

**Post-Christian Narratives for Liturgical Formation:
Formation, Worship, and Mission at Alger Park Church**

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Abstract

After some unexpected shifts in my own faith journey, and in the faith journeys of some people I deeply love, I found myself wondering how I, and my friends and neighbors who have left or never known the church, might meet God together at the same time, and in the same place. I wondered about how Alger Park Church might become an outpost of mission in our neighborhood. I wondered if there were new ways to communicate God's goodness to people who aren't yet familiar.

The result of my wondering is this project, which is comprised of a literature review and a Narrative Inquiry qualitative study of ten post-Christian people in order to explore the ways their narratives can inform the way worship leaders design and host worship events.

The thesis of my project is that listening to the narratives of post-Christian people can inform the way pastors and worship leaders craft and lead worship in order to create an atmosphere where Christians and post-Christian people can be formed side-by-side in worship together. Listening to the stories of post-Christian people gives voice to a growing population of people who find themselves unaffected by the voice of the church and find little or no connection to the Christian message. Pastors and worship leaders listening to the stories of these people can better draw out themes in the liturgy that will communicate not just to Christian, but post-Christian people as well.

The purpose of my project is to help worship leaders and designers consider how they can speak to and be heard by both Christian and post-Christian people in worship. The findings of my project will illustrate the ways post-Christian people might best

engage in the liturgy and offer insights to worship leaders and designers on how to enable this engagement.

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Chapter 1: The Post-Christian Situation

Like most organizations, churches tend to be oriented to serve their own members, speak their own language, and meet their own needs with little regard for those outside the fold. It's human nature. But churches aren't like other organizations. At least, they're not meant to be. Jesus oriented his people in a beautifully backward kind of way. Giving is prioritized over receiving. Being last is preferred to being first. And the strangers, immigrants, ostracized, and alienated are greeted and attended to as special guests.

When congregations gather for worship, we are practicing one of our most essential duties. In fact, many of us even call these worship events, "church," as though they're the most important, if not the only thing we do. At these worship events the faithful encounter God in meaningful, engaging ways. The worship speaks to their heart, impacts their life, and they respond in gratitude to God. Worship can feel like second nature to us.

That's *us*. What about *them*? Is there a place for those who don't fit the mold in worship? Can worship be designed and led in a way that embraces the doubter, the skeptic, and the disenfranchised? Can we contextualize our liturgy so that the gospel speaks to the fast-growing post-Christian population? Can we do worship in a way that makes everyone feel like they're part of the *us*, and together we can take one step closer to God?

To begin to answer these questions we need to listen to, understand, and empathize with the stories of our post-Christian friends and neighbors. We need to hear Rachel's story of walking away from her faith, and finding purpose in her activism. We

need to hear how Rob longs for a community to accept and affirm him. We need Oscar to tell us stories of how the church scared him, and how leaving the Christian faith brought him liberty and purpose. We need to hear Frankie’s longings for connection to something greater than himself.

The church has an opportunity to do worship in a beautifully backward kind of way where there is no *them*, only *us*. Together, we can discover how our narratives fit into the grand narrative of God.

Thesis

The church has an opportunity in corporate worship to rehearse God’s grand narrative in a way that resonates with Christians and post-Christian people alike. By listening to the narratives through which post-Christian people assign meaning to their lives and drawing on those meaningful themes, worship gatherings can change for the better. Since the mission of God “embraces both the church and the world,”¹ our liturgy may as well. Alger Park Church, and others like us, can grow in our commitment to the idea that together, people of any classification—Christian or otherwise—as well as those who refuse classification, can practice the patterns of eternity while God forms us in corporate worship.

Context

When Alger Park church was founded in 1952, “Everything was simpler,” according to Egbert “Bud” Koorndyk.² He continues, “We had it easy. Churches came

¹ David Bosch *Transforming Mission* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1991), 391.

² Personal interview, Bud Koorndyk. December, 2013

with molds and instructions. We followed procedures—everybody knew the procedures—and we followed them. Simple as that.”

Now in his mid-80’s, Bud still works hard to keep his finger on the pulse of the culture, especially as it relates to the church. “Sometimes I wish I was your age. You guys have a lot of work to do. It’s exciting work. We really need good pastors because churches don’t come with molds and instructions anymore. I don’t know how you do it, but sometimes I wish I was young enough to try.”

Bud carries with him the story of Alger Park Church—past and future. He was there the day it was founded, and throughout its existence, Bud has been a prominent leader, serving multiple terms as deacon and elder. The congregation always appreciated him, even though he was something of a controversial figure.

Bud wants to be clear. “Don’t call me liberal, but I guess I’ve always been kind of progressive when it comes to church. We have to constantly be thinking about the future. What do we need to do next? How are we going to have to change? The world is going to keep changing, and you can pretend that the world isn’t going to change, but before you know it, things will have changed and you’ll be dying.”

Bud is right. The world will keep changing, and with it, our best practices for expressing the gospel as a congregation. Bud didn’t grow up in the information age like recent generations did. He’s quick to say he can’t totally relate to his grandchildren’s lifestyles and situations. But he doesn’t allow his ignorance of “the what and why” to be an excuse for not thinking or caring. He knows that the “molds and instructions” we had in 1952 simply don’t work anymore, and he wants someone—even if not himself—to be thinking about what has to happen next.

At the best times in our history, when Alger Park seemed most faithful to God's mission, two qualities were present. They're related, but different. Two sides of the same coin, perhaps: a refusal to chain ourselves to the comfortable status quo, and a willingness to adapt our practices to the mission field God has given us.

Alger Park Christian Reformed Church was founded on February 8, 1952. Our first organizational meeting boasted 62 families, 2 adult members, and 119 children. The other neighborhood Christian Reformed Churches were over-crowded. The neighborhood was booming. It just made sense.

The first business of the church was to elect a council, assign committee members, and begin a building campaign. There were no mission statements, vision manifestos, or core values established. I think they would have told us those things were assumed. This may be indicative of the "molds and instructions" Bud talked about. Christian Reformed Churches in Southeast Grand Rapids were like leather shoes—they all fit slightly different, but the difference was negligible.

So much was assumed back then, mostly because it was safer to make assumptions. In the 50's the vast majority of people who settled in the Alger Heights community were not only Christians, and not only reformed Christians, they were Christian Reformed Christians.

I found interesting information about Alger Park's council deciding to "canvas the neighborhood" in its initial years³. This canvassing, however, seems to have been

³ John Timmerman, *Alger Park Christian Reformed Church: The First 50 Years* Unpublished booklet, 11.

strategically aimed at Christian Reformed Christians moving into our highly transient neighborhood. They were fishing in a barrel.

A generation ago, the Alger Heights neighborhood boasted an almost entirely Christian demographic. Today, less than one-third of Alger Heights residents identify as Christians who value their faith highly. Additionally, only 6% identify as Presbyterian or Reformed. The demographics of the neighborhood have shifted significantly. Today, nominal Roman Catholics are the largest demographic in the neighborhood; Christians in Alger Heights have decreased their involvement in their faith at an even higher rate than the national average.⁴

Since its establishment in 1952 Alger Park Church has had a passion for missions; but in the past, *missions* referred only to foreign missions. In recent years Alger Park Church members have begun to embrace the new realities of their context. This once “thoroughly Christian Reformed neighborhood” no longer is.⁵

After some difficult years of congregational self-discovery Alger Park Church is beginning to discover a natural giftedness for ministry in a post-Christian world. On good days, the congregation is inclusive, hospitable, socially adept, and spiritually engaged. Members are demographically similar to their immediate neighbors in many ways. Church leadership is supportive of a mission-focused direction. The congregation’s history of being a strong missionary-supporting congregation is translating well as they include friends and neighbors as those to whom they are ministering. While some might

⁴ Percept Group, Inc. *Ministry Area Profile*. n.p. 2008.

⁵ As sometimes described by many long-time members of Alger Park Church and Alger Heights residents.

look at us and assume that Alger Park is a self-preserving institution with a rigid style, there's more to us than meets the eye. Through strong leadership and great sensitivity to our neighbors, Alger Park is poised to live its missional identity in our post-Christian world.

The context for this project is concentric. Alger Park Church is located in the Alger Heights neighborhood of Grand Rapids, Michigan. But we now find ourselves in a religiously diverse community whose spiritual values closely reflect those of post-Christendom North America. For this reason, while the context of my project is the Alger Heights neighborhood, the project has strong implications for all the places our lives, work, and relationships take us throughout Grand Rapids, West Michigan, and beyond.

