ecumenical challenge.
of “roast preacher.” One particular period of pain happened before I even started on the job. I will never forget a Sunday morning worship service in the spring of 2007 when I was here as a candidate at First Reformed Church. Immediately following the Benediction I was herded into the old Consistory room to stand before the entire Consistory and their spouses to answer any and all questions for 45 minutes. A soft-spoken Deacon named Scott asked me if I thought I was able, with such limited experience, to lead a congregation being only 25 years-old. Just a year later, Scott and his wife left the church as a result of a leadership decision I made to let go of a secretary and a worship leader who were close friends of his.

I have never forgotten that poignant question Scott asked. I fully understand that along our journey of transformation, lifelong members have left the church over leadership decisions they were not in favor of. That pains me. While I have extended olive branches of peace, many of these relationships remain frayed. The transition to a staff-driven church with a young senior leader was a stark contrast from the style of pastoral leadership First Church was accustomed to for many years. However, DePree suggested, “…wherever or

[44] Scott’s questions came to my mind as I read through both Israel Galinda’s book “The Hidden Lives of Congregations” and reviewed once again Nancy Ammerman’s book “Studying Congregations.” Both of these resources provided keen insights into understanding the relationship between how best to lead a congregation through change. Both resources were helpful for me as I looked back and reflected how I lead effectively and ineffectively, as well as looking forward to future models of leadership.
however we serve, we can’t avoid the central conundrum of risk: to risk nothing is perhaps the greatest risk of all.”45 Reflecting back on our corporate journey of transformation, areas of staffing change proved to be places where greatest risk and reward were involved. I give God thanks that the leadership of the Church trusted enough, risked enough and believed enough to give a young staff permission to try, to succeed and to fail.

Offices of Service

Outside of staffing changes, perhaps no other area of leadership has experienced a greater transformation that the office of Deacon. Historically, Deacons were bean counters charged with passing plates, creating budgets and sending out yearly letters that were carbon copies of the previous year with the exception of the change in date. There was also a subtle perception that a Deacon was an “Elder-in-training.” As Clint reflected, “The role of Deacon has greatly changed. I’m the first in my family to be on Consistory. Before Deacons were all about numbers, now they are more involved in acts of mercy and caring for others.” Now, Deacons work closely with our Director of Mercy & Justice ministries on monthly services projects that range from raking leaves to washing

45 DePree, Leading Without Power, 139
Recovering a more robust Biblical understanding of the office of Deacon has been a process, not a program. We are continually refining the word of Deacons to better meet the ever-evolving needs of a multi-racial, multi-generational congregation.

I created a “Consistory Playbook” to help define and articulate the roles and responsibilities of Elders and Deacons. Below is a section taken from the Consistory Playbook specific to what First Reformed Church Deacons are called to do:

- First Reformed Church Deacons gather, count and distribute financial gifts within the Consistory approved budget of the Church.

- First Reformed Church Deacons work with the Pastors in Stewardship Sermons and increasing educational awareness of faithful giving.

- First Reformed Church Deacons are sensitive to persons with special physical or financial needs and work with the Pastors to provide gracious care for those needs.

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46 As a result of this project, a “Vision-Nominations” sub-committee was formed to specifically address the leadership challenges facing a congregation where roughly 25% of the congregation has joined in the past five years. Beginning in 2014, this committee set in motions steps to sharpen the gifts of Elders and Deacons by funneling them into areas of “care” and “administration.” The idea was provide a system where more ministry and fewer meetings can flourish. One of the key areas of focus for this group was the realization that we had not asked the first question of our liturgy until candidates were standing on the front steps of sanctuary in front of the congregation being ordained and installed. We had failed to ask the question, “do you feel called by God”? As a result, this committee added a component of self-nomination to the nomination process to stress the importance and understanding of “call.”

47 The Consistory Playbook was a key learning in Learning Unit #3. Revised copies are given to each new Consistory member every year. See the Appendix for a full copy of the Consistory Playbook.
First Reformed Church Deacons work with Corey Buchanan, the Director of Mercy & Justice Ministries, on monthly service projects called “First on the Move.”

First Reformed Church Deacons develop relationships with current Missionaries and strive to shape our local and global mission efforts into the ethos of the Church.

First Reformed Church Deacons commit to making corporate worship, attending meetings and participating in the life of the Church a high priority in their lives.48

As a result of becoming a multi-racial, multi-generational congregation, serving on Consistory now has less to do with your last name or as a status symbol among the congregation and more to do with God’s calling individuals into offices of service. Henry Nouwen touched on this shift in leadership theory when he wrote, “The way of the Christian leader is not the way of upward mobility in which our world has invested much, but the way of downward mobility ending on the cross.”49 And so we intentionally encourage Elders and Deacons to roll up their sleeves and be about the work of the Church. By focusing on a posture of humility, Elders and Deacons of different ages, skin colors and ecumenical backgrounds have been able to find common currents in their call to serve.

48 Betty Voskuil, “The Ministry of the Deacon” (New York, NY: Reformed Church Press, 2006). I had the privilege of being able to interview Mrs. Voskuil as part of Learning Unit #3. Her wisdom and insights were profound and applicable.

Ultimately, as Nouwen wrote, “The central question is: are the leaders of the future truly men and women of God, people with an ardent desire to dwell in God’s presence, to listen to God’s voice, to look at God’s beauty, to touch God’s incarnate Word, and to taste fully God’s infinite goodness?” As we have asked that question to individuals of different ages, skin colors and ecumenical backgrounds, we found an earnest desire to reclaim the role of Elder and Deacon as offices of service. As Nouwen asked “but how can we lay down our life for those with whom we are not even allowed to enter into a deep personal relationship? Laying down your life means making your own faith and doubt, hope and despair, joy and sadness, courage and fear available to others as ways of getting in touch with the Lord of life.” In this reclaiming and refocusing the offices of Elder and Deacon, we have laid down some of our own personal preferences in worship style and liturgical texture in the spirit of authentic hospitality praying that the oneness found around the tables at Consistory meetings will trickle down into the pews on Sunday mornings.

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50 Nouwen, In the Name of Jesus, 43.
51 Nouwen, In the Name of Jesus, 63.
52 Another helpful resource in multi-cultural leadership has been Eric Law’s book The Wolf Shall Dwell with the Lamb. In chapter 3, he describes the difference in perception of power and their consequences for leadership. This has been a helpful reminder in the subtle, but palpable tension of power and influence.
Humbly Thankful

Transitioning from a white, agricultural congregation to a multi-racial, multi-generational body of Christ did not happen without intentional efforts to reshape and reimagine areas of liturgy, preaching and leadership. While we give God thanks for this wonderful gift, we are also more keenly aware of our sheer dependence on God’s grace, wisdom and unity. In the fifth and final chapter, I will reflect how these changes have been able to impact our identity as God’s diverse people. To that end, we are humbly thankful.
Chapter 5: Cough Medicine & Tomatoes

“After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb.”

Revelation 7:9
Chapter Overview

This final chapter will tie together pieces of cultural competency and a more robust understanding of the Kingdom of God within the context of a multi-racial and multi-generational congregation. I will draw from focus group reflections and outside sources to analyze how the changes in congregational composition with respect to diversity of age, skin color and ecumenical background have created a richer theological framework for living and serving within the Kingdom of God on the south side of Chicago. I will reveal not only how First Reformed Church’s identity as God’s diverse people changed, but also how their sense of purpose and place in God’s greater redemptive efforts changed as well. I will conclude this chapter with prayerful reflections that may serve as a catalyst for a season of greater discernment and vision casting in the life of the Church.

Cough Medicine or Tomatoes?

When I was younger, I absolutely detested the taste of cough medicine. It became so noxious (in my mind) that all my mom needed to do was show me the bottle and I would throw a crying, coughing tantrum. The syrupy texture, the bitter taste and the sticky bottle all made me gag. The only saving grace, as a five year old, was that I could somehow, in the deep recess of my mind and body,
muster up the strength and intestinal fortitude to endure the taste of cough medicine knowing that my cough and my throat would begin to feel better.

I have often wondered whether becoming a multi-racial church was something like taking cough medicine. Meaning, the congregation of First Church knew that in order to remain a viable ministry in South Holland, the composition of the congregation must begin to reflect some of the obvious changes reflected in the Village of South Holland. The thinking was that we knew we had to do it to survive, but we really did not like the process, or the taste of the sticky situations that the journey would lead us through. I believe there are some within the congregation of First Church who believe diversity is like taking cough medicine. They know they have to, but do not really want to.

When I was five years old, I also detested the taste of tomatoes. Ketchup was okay, but as for tomatoes, I could not handle even the thought of a sliced tomato on my hamburger. Now, as an adult, I love tomatoes. I love their texture, taste and rich flavor. When I fast-forward five years on this corporate journey of transformation, I believe there are many individuals who liken being a multi-racial church to my perception of eating tomatoes. At first I did not like them, but over time, through shared experience, I developed not only an acceptance, but an affinity for tomatoes. I believe this is true with many individuals in the life of First Church. At first they may not have been comfortable or have preferred
diversity of age, skin color and ecumenical background in the life of their 165 year old church, but through shared experience and over time, they developed not only an acceptance of people different than themselves, but also an affinity for the diversity reflected on a Sunday morning.¹

My suspicions were confirmed during a focus group conversation when Glenn commented that “desperation came first and then we realized this is what the Kingdom of God looks like.” Undoubtedly, there are still “cough medicine” Christians when it comes to diversity represented in the pews on Sunday morning, and there are also undoubtedly “tomato” Christians worshiping, serving and giving. My hope and prayer is by the power of the Holy Spirit, “cough medicine” Christians will become “tomato” Christians and “tomato” Christians will in turn witness to their “cough medicine” Christian friends about the sweet flavor of diversity being at the very heart of the Kingdom of God.

An Old White Farmer & A Young Black Criminal

Transitioning from a white, agricultural congregation to a multi-racial, multi-generational congregation has been built upon relationships. Through growing relationships, shared experiences, fellowship opportunities and the help

¹ A helpful resource in the intentionality of becoming a multi-racial church has been George Yancey’s book One Body One Spirit. Specifically, on page 68 he describes seven principles for building a multi-racial congregation. In his fourth principle, intentionality, he describes how building a multi-racial congregation doesn’t just happen. It takes work.
of the Holy Spirit, the tenor of focus group individuals was extremely positive about diversity of age, skin color and ecumenical background. As Glenn commented, “I never thought it would be so easy to incorporate so many backgrounds together. We were never allowed to date Catholics and associate with other cultures. This transition is easier than I imagined it would be.”

Others expressed similar positive experiences with becoming a multi-racial congregation. Corey reflected, “People are interested to learn other people’s cultures. What we have in common is more than what we don’t have in common. Brings me joy to see the effect of how different backgrounds come together.” Others like Keith added, “We have our family, friends and work, but church is more diverse. We learn more about people here. It makes you a more well-rounded person by being around this diverse atmosphere.” Even older members like Bill shared, “we’re all the same in God’s sight.”

One such shared experience has become a picture of God’s preferred vision of reconciliation and grace within the life of First Church. In 2010, Corey, who was incarcerated for an attempted murder of a police officer and now works as a Chaplain for Chicagoland Prison Outreach, was hired as an Intern from Moody Bible Institute. Perhaps no greater victory has been the hiring and

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2 This observation was particularly noteworthy. Rather than experiencing overt racial tension, I began to realize a genuine sense of joy in experiencing diversity. While for many, that sense of joy is still experienced in a reserved-Protestant, comments like Bill’s reveal a deeper thread of the power of sanctification.
assimilation of Corey into the body of Christ at First Church. By the end of his
semester long internship, one of his final assignments was to preach at First
Church for a Sunday morning worship service.

A few days later Bill called me and asked me to bring Corey out to his
farm. Sinfully, my initial reaction was, “nothing good could come from this old
white farmer wanting this young black intern out to his farm.” Visions of the
movie “A Time To Kill,” came flashing in my mind. Bill looked me square in the
eye and said that Corey delivered one of the best sermons he’s ever heard and he
wanted to give that word of encouragement to Corey while showing him around
his farmyard. I told Bill I would bring him out later that week, but also asked,
“what about all the sermons you’ve heard from me?” Since then, Bill, who along
with his wife cared for their quadriplegic son Steve for over thirty years, has
grown to become one of the strongest champions for diversity within the life of
the church. An old white farmer and a young, formerly incarcerated black man
are great friends. Amen.

The Call to be One

In chapter four, I shared how specific changes in liturgy, preaching and
leadership became catalysts for becoming a multi-racial, multi-generational
congregation. Still, these could be interpreted as programmatic in nature. While
they were specific steps in a journey of transformation, the underlying shift in theology begins to manifest itself in relationships, shared experiences and adjustment in Biblical worldview.