Terms

Post-Christians, Nones, and Hangers-On

Post-Christian people are “post-” either as a result of being born into a post-Christendom era or because of their personal skepticism or rejection of the Christian faith. Because within this classification there is a spectrum of (dis)engagement with the church, some individuals referenced in my project are labeled as post-Christian even if they engage in some aspects of traditional Christian belief and practice. The post-Christian classification includes those who have left the Christian faith for some other affiliation, those who claim no religious affiliation, as well as those who, through some practices or labels, remain loosely affiliated to the Christian church.

In many parts of the United States of America and throughout most of US history, a citizen's Christian faith could almost be assumed.⁶ This is no longer the case. The

⁶ Timothy Keller, *Center Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 182.

Barna Group indicates that younger generations of Americans are increasingly post-Christian.⁷ Additionally, Barna projects that 59% of young people raised in the church will walk away in adulthood.⁸

Time Magazine featured a cover story titled, “10 Ideas That Are Changing Your Life.”⁹ One idea is, “The rise of the nones.” Amy Sullivan writes, “The fastest-growing religious group in the U.S. is the category of people who say they have no religious affiliation. Sometimes called ‘the nones’ by social scientists, their numbers have more than doubled since 1990; major surveys put them at 16% of the population.”¹⁰ Nones have defied religious categorization, causing social scientists and others to create a new category; one that is defined by affiliation with nothing.

At Alger Park Church where I minister, in addition to using the term *nones*, we have taken to using the term, *hangers-on* to describe those in our community who, unlike their more religiously connected parents and grandparents, are only tangentially related to the church and their faith. *Hangers-on* may identify themselves as Christian, but this identity is more ethnic than individual, more inherited than possessed. *Hangers-on* may adhere to some Christian teachings and values, but easily dismiss others. They may even be members of a congregation, but their participation in the life of the church tends to be more infrequent and impersonal.

⁷ "How Post-Christian is America?" Barna Group, accessed May 20, 2015
<https://www.barna.org/component/content/article/36-homepage-main-promo/608-barna-update-02-21-2013>.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Amy Sullivan, “The Rise of the Nones,” *Time*, March 12, 2012, 68.

¹⁰ Ibid.

The term post-Christian is an intentionally broad term to describe a very broad group of people. This bulky classification is preferable over forcing people into groups such as *nones* and *hangers-on*. Attempting to group people any more specifically would fail to appreciate the originality of each individual, especially since many post-Christian people tend to resist classification.

Seattle-based indie folk band *The Head and the Heart* identify with this lack of spiritual self-identity in many of their songs. In the opening track of their self-titled debut album they sing,

*I don't know where they are...
I don't know where they are...
My roots have grown
but I don't know where they are.*¹¹

It is important for interviewees to be able to define themselves with their stories in an emic description rather than allowing others to classify them according to pre-determined categories and descriptions. The stories of these individuals will unfold descriptions that are particular to their stories and their values.

As I listen to the stories of different people with differing perspectives, I wonder: How might my project change or deepen the way I currently understand people in relationship to faith and the life of the church? What themes and trends will emerge for the benefit of worship leaders and designers as I hear these people describe the nature of their stories?

Narrative

¹¹ The Head and the Heart, *Cats and Dogs*. Seattle: Sub Pop, 2011.

One assertion of the relevant literature is that post-Christian people do not look to the Christian faith as a grand narrative in which to find essential meaning and purpose. Postmodern and contemporary thought have engendered a distrust of grand narratives– or metanarratives– and encouraged individuals to find meaning by probing their own micro narratives for a truth all their own.¹² These personal narratives have become the lens through which many post-Christian people discover and assign meaning to their lives. As James K.A. Smith writes in *How (Not) To Be Secular*, post-Christian people “don’t have any sense that the ‘secular’ lives they’ve constructed are missing a second floor. In many ways, they have constructed webs of meaning that provide almost all the significance they need in their lives (though a lot hinges on that ‘almost’).”¹³

How are most people conscious of the narratives that shape their lives? Will post-Christian people articulate a single story that encompasses their narratives? How do they participate in certain broader, communal narratives? What connections can be drawn between the grand narrative of Christianity and the micro narratives of post-Christian people?

Worship and Liturgy

Worship and the worship event in my project refer to formal, public events hosted by congregations. In a context like Alger Park Church, formal worship’s main purpose is dialogical covenant renewal between God and his people. However, the discussion of

¹² Jean-Francois Lyotard, trans., *The Postmodern Condition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), 1984.

¹³ James K.A. Smith, *How (Not) to be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), vii.

worship in my project will have more to do with the church's responsibility for hospitality and sensitivity to the post-Christian guests at these events.

The liturgy to which my project refers is the work of the people in public, corporate worship services. The liturgy guides worshipers as they rehearse the “true story of the whole world”¹⁴ in worship, and participate in formative patterns that draw participants into God's story. Traditional Christian worship is not meant to be an escape from our ordinary routines, or a retreat to energize participants for life in the so-called “real world” later in the week. Instead, the liturgy is meant to recite holy patterns of real life for us. As David Stubbs suggests, “the work we do on Sundays in corporate worship is not somehow ‘unreal,’ but rather the ‘most real’ work that we do.”¹⁵ In light of this, I wonder: what aspects of Christian liturgy might most deeply and most frequently resonate with the stories of post-Christian people? What language, rhythms, and symbols in traditional worship might be challenged or enhanced when they are re-imagined through narratives of post-Christians? What aspects of a worship experience might liturgy designers choose to highlight, improve, or discard in order to connect with post-Christian people?

Formation

The traditional notion of Christian formation refers to the spiritual development of believers toward Christlikeness. Dallas Willard writes, “Spiritual formation in the tradition of Jesus Christ is the process of transformation of the inmost dimension of the

¹⁴ Bartholomew and Goheen, *The True Story of the Whole World*, 7.

¹⁵ David Stubbs in Leanne VanDyk, ed., *A More Profound Alleluia*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 136.

human being, the heart... It is being formed (really, transformed) in such a way that its natural expression comes to be the deeds of Christ done in the power of Christ.”¹⁶ The formation to which my project refers emphasizes the formation of not just Christians, but also post-Christians in worship. This emphasis adds new dynamics to the traditional definition of Christian formation. The formation of post-Christian people might include something as simple as encouraging them to open their hearts and minds to new ideas, or imagining that there *is* a God out there, and imagining he is love. Because post-Christian people as well as Christians are subjects of the formation there are implications for *worship, mission and evangelism* in this project as well.

Formation and Worship

The divine/human dialog in worship is more than an exchange of information. God is not content only to relay information about himself; he intends that worshippers are formed through the experience of the liturgy. In *Desiring the Kingdom*, James K.A. Smith explores how liturgies, both cultural and religious, in and outside of worship, make us who we are by directing our desire. Smith says, “Liturgies aim our love to different ends precisely by training our hearts through our bodies. They prime us to approach the world in a certain way, to value certain things, to aim for certain goals, to pursue certain dreams, to work together on certain projects.”¹⁷ Public worship is a powerful formative exercise where God works to redirect the desires of the church and the world.

Formation and Mission

¹⁶ Dallas Willard, “Spiritual Formation: What it is, and How it is Done.” DallasWillard.org accessed May 20, 2015. <http://www.dwillard.org/articles/artview.asp?artID=58>.

¹⁷ James K.A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 25.

This project is a missional endeavor. The trajectory of mission finds its source not merely in the practice of Christianity, but primarily in the very nature of God. Lesslie Newbigin writes, “Mission is not primarily an activity of the church, but an attribute of God. God is a missionary God.”¹⁸ The mission of God, or *Missio Dei*, is shared with the people of God, who are to embody the passion and nature of their creator. Each community of believers, then, becomes a “hermeneutic of the gospel” of Jesus Christ.¹⁹ The missionary nature of God’s people so shapes their practices that even the corporate worship of God can be a missionary exercise where the “public truth”²⁰ of the Gospel is practiced, proclaimed, and embodied for the sake of the whole world, Christians and post-Christians alike.

Formation and Evangelism

There is an evangelistic conversion process built into the unfolding drama of the liturgy in every worship service. Participants are called to worship, to confess, given a word from God, and sent out with purpose.

For many, however, the term *evangelism* carries implications that distract from the εὐαγγέλιον, or *good news* that it means to convey. Evangelism can be associated with high pressure, one-time decisions between heaven and hell; orchestrated by over-eager proselytizers, zealously separating sheep from goats. This is bad evangelism, if evangelism at all.

¹⁸ David Bosch, *Transforming Mission* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1991), 389–390.

¹⁹ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 23.

²⁰ Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 95.