While it may have been born out of a church’s survival instincts and less out of a Biblical mandate, those lines began to blur the more multi-racial and multi-generational the First Church became. As author Mark Deymaz writes, “Christ prayed specifically that future generations of believers would be one so that the world would know God’s love and believe. In this way and by this means, Christ stated that his mission would be accomplished through others and ultimately, his Father glorified...we have been called to be one for the sake of the Gospel.”

This sense of unity has begun to surface in multi-racial friendship and a greater spirit of hospitality before and after morning worship services. Congregants began to realize that there is a theological mandate to be one, not from the pastor, not out of guilt, not out of manipulation, but a charge from Christ himself.

In 2012, the RCA reached out to our congregation curious as to how people from different cultures, ecumenical backgrounds, skin colors began participating in the life and witness of the old First Reformed Church in South Holland, IL. The following article captures that journey and answers, in part,

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how the Holy Spirit began to shift the congregational composition, along with the attitudes and perceptions of individuals within the congregation towards diversity.

You know how the story goes - the church starts shrinking a little at a time. Soon it divides itself even farther between traditional and contemporary services thinking worship style is the problem. Or, it sells the building and heads to the ‘burbs thinking location is the problem. Or, it does nothing, figuring "the last one out will turn off the lights", because it is convinced culture is the problem. The story of First Reformed Church in South Holland, IL is a bit different and goes something like this.

163 years ago Dutch immigrants settled on the fertile farming soil on the South Side of Chicago and formed the First Reformed Church of South Holland. In the 1950s and 60s First Church was growing faster than the onion sets that made this community “The Onion Set Capital of the World.” Pastors like Bast and Brown stewarded the pulpit and saw the membership balloon to well over 1,000 people. Unfortunately biological growth only goes so far. In the mid 90s, the Village of South Holland began to change. Popeye’s Chicken replaced The Dutch Kitchen. Greenwood Elementary School was no longer an all white, all Dutch, watered down version of a Christian School in the Public School System. And the major divide on the block was no longer whether you were member of a Reformed Church or a Christian Reformed Church. It wasn’t too long that this once flagship RCA Church of the Midwest was humbled to her core. Elder’s meetings were run with a funeral-like tone listening to yet another family transferring out. By 2008, about a 175 people were left to spread out on a Sunday morning for worship. There was even talk that the conclusion of the story was right around the corner.

In 2008, the leadership of the church got together and had the harebrained idea to call a 24 year senior at Western Theological Seminary to be their 25th Senior Pastor. A 26 year old Director of Worship was brought on to blend the richest hymns of the 19th century alongside the robust soul of contemporary worship songs. A 31 year old African-American Director of Mercy & Justice Ministries was brought on to help the congregation roll up their sleeves and do less talking about their faith,
and more living their faith out loudly. And to make sure none of these young guns had too wild of an idea for ministry, an 86 year old Pastor Emeritus was brought on to tend the flock.

The chapter of the story that’s being written today is one of revival. It’s one where black and old, and white and young can reenact a slice of heaven together. It’s not forced from the pulpit. It’s not coerced through programs. And it hasn’t been manipulated by affirmative action. It has just happened. The culture where there was a lot of talking and thinking about being a follower of Jesus has been replaced by a culture that rakes neighbors leaves and throws community car-washes and opens up a food pantry right on campus. The culture that thinks Jesus came to die for those that look like me and talk like me and dress like me and vote like me has been replaced with a culture that realizes that Jesus came to live and laugh and die for everyone. And the culture of being the wealthy country club congregation has been replaced by a compassionate, gracious and joyful congregation that can laugh at a joke during the sermon and raise their hands (only halfway of course) during a song of praise. In 2009 the first African-American was elected to the office of Deacon. Today, nearly 18% of the congregation is not white. And a new reality is being created that honors the past but isn’t suffocated “by what we’ve always done.”

With revival has come more baptisms than funerals. With revival has come more Methodists and Baptists and Catholics joining the Church. With revival has come RCA drifters coming back to the Church and a whole battalion of believers that have never heard of the “Reformed” Church. With revival has come life-long members doing the seemingly unthinkable and lovingly sliding down their endowed pew to make room for a few more visitors. And revival has come with a smaller budget and larger offerings. 163 years hasn’t been enough time to tell the story of First Church. There are new characters and new ministries. But what’s interesting is that revival didn’t necessarily mean revolution. You can still hear the words of the Lord’s Prayer being prayed. You can still add your voice with the choir when the organ and the guitar play nice in worship. And you can still hold onto a bulletin and see words like “Approach, Word, & Response.” This is their story.
Forget “once upon a time.” This is real and it’s happening at First Reformed Church in South Holland, IL.\(^4\)

This article was a great source of pride and encouragement for our congregation. It captures in part how we, as a congregation were able to move towards a greater posture of inclusion and hospitality. This story of transformation and transition also locates Deymaz’ theological assertion that unity is at the heartbeat of the Gospel.

The Church as Mosaic

Becoming a multi-racial, multi-general body of Christ was never accomplished through guilt, or manipulation, and certainly not through programming that began to shift not only the orthodoxy, but also the orthopraxy among the congregation. It was never a question of Biblical authority. The Bible is clear on this matter. Jesus in John 17 prays that we would be one as He and the Father are one. Paul writes to the Church in Ephesus there is one Lord, one faith, one Baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all. Peter at Pentecost invites the Holy Spirit to unite 3,000 believers in their native tongues. Clearly, throughout the Bible, there is a cultural mandate to

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\(^4\) Matt Waterstone. “Revival, Not Revolution.” *RCA Today* Spring 2012, 8-10. This article was part of Learning Unit #1 and became a source of tremendous hope and pride for our congregation. It has now been edited and included throughout our website www.frcsh.org.
experience the riches of multi-cultural ministry. This was a Biblical assumption that the congregation did not need re-learning.\(^5\)

Moreover, throughout the New Testament there is a clear movement towards greater diversity and inclusion as a body of Christ. This message does not come from the pastor, or the consistory, or even the denomination. The message of unity comes from our Triune God. Once this Biblical basis is established it then becomes important to tease this powerful principle out without alienating, shaming or manipulating individuals into a practical theology of unity.

Still, this unity amidst diversity does not suggest we all are carbon copies of each other. Author Michael Hawn uses the image of mosaic to stress this idea. He writes, “a mosaic consists of thousands of tiny pieces, each with its own distinct hue and shape. Each as its own identity defined by size, color, shape and texture.”\(^6\) Thus, by the grace of God we have been able to avoid a culture which welcomes individuals if they look like, dress like, worship like and act like the existing majority of the congregation. Rather, roughly 275 tiny pieces, each with its own distinct personality and background experience a bond in the love of

\(^5\) An additional voice in this conversation has been Curtiss Paul DeYoung’s book *United by Faith*. In chapter 9 titled “The Truth of the Gospel,” he describes a shift in theological worldview and a theology of oneness. This chapter is rich with Biblical reference in providing a strong theological foundation for multi-cultural congregations.

\(^6\) Michael Hawn, *One Bread, One Body: Exploring Cultural Diversity in Worship* (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2003), 4. In his section titled “Culturally Uniform Worship,” Hawn also has some powerful reflections on effects that generational differences have on a congregation.
Christ that celebrates unity amidst diversity. Like creating the theological space for both a “Chritus Victor” and “Substitutionary” atonement theories, the sense of theological unity is a paradigm of “both/and,” not “either/or.” Simply put, multi-racial, multi-generational congregations are manifestations of the Biblical witness of unity.

We’re All Adopted

As I have shared previously, “change” was a four letter word prior to First Church’s journey of transformation beginning in 2008. The congregation knew what the Bible had to say about unity, inclusion and diversity. The Biblical and theological mandate was not in question. This message of radical oneness was nothing new. However, there was a tenor of selective memory when it came to how those verses and themes throughout the Bible were implemented in the life of the congregation. Throughout this journey of transformation, perhaps the subtle, but most important change has been the congregation’s understanding of the Kingdom of God.

Every Palm Sunday I recite Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount where His upside-down gospel of radical forgiveness and audacious love is on full display.

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7 One of the key learnings throughout this transition has been to own and acknowledge the place and voice of the majority of culture. In the process of becoming a multi-racial, multi-generational congregation, we have been intentional to own inherited power of the dominant culture. An example of this was when black members began to serve on consistory, they did not say anything or add to the meetings unless they were specifically spoken to.
This Biblical revelation began to manifest itself into the congregation’s sense of identity and vocation. Specifically, the congregation began to see their identity as part of the larger Kingdom narrative being played out in the Bible. As author Robert Henderson writes, “holiness speaks to our identification, and oneness, with that same holy God. It speaks of those that once were enemies of God, but have been delivered by him from our captivity to the darkness, and have become adopted as his sons and daughters of light through Jesus Christ.”

Rather than seeing each other has black or white, people began to see each other as fellow holy messes in need of the light and life of Christ.

Locating our place in the Kingdom of God became a critical shift in thinking, living and worshiping. This shift in Kingdom understanding has led to an emergence in profound changes with respect to congregational composition and practice. There is a genuine sense that our identity as a people of God is no longer defined by our relationship to the South Holland Bank, or to the Onion Set industry, but rather to an acknowledgement that, regardless of our skin color, ecumenical tradition or musical preference, we were all once enemies of God and have now been “adopted as daughters and sons of light through Jesus Christ.”

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Oneness & Mission

One of the profound ways the holiness that Henderson writes of has manifested itself in the life of the congregation has been in our posture toward mission. As previously articulated, foreign mission was of the highest priority in the life of the church. However, as years pass, missionaries transition, congregants pass away, the mission budget becomes nothing more than a sacred cow where so-and-so’s grandchild (who no longer is a member) was a missionary back in the 1980s and while financial support has been given for years, nobody really knows what anybody does. Above all, nobody dares to cut anyone from the mission budget for fear of being labeled insensitive toward mission. As Henderson writes, “Our oneness with God, in Christ, also imbues us with Christ’s own spontaneous and contagious love for the world.”9 As a result, how First Church sees our place and role in extending this “spontaneous and contagious love for the world” that Henderson writes of has drastically changed as a result of becoming a multi-racial, multi-racial congregation.

By the end of 2013, a 30-member Missional Cohort was formed from the ranks of the congregation to re-assess who and how and why we are involved with mission. We began to realize that “Our lives of holiness require that we, with joy, take our place in every day’s life as the missionary arm of the Holy

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9 Henderson, The Church and the Relentless Darkness, 192.
Trinity, as those consumed with Jesus’ own passion to seek and to save those who are lost.” 10 The lost that are right across the street and the lost that are across the globe began to be more than budgeted line items and extensions of our multi-racial, multi-generational ministry in South Holland. By more clearly embracing our oneness in Christ, our mission budget radically changed with a greater balance of local and foreign missionaries. 11 We also began to notice common currents of missional passions that wove together both domestic and foreign mission. As a result of this group’s work, we identified our missional passion around mission efforts that focus on “growing individuals in the Word of God.”

A Hospitality of Grace

Above all, becoming a multi-racial, multi-generational congregation has created a greater awareness and appreciation for God’s amazing grace. It is this spirit of daring grace that has stirred a pivotal change in the theological understanding of the Kingdom of God at First Church. Tracing our Puritan roots, First Church tended to spend a great deal of time thinking, preaching, teaching and living on the first letter of the helpful acronym common in Reformed circles known as “T.U.L.I.P.” By focusing so long, and so hard on sin, there was little

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11 I would like to thank my good friend, Scott Englesman, the Director of Global Mission for the RCA. Scott walked alongside our congregation during this process and has begun to take this “Missional Cohort” idea to other congregations throughout the denomination.
room for reveling in God’s grace. This shift in focus has been critical in First Church’s journey of transformation to a hospitality of grace.

As people from all different walks of life have made their way to First Church for Sunday morning worship, they are met with a community that acknowledges sin, and still rests in God’s grace. Author Richard F. Lovelace affirms this shift in understanding when he writes, “Churches which have been fed on a heavy diet of ‘legal terrors’ or moralism will need to be addressed with a strong positive emphasis on the grace of God.” As a congregation, we have come to understand that the Kingdom of God is built upon the grace of God. As a result, through sermons, leadership and pastoral care, I have been intentional about reminding individuals that just because we look nice on Sunday morning, or drive nice cars to worship, or have been a member for a long time, that does not mean that pain and brokenness are not running rampant in individual’s lives that desperately need an infusion of the grace of Jesus Christ.

Lovelace goes on to write that “we must first make real to people the grace of God...not because of spirituality or achievements in Christian service, but because God has accounted to them the perfect righteousness of Christ.”