In *Transforming Mission* David Bosch offers eighteen theses toward a constructive understanding of evangelism. Bosch emphasizes the importance of evangelism, properly understood, while placing it under the broader umbrella of mission.²¹ Many aspects of evangelism, as Bosch describes them, should be commonly shared with believers and non-believers alike. Evangelism, according to Bosch, “involves witnessing to what God has done, is doing, and will do.”²² This witness is for the formation of the church and the world together. While non-believing people are traditionally (and appropriately) the primary subjects of evangelism, the message of good news is suitable for everyone, all at once.

By the Holy Spirit, Christians are born again all at once, but also over a lifetime with many pangs along the way. Conversion happens miraculously and suddenly, but also through trial and error as part of a journey. This project embraces a more formational perspective of evangelism, recognizing how each of us engage God’s story in different ways and at different tempos.

Even though evangelism is an important element in this project, the term will be avoided. This is not because of a distaste for the term (as defined by Bosch) or it’s practice. Rather, the term will be avoided to steer clear of unnecessary distraction from the unhelpful baggage associated with it.

Ultimately the formative goal of worship is that the narrative pattern practiced in the liturgy would become a pattern of daily life for all participants. This formation

²¹ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 421.

²² *Ibid.*, 422.

through the Holy Spirit this can take place in the lives of post-Christian people and believers at the same time.

I wonder: Are post-Christian people aware of the formational narratives already at work in their lives? Are post-Christian people looking for new, hope-filled realities for their lives?

Ministry

This project explores multiple areas of ministry, including evangelism, cultural engagement, faith formation, and worship. At Alger Park Church, we assume that people from across the spectrum of belief are present at all our events—especially worship. This helps us do ministry that invites people to take *one step closer* to God, wherever we may find ourselves.²³ We try to frame faith formation as a journey each of us must walk, not as a static location—being in or out. God’s desire is for everyone to take one step closer to him in the form of a prayer, a question, an expression, or a profession. Over time some people in our community have come to find themselves in Christ for the first time, but our emphasis remains on the journey. We believe that this strategy extends our reach to those who otherwise wouldn’t feel welcome at church. There is no beginning or end to our formation, no arrival point or destination. Keeping this perspective allows us to speak to all worshippers in the same voice—encouraging them to take whatever next step God has put in front of them.

If public worship is to be a place of formation for Christians and post-Christians alike, it will take more than changing styles and techniques. Ruth A. Meyers recognizes that “developing missional liturgy is an adaptive challenge, learning how to embody and

²³ Alger Park Church Membership Information.

enact the inherited forms of the Christian tradition in particular cultural contexts. This requires Christians to reconsider the values, attitudes, and habits that have accrued over a millennium and a half of Christendom, and to learn to be church in a new way, while still holding fast to the faith delivered to the saints.”²⁴

It’s never easy to ask people to reconsider their values, attitudes and habits. Cultural pulls in congregations are as strong as anywhere else. However, it is critical to help every worshipper, even long-time committed disciples, understand that change and adaptation are required at every point along the Christian journey. Long-time committed disciples who are stuck in old habits need to have a conversion of their own. Ideally, in a congregation where Christians and post-Christian people are being formed by God side-by-side, everyone has a sense of how they are being called to convert.

Sharing our stories can be a powerful way of helping a diverse congregation understand and appreciate the needs of their fellow worshippers. In this project, listening to the narratives of post-Christian people will help us further embrace the journey of discovery and assist people in a variety of stages in their faith formation. Through this process Christians and post-Christians can encounter God on the same level, in the same room, and find their place in the same story. Crafting worship that accomplishes this requires an on-the-ground understanding of the narratives that give meaning to human life, as well as the grand narrative of God, into which our narratives fit.

This Project and Me

²⁴ Ruth A. Meyers, "Unleashing the Power of Worship." *Anglican Theological Review* 91, no. 1 (January 2010): 65.

When I began the Doctor of Ministry program, admittedly I didn't see the connection between the autobiographies we were asked to write and the program we were undertaking. Sure, it's important to be aware of who we are and where we come from as we study, but initially, I didn't connect my program to my autobiographies.

Eventually, it struck me like a bolt of lightning. All the learning units, all the fields of study, all of the questions I was asking, all the books I was reading, all the sermons, teachings, interviews, and papers—my participation in the DMin. program itself—was an expression of a (mostly) dormant ache within me. I had serious questions about my faith, my calling, and my life. If not for those spiritual autobiographies and the loving, persistent probing of my cohort, I'm not sure I ever would have made the connection between my program and the goings-on deep in my heart. My academic questions about mission, culture, and the nature of belief were more personal than I knew.

I found it very difficult to be an ordained minister working against serious doubt. In order to continue to be productive in my work, I sectioned myself into two Stephens. On one side of my split personality was my religious life—including my vocation, the Bible, the historic Christian faith, and my dormant passion for life with God. On the other side was my intellectual and existential doubt, my empathetic love for my unbelieving friends, and a disenchanting hangover from my adolescent faith. I was an unwitting, cross-pressured citizen of Charles Taylor's immanent frame.²⁵ My duplicity sent me swinging between fits of nosebleed piety, and outright agnosticism. There was a chasm between my personal life and my pastoral life. I believed, but I didn't believe.

²⁵ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Belknap Harvard Press, 2007), 542.

Perhaps the most troubling part of my loss of faith was that it seemed the church had nothing to say to my situation. I understood the church was for believers, not doubters. The means of grace were for the spiritually assured. The gospel was for the orthodox. I didn't see a place for my story of doubt and skepticism within the story of God.

This project is a positive reflection of how I'm growing into the new brand of faith God promises, and how he is equipping me for the new kind of ministry to which he's called me.

Today, one of the most joyful and liberating parts of my vocation is being a minister who is outspoken about my history with, and persistent inclination toward, doubt. I find it invigorating to tell the story of my struggle to believe. By owning and sharing my doubt I am able to connect my story with others who share my struggle, and together we are discovering what it looks like for doubters to be believers with integrity.

Father Damien, the great missionary to the lepers on Molokai, Hawaii, was always deeply beloved by the outcasts he served.²⁶ However, one of the great turning points and highlights in his ministry was the day he discovered he had contracted leprosy, the disease that plagued his community. At last, he was in ultimate solidarity with the people who held the strings of his heart. From that day forward, Father Damien relished the opportunity to begin his sermons with the words, "We lepers..."²⁷

²⁶ Gavan Daws, *Holy Man: Father Damien of Molokai* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1984).

²⁷ Jack Voelkel, "Father Damien: The Leper Priest." *Urbana: For God's Global Mission*. Intervarsity, n.d. Web. (22 Aug. 2014).

Although I'm no Father Damien, I am thrilled to speak passionately and honestly to the people God has called me to serve, often saying "We doubters..." This is my solidarity with those to whom God has called and gifted me to minister, and I believe my project reflects how God is gifting me to accomplish the good works he has prepared in advance for me to do.

Every person's story is part of God's story. I hope that through this project more of God's children, post-Christian or not, can be formed together as they discover how their stories align with God's.

Consequences

Doing ministry in our post-Christian situation requires the church to take a deep look inward at our priorities as well as a deep look into the narratives and values of post-Christian people.

Much of the language that's assumed in Christian worship is not only outside the vernacular of many post-Christian people, the themes are simply not understandable or applicable to their worldviews. More than that, the theological and practical emphases of many churches are so out of touch with the values and narratives of post-Christian people that they have no bearing on their lives.

Moving forward in addressing these problems requires an examination of missional theology, philosophical theology, and worship theology in chapter two, establishing research practices in chapter three, as well as doing the hard work of inhabiting the post-Christian context by listening to the stories of post-Christian people in chapters four and five.

Chapter 2: Review of Literature

The emergence of our post-Christian situation has perplexed and surprised many churches, including Alger Park. Consciously or not, we assumed that the way we were doing ministry was the right way, and the world around us would always be receptive to what we have to offer. Instead, it's the church must be willing to understand and appreciate the post-Christian situation and adapt ministry to meet the needs of our post-Christian friends and neighbors.

However, the situation churches like Alger Park find themselves in is not anything new, and it didn't develop overnight. Drawing on pertinent literature in missional theology, philosophical theology, and worship theology, this chapter will help trace some of the developments that have brought us to our current situation. This review of missional theology explores the nature of the church and her mission in context. Exploring philosophical theology will shed light on the nature and patterns of faith and belief in human history, and in our current context. And a survey of relevant literature in worship theology investigates strategies and values for designing worship that engages un-churched people.

These three fields—missional theology, philosophical theology and worship theology—help frame the discussion of how Christian and post-Christian people can be formed together in worship.

Missional Theology

God's missional nature, passed to his people, is evident throughout scripture, including in the Old Testament. Perhaps the missional purpose of God's people was best and most clearly articulated in the words of Jesus himself in Matthew 28. Upon seeing

the resurrected Jesus, the disciples broke out in spontaneous worship. But even in their worship of the resurrected Christ, in his physical presence, verse 17 says, “some doubted.” It was a gathering of believers, worshippers and doubters. Some, one might imagine, fell into all three categories. This is the context for the words of Jesus which inspire our mission.

Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age (Matthew 28:18-19).

Other believing/doubting/worshipping gatherings emerge in other New Testament texts. In Acts 17 the Apostle Paul demonstrates how dialog between the church and secular culture helps to form meaning around God’s truth for people in a particular time and place. The philosophical elite at the Areopagus were surprised and thrilled to hear Paul argue from their own philosophical foundations. In verse 24 Paul argues, as though he were an Epicurean Philosopher, “And [God] is not served by human hands...” (17:24). And to satisfy the Stoics he quotes one of their poets in verse 28, “...We are his offspring” (17:28). Of course, all of this was to proclaim to the philosophers at the Areopagus, as well as the entire city of Athens, that Paul knew the identity of the unknown god they worshipped (17:23). In the end the scholars told Paul, “We want to hear you again on the subject” (17:32).

Paul allowed the narratives of the Athenians to inform his presentation of the gospel. Without being gimmicky or presenting a bait and switch, he used their language and their ideas to connect them in a natural and familiar way to the story of God.

The gospel is very public news, Paul would insist, and Newbigin would echo. However, the gospel message will find much greater receptivity when it is germane to its context. Paul does this effectively in Acts 17.

It is not the case, however, that when the gospel is shared with a non-Christian culture, only the non-Christian culture benefits. The benefit goes both ways. Good communication between the church and its surrounding culture is mutually beneficial. As in Acts 17, a given culture benefits to see how the gospel informs their culture. Likewise, the church benefits to see how a new culture informs the gospel, as though adding another facet to the diamond. When the church and a surrounding culture understand one another well, people are able to form meaning around the gospel of Jesus Christ and God makes his Kingdom begin to come on earth as it is in heaven.

In 1 Corinthians 14 Paul is instructing the Corinthians in orderly worship as it pertains to speaking in tongues. In his teaching, he includes verses that illustrate the expectation and hope that unbelievers may be present in worship. He also demands that those in leadership take the needs and sensibilities of these unbelieving people very seriously.

So if the whole church comes together and everyone speaks in tongues, and some who do not understand or some unbelievers come in, will they not say that you are out of your mind? But if an unbeliever or someone who does not understand comes in while everybody is prophesying, he will be convinced by all that he is a sinner and will be judged by all, and the secrets of his heart will be laid bare. So he will fall down and worship God, exclaiming, 'God is really among you!' (1 Corinthians 14:24).

This project springs from a missiological and New Testament vision for Christian ministry that borrows from and assumes the primary tenets of the Missional Church

movement.²⁸ In his foundational work, *Transforming Mission*, David Bosch narrates the history of the church's mission, rooting his missiology in the *Missio Dei*.²⁹ Bosch illustrates New Testament models of mission, identifies five major paradigm shifts throughout Christian history, and advises his readers toward a relevant missiology moving forward. *Transforming Mission* is a treasure of history, wisdom, and hope for the church. "Mission is, quite simply, the participation of Christians in the liberating mission of Jesus, wagering on a future that verifiable experience seems to believe. It is the good news of God's love, incarnated in the witness of a community, for the sake of the world."³⁰

Lesslie Newbigin's work has deeply impacted this project, as well as my ministry as a whole. *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* emphasizes the missional nature of the church and helps to contextualize ministry in a secular society.³¹ Newbigin explores epistemological matters such as plausibility structures, dogma, and the false dichotomy between facts and beliefs. He questions the relationship between reason and truth, revealing the limits of reason. From there, Newbigin advises the church on the need for contextualization in our mission, "What is promised as the goal of history, that which makes possible responsible action in history, is something which heals the dichotomy between the private and the public worlds which death creates."³²

²⁸ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 389–390.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 519.

³¹ Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*.

³² *Ibid.*, 115.

In *Foolishness to the Greeks* Newbigin makes the case for thoughtful Christian discipleship in post-enlightenment culture.³³ He offers an apt critique of the power structures of his day and argues for the authority of Scripture, even in a modern philosophical environment. Chapters on science and politics discuss what each of these fields over-promise and under-deliver, especially in comparison to Christ. Finally, Newbigin offers the church seven requirements for missionary engagement in his modern world, including, “the necessity for help in seeing our own culture through Christian minds shaped by other cultures.”³⁴

Michael Goheen,³⁵ and Darrell Guder³⁶ stand on Newbigin’s shoulders to provide guidance for embracing the missional nature of the church in every aspect of its existence, including corporate worship.

This project also connects to the theological grounds of the *Gospel In Our Culture Network*—specifically in George Hunsberger’s idea of “the way of the church and the world” which is illustrated as being of “contrast and companionship.”³⁷ Hunsberger reminds us,

The church is ‘called out into *Public Assembly*’ (ekklesia). This means we are called toward the heart, the center of the life of the common world, not away from it. Worship is a *Public Service* (leitourgia, meaning a ‘work for the people’). It does not indicate the worship-work ‘of or by the people,’ meaning the Christian

³³ Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 146.

³⁵ Michael W. Goheen, *A Light to the Nations* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011).

³⁶ Darrell L. Guder, ed., *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

³⁷ George R. Hunsberger, "Contrast and Companionship: The Way of the Church with the World." *Cultural Encounters* 7.2 (2011): 7-16.

community. Rather, it means the worship of the people of God is done ‘for, on behalf of, as a service to’ the whole world.³⁸

Alan J. Roxburgh contributes to the missional theology conversation by encouraging Christian leaders to make changes in their ministry that will truly impact their communities as they are, not as they imagine them to be. In *Missional: Joining God in the Neighborhood*, Roxburgh acknowledges the quickly changing contexts in which the North American church exists and encourages Christian leaders to move beyond conversations about the church, and move into the neighborhood.³⁹ He writes, “Unless, as leaders, we are willing to enter this in-between space that disrupts our settled assumptions and threatens our formulas and expectations, we will remain locked into a monologue of church questions and strategies.”⁴⁰

From Bosch to Roxburgh and beyond, a robust missional theology inspires churches like Alger Park to see the world and our local communities through the lens of God’s mission. These thinkers inspire leaders to shift focus from the safety of doing ministry for those on our membership rolls and instead to see the church as an agent of blessing and redemption for all of humanity and the world God loves. If God is a missional God, his church must be a missional church. This will require a significant shift in thought and practice as the church works to discern who we are as the people of God and how we can bless the world around us.

Philosophical Theology

³⁸ Ibid., 11.

³⁹ Alan J. Roxburgh, *Missional: Joining God in the Neighborhood*. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011).

⁴⁰ Ibid., 90.

At Alger Park Church, like most other churches, there is an underlying assumption that most of us share the same beliefs. Beyond that, we also tend to assume that the *nature* of our belief is the same—that I believe in God the same way you believe in God and I have faith in God in the same way you have faith in God. What many folks don't know, however, is that not only do we believe different things, we also believe *differently* about things. Many of Alger Park's most committed members also consider themselves to be doubter. Other members of Alger Park have a difficult time understanding how one can believe and doubt at the same time. The words "faith" and "belief" mean different things to different people. If this is true in the church, it must be exponentially more true of post-Christian people.

If the goal is to host worship that forms both Christian and post-Christian people, it's important to have a better understanding about the nature of faith and belief and how different people might approach these topics differently.

Thinkers from a number of relevant philosophical movements shed light on the philosophical and epistemological issues related to belief, doubt, faith, and narrative. In postmodern philosophy, Jean-François Lyotard's concept of "little narratives" is fundamental to understanding the meaning-shaping narratives of contemporary post-Christian people.⁴¹ Richard Bauckham shares insights in *Bible and Mission* on how the biblical narrative should be distinguished from the metanarratives of modernity, which Lyotard was initially critiquing.⁴²

⁴¹ Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*.

⁴² Richard Bauckham, *Bible and Mission* (United Kingdom: Paternoster Press and Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 88.

Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age* is essential to any conversation about how and why we have come to think and believe as we do.⁴³ Taylor's work is epic and insightful in its descriptions of the "cross-pressured" situation in which we find ourselves.⁴⁴ Taylor traces the roots of our current secularism from Enlightenment thought, through the Reformation era, into 19th and 20th Century social transitions, and finally into contemporary life. Taylor argues that modern secularism isn't just the absence of religion. Secularism has a narrative all its own. When Christian expressions give way to secularism, it's not giving way to a vacuum, it's giving way to a new narrative.