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13 This idea continues to be a growing edge in the life of First Church. The nuances of the Dutch culture where emotional barriers are high and there is a defined line between personal and public self continue to be cautiously pastored through.

14 Lovelace, Dynamics of Spiritual Life: An Evangelical Theology of Renewal, 211.
more “country club” congregation. Less “I’m alright, you’re alright, we’re all alright.” As contemporary Christian musicians Casting Crowns write, no more “stained glass masquerades.” Rather, a subculture began to emerge which left room for the normalcy of brokenness and an honest awareness of our need for the grace of Jesus Christ.\(^{15}\) This has been the fuel for the transformation in understanding that the Kingdom of God demands when we take seriously the call to be a multi-racial, multi-generational congregation on the south side of Chicago.\(^{16}\)

The Kingdom of God in Sisters & Stillborns

Theological jargon of “Kingdom of God” can often times leave a congregation chasing after her own tail. How do we know the Kingdom of God? How do we experience the Kingdom of God? How are we sure this journey of transformation has impacted a greater understanding of the Kingdom of God? Perhaps no greater example that the understanding of the Kingdom of God has been impacted has been how we, as a congregation, care for one another. Author John A. Armstrong picks up on this when he writes, “True revival never creates

\(^{15}\) I first heard the phrase “normalcy of brokenness from Eugene Peterson at the Bast Preaching Festival held at Western Seminary on Monday, November 10, 2014.

\(^{16}\) Another author that has been instrumental in this piece of my personal formation, along with the formation of our congregation has been Brennan Manning’s book, Ragamuffin Gospel. For an entire year, an Adult School Class used this book to break down barriers, deepen relationships and experience God’s amazing grace anew.
an atmosphere of self-centeredness. There is always a definite connection between right doctrine and right practice...Simply put, revivals have a clear ethical aspect to them. This aspect may depend upon the circumstances and the times, but the love of Christ always causes revived people to reach out beyond themselves.”

In the past five years, we have experienced this connection between doctrine and practice in how we care for one another. In 2013, a Care Team was organized and mobilized throughout the congregation where volunteers are trained and equipped to make hospital, home and rehabilitation visits to members in need. Twenty individuals from all different backgrounds and skin colors are now involved in the Care Team. They are paired together and go out monthly to share the compassion and grace of Christ with members in need.

A wonderful manifestation of this theological transformation occurred on the third floor of a local nursing home where Barb, a 60 something white woman, along with her Care Team partner, Dollie, a 60 something black woman, made a visit to one of our “shut-in” members. Upon walking into the room, the elderly

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17 John A. Armstrong. *True Revival: What Happens When God’s Spirit Moves?* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2001), 63. John has been a close friend throughout my ministry at First Church. His work on “missional-ecumenism” has been a source of tremendous encouragement and hope as we move beyond traditional denominational boundaries. For more information John’s work of bridging the gap between Protestants and Catholics, see his website at www.act3Network.com.
woman asked in all sincerity, “are you two sisters?” They looked at one another and said with smiles on their faces, “yes we are.”

Another beautiful and painful example of this theological transformation took place alongside a small casket for a stillborn baby girl of one of our African American members. On a beautiful fall day, over 100 people came to offer their love and support for Mike and Taketia, many of those in attendance were older white members from the church and while they may not necessarily have the long-standing relationship with Mike and Taketia that they do with many older white members in the congregation, they know that pain, sorrow and loss know no color. What was experienced around Oak Ridge Cemetery that afternoon reveals more about a theological shift in understanding what the Kingdom of God looks than any sermon preached.¹⁸

Colored People are More Friendly

While many individuals have come to view this diversity the way I viewed tomatoes, there still is room to grow as a congregation. Perhaps no one summed up the relationship between many of our senior members and diversity better than Dort. As innocently as possible she said, “I find that colored people

¹⁸ A helpful companion in the journey of lamentation has been Eugene Peterson’s book *Five Smooth Stones for Pastoral Work*. On page 139, Peterson describes suffering as “an event in which we are particularly vulnerable to grace, able to recognize dimensions in God and depths in the self. To treat it as a ‘problem’ is to demean the person.” I have learned that in many ways, God is using suffering to bring greater unity to our body of Christ.
are more friendly and loving.” Author Mark Daymez picks up on this idea, specifically regarding senior members, when he writes “unfortunately, many established members will find the challenges of multi-ethnic revitalization insurmountable within the framework of ‘their’ church. Consequently, they will actively avoid or oppose the multi-ethnic vision.” While there is not a fiber of contempt for others in Dort’s kind bones, the generational differences are still present in the pews on Sunday mornings. Focus groups reveal less of a “my” church mentality, it is still important to note that remnants exist and cast long and gaping shadows in which newer members find it more difficult to assimilate into the body of Christ.

Issues of language, upbringing and life experience also impact the generational gap which continues to be a challenge to overcome. While First Church has reached multi-cultural status, and while membership is trending younger, still 27% of communicant members are 75 years and older. As Clint commented “the generational gap is far more difficult to cross than the racial gap.” This generational gap also reveals a racial gap present in the congregation since the oldest African American member at First Church is in her 60s. Yet, as Lovelace writes, “the continuing health of the young people, as well as the

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20 Again, I would like to give thanks to Gerri VanBaren who serves in the Office of First Reformed Church with grace and joy.
revitalization of the Middle-American church, is dependent on the establishment of a liaison between older and younger Christians.”

While crossing generational gaps are difficult and often-times tedious, the unity that Christ calls us to demands that we pursue with vigor and passion ways to meet these generational challenges.

Author Soong-Chan Rah offers a realistic, yet bleak critique of the cultural dynamics at play when racial divides are present within the life of a congregation. What Rah describes as “white privilege” is the counter-part of the generational gaps present within congregational composition. This sense of “white privilege” is something that we are more and more aware of in the way ministry takes place and who is around the table casting that vision. He writes, “white privilege is the other side of racism. White privilege is the system that places white culture in American society at the center with all other cultures on the fringe.” This is the subtle dynamic that is often times unspoken in the life of the Church. Are we a welcoming body of Christ with the underlying assumption

21 Lovelace, Dynamics of Spiritual Life: An Evangelical Theology of Renewal, 204. Lovelace goes on to make the argument that in order for true revival to happen, both older and younger segments of the congregation must experience revitalization. Otherwise, one segment will become burned out and the other will simply remain stagnant.