This idea of the *secular narrative* is partially responsible for inspiring my project. Taylor describes how easily our narratives can be tweaked, so that God is no longer our reason for moral behavior, but moral behavior itself can become the reason we behave. God need not be seen as the source, substance, or goal of our narratives. As a result, the common order is no longer common, and God's narrative for righteous living is only one narrative of many from which to choose.

Taylor, however, finds common ground in all secular narratives and describes them this way: "We don't need God anymore, because we know how to get it ourselves."⁴⁵ Many post-Christian people, consciously or not, have made this one of their guiding narratives.

In *How (Not) To Be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor*, James K.A. Smith creates a field guide for Taylor's project; and Taylor's insight becomes "a cultural anthropology

⁴³ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Belknap Harvard Press, 2007).

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 542.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 564.

for urban mission.”⁴⁶ Smith stands on Taylor’s shoulders to encourage believers not to let the disenchantment of modernism to sap their energy for believing. Secular thought is a construction as much as faith might be. “What pretends to be a “discovery” of the way things are, the “obvious” unveiling of reality once we remove (subtract) myth and enchantment, is *in fact* a construction, a *creation*: in short, this wasn’t just a subtraction project.”⁴⁷

Contemporary philosopher Luc Ferry offers additional frames for understanding meaning-shaping narratives in the 21st Century in *A Brief History of Thought*.⁴⁸ His history of thought tells some of the story of Christian thought, which he describes as “the victor over Greek philosophy,”⁴⁹ offering a greater consolation to the human condition. Ferry cites the renaissance, humanism, and modern physics as the primary powers that rattled Christianity. He writes, “Belief, at this time fettered in shackles rigidly imposed by the church, started to waver, so that the most enlightened individuals found themselves dramatically at odds with ancient doctrines of salvation which were becoming less and less credible.”⁵⁰

We live in an age where many people, post-Christian and Christians alike, have significant faith in their doubt, and doubt their faith.⁵¹ In order to foster a worship

⁴⁶ Smith, *How (Not) to be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor*, xi.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 99.

⁴⁸ Luc Ferry, *A Brief History of Thought* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2011).

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 55.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 94.

⁵¹ Smith, *How (Not) to be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor*, 7.

environment where Christians and Post-Christian people are being formed together, church leaders must endorse a generous understanding of the nature of faith and belief. New wine will burst old wineskins, so new ways of believing will require old understandings to grow and adapt.

Worship Theology

The missional and philosophical ideas explored above will need to find their fruition in the worship experience and a number of contemporary Christian leaders and scholars bring insights to the discussion of the nature faith formation, worship, and mission. This includes Tim Keller's *Center Church*⁵² principles for church ministry and Fred Harrell's "Seeker Comprehensible" values for crafting worship.⁵³ Keller's *Center Church* reads as a kind of text book for crafting and carrying out a congregational identity which is rooted in the gospel and is missionally minded. The book guides the reader through a process of contextualization starting with establishing a doctrinal foundation, then articulating a theological vision, and finally, creating a ministry expression.⁵⁴ Keller promotes a number of values that can make worship comprehensible to nonbelievers, including, preaching in the vernacular, addressing and welcoming nonbelievers, and preaching grace.⁵⁵ Harrell stands on Keller's shoulders and offers practical advice of his own, including, removing any unnecessary stumbling blocks for nonbelievers. According to 1 Corinthians 1:23, the crucified Christ is enough of a

⁵² Keller, *Center Church*.

⁵³ Fred Harrell, "Preaching in a Post-Christian World." (City Church San Francisco Preaching Conference, San Francisco, California. Feb. 2010).

⁵⁴ Keller, *Center Church*, 20

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 304-305.

stumbling block. We shouldn't allow other controversies, like our politics, to create additional ones.

Clayton Schmidt's, *Sent and Gathered*, offers "a worship manual for the missional church," connecting historical Christian worship practices to various missional contexts.⁵⁶ Schmidt offers insights on crafting worship that is rooted in the liturgical tradition but creatively engages contemporary culture as well.

Expanding on Thomas Shattauer's insights in *Liturgical Assembly as Locus of Mission*,⁵⁷ Ruth A. Meyers identifies three ways worship and mission can be viewed in relation to each other: worship as evangelism, worship as a call to mission, and (preferably) worship as mission. She writes, "worship and mission flow into and out of one another, public worship becoming mission, which becomes public worship, which becomes mission, in an ongoing dance."⁵⁸

Missional worship, according to Meyers, has little to do with style and much to do with identity and vision.

Missional worship is not about particular techniques but about an approach to worship and to Christian faith and witness in the world. In missional worship, the assembly understands its identity as a lively Christian community, staying in dialogue with its contemporary context while also drawing deeply from the well of tradition, confident in the enlivening power of the Spirit, proclaiming and celebrating the reign of God. Missional worship takes place in a missional congregation, one that is 'shaped by participation in God's mission' and which 'lets God's mission permeate everything that the congregation does—from worship to witness to training members for discipleship.'⁵⁹

⁵⁶ Clayton J. Schmit, *Sent and Gathered: A Worship Manual for the Missional Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009).

⁵⁷ Thomas H. Schattauer, "Liturgical Assembly as Locus of Mission," In *Inside Out*, 1-21.

⁵⁸ Ruth A. Meyers, *Missional Worship, Worshipful Mission* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 35.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 35, quoting Barrett, *Treasure in Clay Jars*.

James K.A. Smith and David Stubbs have given additional theological grounding to the project through their work on cultural liturgies and the formational rhythm of worship, which leads people to become formed to “practice patterns of eternity.”⁶⁰ Stubbs writes,

[Worship]... provides a window into the ‘final ends’ or overarching purposes of human life as intended by God. Worship, in short, re-enacts or dramatizes God’s intent for human flourishing. Worship gives us an opportunity to ‘practice’ patterns of eternity.⁶¹

Also, Smith’s discussion of Christian formation for mission and “restor(y)ing the world” orients an understanding of how worship events and liturgy have a centrifugal effect which impacts our priorities and behaviors outside of worship.⁶² God’s story becomes our story and changes the way we live daily.

Christine Pohl’s, *Making Room*, offers a historical theology of hospitality, praising and challenging the church by recalling the proud traditions of Christian hospitality.⁶³ Not only does this text assume the presence of unbelievers in Christian worship, but also it expects that worship would be comprehensible and applicable for them, as well as the believers present. Pohl shows the breadth the practice of hospitality—connecting what we do in our homes and sanctuaries to how we care for the world’s poor, lonely, exiled, and marginalized. She distinguishes the ancient Christian

⁶⁰ David Stubbs in VanDyk, *A More Profound Alleluia*, 136.

⁶¹ Ibid., 136.

⁶² James K.A. Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), 151.

⁶³ Christine D. Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999).

practice of hospitality, where guests are given provision, love, and community, from contemporary practices, which are better described as “entertaining.” As this applies to the worship experience, it inspires worship designers and leaders to offer hospitality that is focus on provision, love, and community, rather than a superficial, attractional form of entertainment.

A worship service that engages and forms both Christians and post-Christian people must be sensitive to the diverse needs of a diverse group. The challenge for worship leaders and designers will be honoring and embracing the diversity present, while helping each person connect to the single story of God by finding their story in his.

Chapter 3: Discerning the Post-Christian Situation

What's the best way to better understand the hearts and minds of a broadly defined, vastly diverse group of people which prides itself on resisting conventional classification? Among other things, it takes some real humility.

It's important to understand the limitations of a research project like this. The term post-Christian being as general as it is, and this demographic of people being as diverse as they are, it would be impossible to think that one research project—especially the size and scope of this one—could possibly offer anything too definitive. Because of these realities, it's important for this project to have a specific focus and clear expectations for its application. At best, a project like this one will offer a small glimpse into an enormous world that can initiate other creative projects to keep the conversation moving forward.

There is a world-full of data about all kinds of people, including post-Christian people, but for matters related to this project, demographical statistics are not the most helpful. This is a project that sets out to know people's hearts, understand their feelings, and understand how and why they connect to those around them. The goal is to have a better sense of their identity and how they see their role in the cosmos. How do they assign meaning to their lives? What do they dream about and what keeps them up at night? And how can the answers to these questions inform the way we craft and lead worship, so help them grow to see their place in God's story?

Product

This project is a narrative analysis that develops language and themes from the stories of post-Christian people and reflects on how these insights can inform crafting

liturgy and hosting worship events that are formational for post-Christian people and Christians alike.

Process

Using narrative inquiry with ten interview participants, the aim of this project is to discover how post-Christian people construct order and assign value to their experiences and stories.⁶⁴ I selected the ten people with the help of friends and pastors who are familiar with this project. These ten interviewees were selected for their thoughtfulness about their stories and according to their varying relationship with the church as post-Christian people. Two of the ten are somewhat closely related to the church—attending high holy day services and identifying as Christians—while others have no relationship with the church whatsoever.

The majority of the participants are local to the Alger Heights neighborhood in Grand Rapids. Other participants were selected from elsewhere based on their potential contribution to the project. I found that ten participants were sufficient for my purposes because much effort was given to finding the right ten people, and the goal was depth of inquiry, not breadth.

Annabelle is a neighbor who likes church but doesn't make it a priority. Camille has left the faith. Her family of four lives a block from my family. Frankie is a friend from another time in my life who no longer believes. Jack is close to one of my best friends. He has essentially forsaken Christianity. Jane lives in the neighborhood and has a fascinating spiritual story. Oscar is a stakeholder in the community and has walked away from Christianity. Patrick is a good friend who struggles with his faith. Rachel, a friend

⁶⁴ Guiding my methodology will be D. Jean Clandinin and F. Michael Connelly, *Narrative Inquiry* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000).

of a friend, no longer believes. Rob is an atheist one day and agnostic the next. He attends an Alger Park small group regularly. Rupert sought out help from the church and has recently experimented with faith after a family crisis.

To prepare myself for the interviews and to confirm the usefulness of my questions, I field tested my questions informally with colleagues who are familiar with my project, including my supervisor. I confirmed with these colleagues that the data from these field tests will be held in confidence, but will not be used for my project. Following these field tests, I sought input about the questions that were asked, as well as the entire field experience.

As I began my official interviews I made clear my purpose to the ten participants, that I am listening to and interpreting people's stories to discover patterns in how people form and assign meaning in their lives. And secondly, that I am searching for themes and principles that can inform Christian liturgy and worship.

Even though I made my intentions clear, many of the participants were still expecting an evangelistic, strong-armed sales pitch at some point along the way. They were relieved to find out that it simply wasn't coming. I told a few of the participants that the church has done a lot of talking over the years. This is one situation where we only intend to listen. They seemed to appreciate it.

I asked each participant to commit to two interviews, each lasting between sixty and ninety minutes. These interviews consisted of open-ended questions. I recorded each conversation and kept field notes during the interviews as well.

After the interviews and field notes were transcribed and categorized according to Cortazzi's method of interpretation and I shared selections of the anonymous, transcribed

interviews with other worship designers, liturgists, and church leaders to receive their help in interpreting the narratives.

Finally, I analyzed the interviews for language patterns and common themes from the interviews and collected and categorized extended stories that would be especially applicable to worship design.

Data

Using the process of narrative inquiry, I collected data which was useful for discovering and construing themes in the stories of post-Christian people. According to Tim Sensing,

Narratives afford individuals the possibility to construct, co-construct and reconstruct coherently their identities, and to acknowledge their loyalties, traditions and inherited roles. Narrative research is a powerful tool that allows for the exposure of both information and interpretation and is an appropriate means by which researchers can examine their beliefs and practices.⁶⁵

Not only is narrative inquiry a highly regarded form of qualitative research, it also lends itself very well to the theological foundations of this project. Just as Scripture tells the story of God, and Christian liturgy is an invitation to participate in the story of God's story on a regular basis, narrative inquiry is also an invitation to engage in broader narratives. The priestly work of worship leadership requires understanding God's story, as well as the stories of the worshippers present. One might even suggest that liturgy is a form of theological narrative inquiry into the passions and practices of God. For these reasons, narrative inquiry was obviously the right tool to utilize.

⁶⁵ Tim Sensing, *Qualitative Research* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2011), 158.

I gathered data from the ten participants. The interviews were recorded and I kept field notes. As described by Clandinin and Connelly in their book *Narrative Inquiry*, these field notes allowed me to “move back and forth between full involvement with participants and distance from them,” as well as “to fill in the richness” of their stories.⁶⁶

The interviews and the questions were open-ended, aiming to “minimize hypothesis and researcher-imposed definitions and limitations.”⁶⁷ This “open frame of reference” created “the possibility of new and unexpected discoveries.”⁶⁸ Input gained from my field tests informed my questions and the nature of the interview. It was important for me to adapt within the interviews to get the most possible out of each interviewee. My plan was to encourage a more chronological narrative in the first interview with each volunteer, and to ask more thematic narratives in the second interview. As it turned out, the chronological interviews I planned for the first meetings very quickly became thematic. My interviewees were not eager to tell a detailed story of their lives. They were much more excited to give anecdotes and share their most formative stories.

Especially in my field notes I worked to give special attention to the participant’s representation of reality, not necessarily the veracity of their account. I wasn’t there to fact-check, only to understand the how the interviewees felt and thought about the major events in their lives.

⁶⁶ Clandinin and Connelly. *Narrative Inquiry*, 80.

⁶⁷ Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, 161.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

The initial questions in each interview focused on hearing as much of his or her life story as possible. As necessary, I asked questions that invited them to tell stories and evaluate their narratives, not just give information. I probed with requests like, “Tell me about that,” or, “What was that like?”

The main purpose of these initial questions with each participant was to hear the overarching story of his or her life. After the first interview with each participant I reviewed their story and identified moments in their lives that resonate with central themes in Christian worship. At the second interview with each participant, I asked to hear more about these specific moments that deal with themes in Christian worship. I was able to use the initial interviews to inform my questions for the second interview with each person. I wanted to allow the narratives of my participants to direct my learning.

Based on the literature, my experience in the field, and the liturgy we most often follow at Alger Park Church, these became the central themes which directed the development of the questions for the second interview:

- Community (environment, gathering, call to worship, God’s greeting)
 - Questions: “Tell me about a time when you felt safe and vulnerable at the same time. Tell me about a time when you felt ostracized or excluded. Tell me about a time you were chosen to be a part of something special. Tell me a story about finding home in an unexpected place. Tell me about a time you felt a strong sense of belonging.”
- Renewal (confession, forgiveness, reconciliation)
 - Questions: “Tell me a story about when someone you love called you out for something you shouldn’t have done. Tell me about a time where you

had to be forgiven or had to forgive someone else. Tell me about a time you became a better person. Tell me how you try to leave your guilt behind you.”

- Wisdom (scripture reading, sermon)
 - Questions: “Tell me about a time when you were given wise advice. Tell me a story about how someone shared their wisdom with you. Tell me about someone whom you are quick to listen to. Tell me a story about how you came to see your life differently. Tell me a story you know that inspired you.”
- Sacredness (Lord’s Supper, sending)
 - Questions: “Tell me about the last time you experienced something sacred or meaningful. Tell me a story about a time when you felt like you were part of something beautiful. Tell me a story about when you were given something you didn’t deserve. Tell me about a time you physically encountered something that seemed otherworldly. Tell me about a time you felt great purpose.”

I didn’t cover each of these five central themes with every participant. Some had much to say about sacredness, but little to say about wisdom, for example. I didn’t force the participants in directions they didn’t naturally want to go. I allowed the emphases of each participant’s narrative dictate which themes were covered.

Some participants were curious why I wasn’t asking them “religious” questions. I explained that my goal was not to get their input on religious themes, but to hear about their every-day experiences, and from there, it was my job to extrapolate the “religious”

themes and apply them in my project. The goal is that the worship we design at Alger Park Church and elsewhere would engage the stories of these post-Christian people as they are. The data was not to first run through a religious filter.

Some interviews, to be perfectly honest, were disappointing. One interviewee in particular had very little to say. This person's answers were abrupt and getting him to expand and elaborate was a chore. Needless to say, his interviews didn't contribute much to my project. His apprehension might be indicative of a personal issue with organized religion, or a lack of thoughtfulness about the issues we discussed. However, drawing any firm conclusions based on what one person did not say, seems to be overstepping. The vast majority of the interviews, however, were excellent. I was thrilled by the participants' eagerness to engage and their honesty. I was surprised and excited by their stories.

Because these ten participants were hand-picked for their thoughtfulness I was prepared to be engrossed and fascinated with their stories. I wasn't sure, however, how forthcoming they would be right away. Some of the interviewees were friends, and trust had already been established between us. Others I met for the first time at their first interview. I was unsure how forthcoming they would be. Thankfully, even the perfect strangers ready to pour their hearts out to me. Whatever distrust or distaste they might have for in the church, they didn't project it on to me in any way that I could perceive.

After the interviews were completed, transcribed, and coded, I studied the data and followed Cortazzi's method for interpretation to determine (1) how these post-Christian people engage with prominent themes in Christian liturgy (evident structure), (2) how the narratives of these post-Christian people inform Christian liturgy (description

structure), and (3) recommendations for how the church can do liturgy in a way that better resonates with the narratives of post-Christian people (evaluation structure).⁶⁹

I shared this anonymous data with other worship designers, liturgists, and church leaders to receive their help in interpreting the stories. These discussions led to additional evaluative data and added thickness to the findings.