22 Soong-Chan Rah, The Next Evangelicalism (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 28. In my second learning unit, I had the privilege of attending a conference and then having a subsequent phone conversation with Dr. Rah. He made the comment to me that, “the worst thing you can ever call a white person, is that they are a racist.” I found this comment provocative and profound. It speaks to the larger issue of white privilege that is still present in the church.
that new-comers will look like us, and dress us, and vote like us and like the
same kind of music we like?

Ultimately, crossing different ages, skin colors and cultures requires
patience and grace. Rah goes on to contend that this challenge is worth our best
effort for the Kingdom of God. He writes:

We face a challenging reality. We live under the reality of the oppression
of the Western, white captivity of the church. We may claim that our
version of evangelicalism is culture-free, that we are merely trying to be
culturally relevant, or that we are trying to maintain the church’s
tradition, and thereby ultimately reject the claim of cultural captivity. But
the reality of the situation is that Western, white culture dominates
American culture, and in turn, dominates American
evangelicalism...Instead of creating a Christian America, evangelicals
have Americanized Christianity.23

This “Americanized Christianity” confronts the journey toward
transformation of becoming a multi-racial, multi-generational body of Christ at
First Church. Assimilating newer members into the life of the congregation has
been a difficult task. While we, as the majority culture, may tend to believe that
what goes on between 9:30am-10:40am on a Sunday morning is free from
cultural projections and assumptions, the reality is that it is a constant battle to
hold ourselves accountable to natural biases that each of us bring with us to
worship. Specifically, when welcoming members from non-Reformed

23 Rah, The Next Evangelicalism, 3.
backgrounds the challenge is as one Elder put it, “we don’t want newer members
to walk out the back door just as easily as they walked in the front door.”

While we continue to struggle in overcoming generational gaps, the pulse
of the congregation beats in the right direction. For example, Barb shared with
the group that, “we treat each other with respect. Whether we are rich, poor,
black, white or brown – everyone is welcome.” How the rich, poor, black, white
and brown relate to each other and worship the same Triune God continues to be
the prayerful discernment of the people of God here at First Church. There
continue to remain challenges in both becoming more racially and generationally
diverse. Ultimately, it is only in a posture of humility and grace that we grow
together.

Cultural Competency

The process of becoming a multi-racial, multi-generational body of Christ
has not been without discomfort or growing pains. However, becoming a
culturally competent and culturally intelligent church is a challenge that
continues to face us to this day. Dort’s comments and others speak directly to
the issue of cultural competency. While we, as a church body, may have a sincere
appreciation for diversity and believe it to be at the heart of God, there are still
cultural barriers that make that journey difficult. As author Soong-Chan Rah
suggests, “our challenge, therefore, is to move our understanding of culture beyond the simplistic perspective to an appreciation of the complexity of systems and structures.” This challenge has been before us for the past five years, and while we have made great strides, there are still obvious gaps in our cultural intelligence. Moreover as Rah goes on to contend “The work of cultural intelligence and cultural sensitivity, therefore, is not simply the transformation of an individual’s thought process, but the transformation of an entire system’s values and norms.”

It is more than clichéd phrases on a bulletin or the token African American on the front page of the Church brochure which makes a congregation culturally intelligent. “Cultural intelligence requires creating an environment that allows for connection to occur. It is the willingness to seek understanding from a perspective beyond one’s limited worldview.” Rah gives a language to a vision that is prayerfully and intentionally trying to be met with vigor and grace. He goes on to write, “By engaging in relationships across the cultural divide and learning from others, we create the possibility of expanding our cultural worldview.” Stretching our worldview to be more inclusive has been catalytic

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26 Rah, *Many Colors* , 85
27 Rah, *Many Colors*, 85
in fostering authentic relationships among individuals of different races and
generations.

Undoubtedly, there are many cultural, racial and generational challenges
that all seek to create silos in the life of First Church. These challenges can be
experienced in the difficulty in breaking into the same triads of conversations
each Sunday after worship. They also can be experienced in who we are inclined
to sit next to in the sanctuary or who we will go out of our way to greet during a
worship service. The level of cultural competency and intelligence has come a
long way, but has a long way to come. While there may not be a written exam to
gauge this competency, perhaps no greater litmus test has been the blossoming
of inter-racial, inter-generational friendships within the life of the church. We
believe this is worth our best and most prayerful effort.

Multi-Cultural Learning Through Shared Experiences

As our understanding of the Kingdom of God has grown to reveal a
greater sense of oneness, so too has our congregation’s desire to live in harmony
together. This unity has been forged through shared experiences. This begs the
questions, “what are those shared experiences?” Throughout First Church’s
journey of transformation, three shared experiences of multi-cultural ministry
shaped the contours of our identity as a people of God.
The first was a Sankofa trip where a dozen members and adherents of First Church went on in October of 2013. Earl James, the Director of Multi-Cultural Ministries for the RCA, invited First Church to be part of this three day bus tour into the deep south to explore how issues of racism, reconciliation and community impact not only our past, but also our present and future. “Sankofa is a West African word that means ‘looking backward to move forward.’ It implies that as we engage in the RCA’s multiracial future freed from racism, we must look backward to see the contexts and experiences of our multiracial past punctuated with racism.”28 Similar to the life of First Church, it became foundational to look backward from being an all white, all Dutch farming congregation, to looking forward to a multi-racial, multi-generational congregation.

During this shared experience, participants were paired with a partner of a different skin color from their own. “This intensive, interactive, cultural awareness training involves exploring historic sites, viewing videos and provided time for processing the experiences of African Americans, Asian Americans, Hispanic Americans, and Native Americans.”29 Sitting in the pews of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church and listening to stories from survivors of the bombing at the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, AL, and crossing the

Edmund Pettis Bridge and touring the Voter’s Rights Museum cultivated in our group a greater sense of empathy, community and grace. Relationships were forged between participants, along with creating a space for honest and open dialogue around issues of race, culture and reconciliation. This shared experience became a place of tremendous growth in the life of the Church.

A second shared experience happens every Monday morning and Wednesday afternoon at South Suburban College for First Campus Ministry (FCM.) FCM was birthed in 2012 and is our ministry to over 17,000 college students, who outside of a few Gideons passing out tracks every year, have never had a consistent campus ministry presence. On Mondays, individuals gather for coffee, prayer and donuts. On Wednesdays, individuals gather for a Bible Study. Members of the Church are either part of the FCM leadership team or simply volunteer to mentor the roughly 75 students, of which 70 are black.