I ensured the confidentiality of the participants by keeping their information under lock and key, never using their actual names on any documentation. Also, I asked the participants to sign an interview consent form.⁷⁰

Audience

The primary audience for my project is pastors and worship leaders who craft liturgy and host worship services. A secondary audience, however, would be any person who desires to be thoughtful about the language they use to assign meaning to their lives, especially Christians who wish to converse with post-Christian people about faith.

⁶⁹ Martin Cortazzi in Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, 163.

⁷⁰ See appendix.

Chapter 4: Three Post-Christian Narratives

Camille, Jane, and Jack

A discussion about “post-Christian narratives for liturgical formation” has the potential to become impersonal and academic. For me, as researcher, however, the discussion is very personal. Each of these interviews represents a relationship. Each of the pseudonyms represents a complex identity.

One of my greatest tasks as researcher is to humanize the research—to make it about people and their stories, rather than just a few hours of sound bites. This chapter focuses on the stories of three post-Christian people who have little in common with each other and little in common with the North American church.

Camille, Jane, and Jack could never serve as a comprehensive summary of the population(s) they represent. As discussed in earlier chapters, the post-Christian designation is fluid and intentionally broad. No three people could ever properly represent post-Christian people in Alger Heights. But these three stories, when told in greater length and detail, help us to formulate some of the common themes that will be explored in greater detail in chapter five.

The three narratives in this chapter, center on major formative seasons in the lives of these three people. Some of their quotes here will be discussed in greater detail in chapter five. For now, the hope is that sharing the narratives of these three people in greater detail will honor the others whose stories will be shared in the following chapter.

Camille’s Struggle for Identity

Camille lives in Alger Heights with her family, including two young children. We’ve had a handful of conversations over the years while our kids made use of the neighborhood playground. Camille has a bohemian sense and style about her. She’s very

intentional about being a peaceful presence in whatever company she keeps. She makes her values known and shows great respect for the values of others. We met for her interviews in my home. She sat on the floor, legs crossed, perfect posture, very composed. Yet as I knew from previous conversations with Camille, life has been difficult for her lately.

Camille grew up as a self-proclaimed “oddball.” She grew up on a farm with hippie parents, lots of pets, a powerful imagination, and a passion for life. “I don’t hide my emotions,” she says with a grin. “I’ve always felt things very deeply and intensely—with people, animals, and even inanimate objects. I’m sure my parents’ Buddhist philosophy has impacted me quite a lot in this way. I was raised to see the interconnectedness of all things, so I have a passion and energy for all things.”

Camille remembers her parents poking fun at Christianity when she was a child. No doubt as Buddhists living in a mostly Christian community, they felt like oddballs in their own right. “But somewhere along the line my grandma became a Christian,” Camille remembers. “Then my sister became a Christian, and I went to Spring Hill Camp as a sixth grader and prayed the sinner’s prayer. Suddenly the tone changed a little at home.” Camille’s parents were always supportive and gracious, even about their daughters’ new-found faith.

Camille recounts her childhood story with remarkable imagery and detail. She attributes her insights to “good work” she’s done with some helpful therapists, counselors, and friends. Camille has been working hard lately to rediscover herself.

Whether consciously or not, Camille uses relationships to pattern her story. She recounts a supportive family at home, moves on to fun friendships at school, and

becomes complicated by troublesome relationships in high school. “As a sophomore I was pretty popular, and I became a bit reckless with my strong relationships. I had already gotten into drugs, drinking, partying, and giving myself away in some ways. I developed some low self-esteem around that.”

That year Camille went on a spring break trip to Mexico with her family. She continued her guilt-inducing behavior in Mexico and found herself frustrated with her choices.

On that trip I noticed my sister, who was so steadfast with Christ. She seemed so grounded and I seemed so flighty and lost, and I said to her—it was just so classic—I said, “You have something I don’t! Please, tell me what it is!” And my sister explained to me that it was Christ. And that day, once again, I prayed the sinner’s prayer right there in Mexico.

Camille came back from Mexico believing she was different, wanting to be different, but still she was conflicted:

I was still wondering . . . did I have a personal relationship with Christ? What even *is* that? I didn’t even know what that was. But I did come back with more determination to take charge of my life. And what that meant was that I’m going to start reading the Bible, and I’m going to stop being promiscuous and partying all the time. It was basically me trying to have some healthier control over my life. And it was key.

According to the Christian world in which Camille was now immersing herself, she had just made the most important, most liberating decision she could ever make. She had committed herself to Christ and had forsaken the ways of the world. But in retrospect, Camille now sees that her pursuit of Christ, as dictated by the Christian community to which she belonged, was what caused her to lose track of her own identity. “[Accepting Christ] brought me into a whole new kind of confusion that would stay with me for a long time. Once I stepped onto that new path, I began to experience this tension

between my own longings—what felt right to me—versus what Jesus would do and what was ‘right.’”

Camille began to feel a tension between who the church expected her to be and the person she actually was. As a result, she found herself often “pretending” about who she was. Pretty soon, she lost track of her genuine identity all together. I asked Camille to explain how she looks back on this tension and her loss of identity:

I wish I could have continued to find out what was true for me, rather than deferring to someone else’s system. I have this love/hate relationship with Christianity. Part of me loves Christianity because in so many ways it was a salvation for me. I was so lost and carrying so much shame, and Christianity gave me a way out. It gave me something to do, something to make me feel better about myself. But also Christianity distanced me from discovering who I am. It kept me from knowing myself.

Rather than asking her own questions, forming her own opinions, and discovering her own heart, Camille found herself trapped in a belief system that allowed little exploration. She fought to live and be perceived a certain way, but often the real Camille—curious, open, adventurous, and creative—would come through. As a result, Camille felt trapped between two identities.

Her first two years of college were marked with that tension. At first she threw herself headlong into all of the Christian groups on campus, though she never really enjoyed those relationships. “To be honest, it always felt fake to me. I always felt like I was role-playing. The people were nice and everything was fine, but I never formed a connection with any of those people.”

Longing for community, Camille ventured out into the college party scene. But not wanting to compromise her values, she didn’t drink. Those nights reflect the apex of

her identity crisis: “I was Susie Sunshine who doesn’t drink at the fucking frat party. It’s just so weird. It’s like, ‘Just don’t go! Why would you even go?’”

But at the end of her sophomore year, Camille decided, “I’m done with this. I’m done pretending. I’m going to do what I want to do. I want to go out with my friends. I want to party. I want to have a good time. I want to drink. I want to be promiscuous. And so I did.”

But after every night of partying came a morning of shame. Camille felt like a living, breathing disappointment to God. Her prayer life, once lively and intimate, devolved to Friday-afternoon warnings to God: “This would be me a lot: ‘I’m sorry God, I know I shouldn’t be doing this. I know I’m turning my back on you again, but I’m going to.’”

Camille’s story goes on like this for a while, alternating between “rebellious” decisions to go her own way and times of great, often-arrogant piety. She dropped out of college to devote two years of her life to YWAM (Youth With A Mission), but on the way to orientation, she “literally felt the presence of God leave” her. She developed the gift of speaking in tongues, but no longer held the faith she once professed. She quips, “I could speak in a tongue right now if I wanted to, even though I don’t believe in it.”

I asked Camille, now in her thirties and married with children, to reflect on how she thinks about her faith now that she’s given up on it. She responds, “I have a lot of bitterness toward Christianity around this. In some ways, my turn toward Christianity gave me my life, but in other ways it took so much away for me. Like it’s stealing life from me, like it’s stealing my decision-making abilities.” Camille is quick to insist that

she's primarily responsible for this loss of life, since she chose to be a Christian. "I chose to give those things away," she admits.

But I didn't get to live my twenties in the way that so many people get to live their twenties. People normally get a job and they get to self-actualize and figure out who they are. But me, I spent the whole time deferring to a very strong, closed, charismatic Christianity. We were zealous—but all of that zealousness was characterized with such a sense of striving. Who were we? What were we doing? It's like we were robots or something.

I feel lost. I poured a shit-ton of energy into [Christianity] and cultivating that, and I'm kinda still like, "Who the fuck am I?" What do I like? What do I not like? I shouldn't say I don't know, but I don't have the ability to tap into that knowing and to own it and hold it. I'm not a Christian anymore; I'm not looking to Christ or the Bible to define my life for me. Also, I'm not a Buddhist. Now I really have to find myself. That's really scary, but it's also really empowering. There's been a lot of deferring of power for my whole life. It's time to stop deferring my power and time to start owning it.