Again, shared experiences within the lines of mentoring, praying and simply walking alongside students has provided a context for growth within the ministry and the life of the Church. Ron, a 70 year old white Elder in the Church serves as the “door-man” greeting every student that crosses his path. Sharing a cup of coffee and a concern over an upcoming mid-term has fostered an ethos within the Church that is more comfortable around the issues, experiences and
challenges facing many younger black students. In the past year, three black
students became communicant members of the Church through this ministry.

A final example of these shared experiences would be First Church’s
desire to participate in the Village of South Holland’s “CommUNITY Dinners.”
This community sponsored event encourages residents of different skin colors to
share a meal with one another and engage in conversation around questions of
hospitality, diversity, values and culture. For three consecutive years, the staff
and leadership team of the church participated in this event. “Whether home
cooked or catered, the meal is always laced with laughter where moments of
connection were unforeseen are made and people who may have begun the
evening as passing strangers become fast friends. There is always something to
gain from the experience: a new delectable dish tasted or a new journey of
friendship forged.” 30 Participating in this event opens dialogue for shared joys,
frustrations, hopes and dreams that reach far beyond the color of one’s skin.

Author Soong-Chan Rah contends that “multicultural learning, then, must
be experienced through the context of community. Learning in community
occurs through shared experience. This process involves journeying together,
sharing meals together, multisensory opportunities, and participatory

Ann and her husband, Rich, along with their children joined First Church in 2009. They were
some of the second wave of African Americans that joined the church. Rich was the second
African American ordained to the office of Deacon.
These multi-cultural learning experiences cause individuals to question preconceived assumptions, deal with their latent sinfulness of racism within their own lives, while fostering a fellowship of greater humility and unity. While signing up for a Sankofa Trip, starting a college ministry in a predominantly black Community College, or having dinner with people of a different skin color will not instantly make a congregation more multi-cultural, these types of experiences transform individuals’ lives which in turn transform the life of the congregation.\textsuperscript{32}

\begin{quote}
Not Up to Us

Transitioning from a white, agricultural congregation to a multi-racial, multi-generational congregation was built on sound theological understanding and concrete Biblical exegesis. Shared learning experiences can also spur a congregation on to reaching God’s preferred vision of unity amidst diversity. Staff changes, leadership changes, worship style changes and theological lenses from the pulpit can all serve as stepping stones towards becoming a corporate
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\textsuperscript{31} Rah, \textit{Many Colors}, 148. Throughout chapter 8, Rah argues for the importance of these types of communal learning activities has foundational in the ability to increase cultural intelligence.

\textsuperscript{32} One additional shared experience has been the re-emergence of a baseball league called APBA Baseball. In the early 1980s, the league was formed among men of the congregation. As the church died, so too did the league. In 2008, the league was re-constituted and has grown to 16 men, three of which are black. Every week, lawyers, bankers, funeral directors and iron workers gather together to experience fellowship and share in a joy of baseball. Currently, my team stinks.
body of Christ that champions the colorful flavor of diversity found in Revelation 7. However, all these are responses to what the Holy Spirit does inside an individual and through individuals making up the local Church.

As Armstrong contends, “We must never dictate the results by how we speak, how we pray, and especially how we plan. The harvest truly belongs to the Lord. We must bow before this reality. It is ours to be faithful to ask the task and it is also ours to wait upon the Lord to grant what He ordains. His ways are not our ways.” While this is frustrating, it is also freeing. Ultimately, becoming a multi-racial, multi-generational body of Christ is not only of the Lord, it is the Lord’s doing.

In the meantime, the waiting is difficult. Patience does not come easy for pastors or congregations. The days of biological growth infusing the sanctuary, choir loft and nursery with adults and children are long gone and have given way to a new season of ministry marked by multi-cultural and multi-racial components. This season is marked by slow, patient, and often times messy growth where the growing is ultimately done by God. We pray. We proclaim. We serve and we wait with eager expectation for individuals to experience the life-saving power of the Gospel through the bride of Christ on South Park Avenue.

Hopeful & Prayerful

The journey of becoming a multi-racial, multi-racial body of Christ did not stop when a particular percentage was reached in membership. While the growing is not our own, this journey of transformation is chronicled as both the past and present of First Church experienced through the lives of focus groups participants. During our January conversations, I spent the final few minutes of time with the individuals vision-casting for the future. Coming out of this five year journey of transformation, where do they hopefully and prayerfully envision First Church in 5, 10, 15, even 20 years from now.

Corey reflected on this question by saying, “Busting at the seams. I see us telling our story across the denomination.” Emily added, “I see us as a bigger, stronger family where we grow more alongside one another.” Dacia agreed with the numerical growth comment when she said, “I see more younger couples a part of our congregation.” Reflecting back on the three options given to the Consistory in the early 2000s, Keith made it very clear that place and space continue to be very important to him and an important part of our future as a body of Christ. He commented, “I see us staying right here on South Park Avenue. I don’t want to leave this community. I see this as a very positive environment.” Although the comment which stood out the most came from a frustrated Glenn who shared, “I’m mystified why more people aren’t here. I
simply can’t understand it. We need to figure out another way to reach more people. I feel like we are the best kept secret around.”

Russ’ Restaurant Revisited

I have a dream of returning to Russ’ Restaurant one more time. In this dream I’m sitting across from the same two former pastors and pillars in the Reformed Church in America. No, they’re not eating crow. Instead, the three of us are singing praises to the Lord Almighty for the work He decided to do in and through the First Reformed Church in South Holland, IL. We’re sharing funny stories of ministry, leadership challenges, worship conversations, nightmares around staffing changes and how people with different backgrounds and skin colors can go from being strangers to good friends. Before the dream ends, we pray that the story of the old First Church would be told and experienced in congregations throughout the country. A story of redemption and revival. A story of hope and grace. A story of family and church. A story of how a white, agriculture congregation became a multi-racial, multi-generational body of Christ. This time, I pick up the tab.

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34 As a result of becoming a multi-racial, multi-generational body of Christ, Tony Campbell, the Director of Missional Engagement for the RCA, reached out to First Church about partnering with the Kellogg Foundation in a multi-year, multi-million dollar grant around education. In the Spring of 2015, a grant will be submitted that will include how Family Life Christian Preschool and Day Care, a ministry of First Church, can more effectively minister to children and families.
Epilogue

I once heard that when a congregation hunkers down in their pews on a Sunday morning to listen to a sermon they want to hear two things. First, they want to hear a story. Second, they want to know where they are in the story. The story of First Reformed Church is located in the larger story that God has told, is telling and will continue to tell. It’s a story of grace. It’s a story of transition. It’s a story of redemption. It’s a story of aging Dutch saints and new members with Polish last names. It’s a story that reveals not a magic program, but a messy process. It’s a story where the same Jesus who brought His good friend Lazarus back from the dead brings His beloved church nestled along the shores of the Little Calumet River back from the brink of death. This is the theological narrative of our God – bringing grace to the guilty, hope to the hopeless, and life to the lifeless. It’s found not only in the Holy pages of the Book, but in the holy pages of our lives together.

A few weeks after the final revisions were made to this project I was having coffee and a batch of delicious sticky buns with the “Weed & Feed” crew. Marilyn, one of the members of this volunteer group, came up to me and congratulated me on graduating. I thanked her and told her I still had some work to do before I really graduated. She said to me, “But when you’re done, I

1The Weed & Feed crew is a group of retired folks that gather on Wednesday mornings to beautify the campus of First Church. They weed and then they feed. I just feed.
need to hear that story. You know, I’ve lived my whole life here in South Holland and in the church, but I want hear it all again.”

Perhaps Marilyn’s comments confirm what makes a good sermon. She wanted to hear a story and she wanted to know where she was in the story. She wanted to hear the Living God proclaim “I am making all things new”\(^2\) in her life and in the life of her church. She wanted to know more of her past. She wanted to be reminded of the pain and beauty of becoming a multi-racial, multi-generational body of Christ. She wanted to celebrate how far she has come as an 80-something follower of Jesus and how far her 166 year-old church has come being salt and light in this community.

For pastors and ministry leaders who have read this story, I would simply suggest that in whatever ministry you find yourself, pay close attention to those stories. Listen long to the stories from the great cloud of witnesses who have gone on before you. Listen to the stories that brought a sense of congregational pride. Listen to the stories of loss that left a congregation or ministry licking their wounds. Listen to the story the Holy Spirit is telling. And listen to your own story. Transitioning from a white, agricultural congregation to a multi-racial, multi-generational body of Christ was not an overnight fix, nor was it manipulated by programming or feeble attempts at affirmative action. Rather it

\(^2\) Revelation 21:5.
began by simply listening to the stories of individuals sitting in the pews on a 
Sunday morning, of elderly saints as they sat knitting and quilting together on 
Monday mornings, and of the retired guys who gathered at McDonalds for 
coffee on Wednesdays at 9:00am.

As he was going through grain fields on the Sabbath, Jesus once said,
“Come to me, all you that are weary and carrying heaven burdens, and I will 
give you rest.”3 Jesus did not say, “come to me once you become a multi-racial, 
multi-generational body of Christ.” He did not say, “come to me once you 
acknowledge the seeds of racism and white privilege.” He did not say, “come to 
me once your liturgy, preaching and leadership radically change.” No, Jesus just 
said “come.” Simply love, listen and pastor the actual congregation that God has 
given to you in the present.

Rather than God’s preferred vision, the journey of transformation first 
 begins with the current reality of each individual congregation. And while that 
current reality may be bleak, it is where the story begins. It begins with people 
who hold with a death grip on the past. It begins with people who are at best 
curiously apprehensive about individuals with a different skin color. It begins 
with people who perhaps more than anything else, just want their church to be 
there long enough to host their funeral. The journey begins with these beloved

3 Matthew 11:28.
people. Serve alongside them. Preach through them. Pray with them. Listen to
them.

Readers beware; entering into your own story of transitioning into a
multi-racial, multi-generational congregation will be messy. It will be awkward.
It will be uncomfortable. This I can promise you. Elders will be asked to discern
how to disciple younger, dating couples living together before marriage.
Deacons will quickly realize that there are far greater issues, both physical and
financial, than who will be assigned to pass the plates on Sunday. Congregants
will be confronted with the unwed, pregnant teen in worship. Worship
Committee members will be forced to deny their preferred instrumentation or
musical selection for the preferences of the entire body. Life-long members will
begin to feel threatened that things “aren’t the way they’ve always been” at their
church. The story, the journey, the transition has been marked with both joy and
pain. For those pastors and ministry leaders brave enough to enter into this story
in hopes of telling their own story beware. Be prayer-fully aware.

Every night that I’m able I get to tuck our three and a half-year old,
Willem, to bed. The nightly liturgy of bath, pjs, bedtime snack and brushing of
teeth concludes with reading books. His favorite book is “The Book With No
Pictures,” by B.J. Novak. If we’ve read this book once, we’ve read it 1,000 times.
Willem’s favorite line in the book says “my best friend in the whole-wide world
is a hippo named Boo-Boo Butt.” He squirms and laughs uncontrollably just as we approach that page because he knows he will hear me say that my best friend is a hippo named Boo-Boo Butt. Willem loves hearing this story, over and over and over again. He never gets sick of it. He laughs just as hard the thousandth time I read it to him as he did the first time.

Transitioning from a white, agricultural church to a multi-racial, multi-generational body of Christ is like that. We simply need to keep telling the story. Tell it over and over and over again. Each time we tell it, we laugh and we cry. We mourn and rejoice. We lament something of old and celebrate something new. This project has been an invitation for me as a pastor to tell the story of First Reformed Church back to First Reformed Church. We’ve seen our own flaws. We’ve seen places where we’ve been embarrassed and even ashamed. We’ve seen how far we’ve come and how far we still have to travel. And we’ve seen a glimpse of what God is calling us to be here in South Holland and beyond.

As for the storyteller, I find myself going back and reading the original story of redemption in the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus. In that story I am further challenged and renewed. I certainly am not the author of this transition, but instead, another character in the story in need of personal and corporate transformation. My story as a pastor, husband, father and friend has been impacted by the story of this congregation. I have grown in areas of
leadership, conflict management, finding my own preaching voice and yes, even inching my way along to be a more patient person.

Like the story of the Good News, the story of a white, agricultural congregation becoming a multi-racial, multi-generational body of Christ is far from complete. There are chapters still to be written. There are characters who still need defining. There are plots awaiting development and climaxes yet to celebrate. In the end, or the beginning, depending on how you look at it – the life and witness of the old First Reformed Church in South Holland, IL is far from over. To be continued in God’s grace...
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