Jane's Greater Consciousness

Jane is a complicated person. She's a deep well of wisdom, emotions, and mystery.

Yet you feel like you know Jane the second you meet her. She's a strong presence and has nothing to hide. She's an upbeat, high-energy, outspoken lady with a nurturing, grandmotherly nature. She's not a grandma yet, but she'll hit the ground running when the day comes, "fingers crossed!"

Jane loves to talk. She's constantly interrupting herself with delightful verbal rabbit trails, ending in, ". . . but I digress." Jane begins with a warning that she's an open book. Next, she explains that telling the story of her youth means telling a story that she didn't really learn until she was forty years old. She knew her dad died young. She knew her mom wasn't a great mom. But she didn't know why.

“I was born in Waukegan, Illinois . . . let’s say quite a while ago. Three days after I was born, my father had a stroke. In those days,” she explains, “when you got strep, you just fought it off. There was no penicillin. He just got it over and over. One of the times he got it, it advanced into pneumatic fever and damaged a heart valve. Today you could go and get the valve replaced—standard procedure. Then, there was no procedure, so his days were numbered.”

Jane was three days old with a young mother recovering from childbirth and a father chronically ill in the hospital. “In those days women didn’t drive. And my mom had to get back to work because hers was the only income anymore, so I went to live with her mother.” Jane has memories of bits and pieces of her childhood, but no one filled in the gaps and explained her childhood situation to her until she was in her forties. “My grandmother always felt like my real mother. I was bonded to her. And when I was a child—a grade school student—I had separation anxiety really bad.”

After a few years Jane’s father passed away. “Heart attack. One minute here, the next minute gone. I was three and my mom was twenty-seven. And she was pissed. He was the love of her life, and now she was alone. And she got depressed.”

She took away all the pictures of my father. It was as if he doesn’t exist anymore. He’s gone. And that’s the way everyone treated death. You went on in your life and no one sat around talking about the dead. So a lot of people saw me and started whispering. There was always this sense that you couldn’t talk to me about my father, so everyone tiptoed around me.

Her mother’s depression made Jane want to spend more time with her grandmother and less time with her mother—further complicating their relationship. “I remember wanting to talk about my father, and I could with my grandma. But not with my mother, she was just too depressed.”

Jane's mother remarried when Jane was five, eighteen months after her father had passed. "In those days you had to be married to have any kind of stability. So she married my stepfather, and that was . . . not a good choice, shall we say." Jane's stepfather had a drinking problem, but he was never violent. "He and I got along fine. He was good to me until his first son was born."

From that point on, Jane was labeled "bratty" and "a nuisance." Her stepfather blamed Jane's mother for Jane's existence. And Jane's mother, not having truly bonded with her daughter, began to view Jane just as negatively.

"So then we became a triangle," Jane remembers. "He would yell at me about Mom and yell at Mom about me. And my mom would say, 'Why are you doing this? You're making him angry.' And I would say, 'I'm not doing anything. . . . I'm just existing.'"

To make peace in the home, Jane tried to be the perfect child. "I tried to be perfect at everything. I got straight *A*'s—I would stand on my head if they wanted me to. I would do just about anything to get a kind word. So, for me, a good day was if everyone ignored me, which would only reinforce how my father felt about me."

Jane felt unloved in all of her relationships, with one exception. Interrupting herself, Jane exclaims,

I was raised Catholic, did I mention that? As a child, my religion saved my life. I'm not kidding. With everything that was going on around me, every Sunday I was promised, 'Jesus loves you.' That saved my life. I'm not exaggerating. It saved my life. All of these other people around me were supposed to love me, but they didn't. But this Jesus guy—I didn't even know he who he was, but he loves me? Wow. How amazing is that?

Leaving for college was a life-giving moment for Jane. She was eager to get away. She went on a semester abroad program and studied at Edinburgh University in

Scotland. “That’s where I met Thomas. We fit together like a hand and a glove.” Mostly, Jane was attracted to Thomas because he was kind to her. “I never experienced that before really. All of my bells were ringing. I fell deeply in love, really quickly. I never experienced that before. I knew. I knew. This is the one.”

Jane and Thomas settled in pretty well as young married people. Jane reports losing her faith in Catholicism, though still being grateful that Jesus’ love helped her through her childhood. “We were nominal believers, I guess, but the faith really didn’t have a daily impact on our lives. So why go to church, right?”

Later, when the family—now including two young sons—relocated to Grand Rapids, Michigan, they joined a Methodist church to find some community. “I thought that you just can’t belong in Grand Rapids unless you go to church. So we went to church.”

But after a couple of decades of marriage—including a very serious trauma suffered by one of their children, Jane’s relationship with Thomas became a disaster. “My job at home was to be the manager. I had to work very hard so that everything was where it was supposed to be. But after [our son suffered this trauma], it freaked me out. It freaked all of us out. I couldn’t manage that.” Thomas withdrew more and more.

The burden on Jane became too great, and she told Thomas that something had to change. “I told him that I needed him to step up and be a husband and father. I needed to communicate with him. I wanted him to tell me how he felt about what happened to his son, but he just sat there like a deer in the headlights.”

This conversation initiated ten years of therapy, until eventually Jane gave up working on the relationship. “And then he was really relieved—when we stopped trying.”

Just ten days after their divorce, Thomas called Jane to inform her that he was in another relationship and confessed that, “Being in a relationship with you is just too exhausting.”

After the divorce Jane worked for years at self-improvement and self-care.

Finally, fifteen years ago, she had a breakthrough:

I went to the Dominican Center and took a class on journaling. It was Natalie Goldberg’s method. You start with a fragment or an idea, and then you just put your pen to the paper and write. You just write, just let the ideas leave your brain.

Jane found this practice helpful and therapeutic, so she did more research into this method:

I found a lot of other interesting things. Most of them were Buddhist things. And I started listening to books on tape—mostly Buddhist authors. And then I started listening to talks by [Buddhist] teachers like Jack Kornfield. And I would have these moments while I’m driving and listening, and it was almost like I could’ve hit a tree because I thought, “How does he know who I am? How does he know what’s in my head and how I feel and why that hurts?” And I thought, “Wow! This is amazing!”

Not long after that, Jane started meditating. She has spent a decade involved with a Buddhist group in the Kalamazoo, Michigan, area, joining them every Sunday for classes. “Now I don’t go to church anymore. Meditation is my church. I would find myself in church listening to sermons and translating them into Buddhism.” Jane’s spiritual journey led her out of the church and into what she describes as a “greater consciousness.”

You can call it God; you can call it true self. You can call it Buddha-nature. Whatever. It’s all the same. That’s where it is. It’s in that connection with another person. As Jack Kornfield says, “In the end, just three things matter: how well we have lived, how well we have loved, and how well we have learned to let go.”⁷¹ Now that’s my religion—trying to love the best I can.

Jack’s Search for Purpose

⁷¹ Jack Kornfield, *Buddha’s Little Instruction Book* (New York: Bantam, 1994), 85.

Jack has two great struggles: feeling worthy of what he's been given and knowing his purpose.

Recently divorced, Jack is in his late thirties with two children. Until recently his young family has been bouncing between military bases in the United States, Europe, and Asia. Our interview took place in the summer of 2015, near one of those bases where he, now medically discharged, lives with his family.

If you didn't know Jack had been a soldier, you never would have guessed it. He's gentle, kindhearted, and unimposing. He's a deep thinker and a peace-maker. The interview took place in his apartment, and we sipped local whiskey. It was top-shelf stuff—his treat. Jack mostly looks down at the table and speaks quietly, especially when talking about Iraq. But when he glances up you can see that he's engaged, not only in the present, but also in the past as he remembers it.

As a young man Jack joined the military because he ran out of options. He had been kicked out of his fundamentalist Christian high school for smoking pot (among other things). And though his family was loving and supportive, his community didn't offer him many other options. "Disappointing people was my profession when I was a teenager," he says with a smile and a shake of his head. "I have story after story of times when I did the stupidest shit but either didn't get caught or got let off too easily. One time I was being careless and I wrecked a car that my grandma bought me. But nobody was upset at me." Jack shakes his head at this too. "My parents weren't upset; my grandma wasn't upset. No one was upset. And I guess maybe I wanted them to be upset because I messed up. I deserved to be the object of anger and punishment, but I wasn't."

Jack has a hard time receiving things he doesn't think he deserves—whether from his family, the military, or God: “This theme happens over and over in my life. I often feel like I deserve way worse than what I get. Like in that accident, I deserved to get injured or killed. But I didn't even get my ass beat. Everyone forgave me so quickly, but I don't know if I forgave myself, even to this day.”

In many things Jack is selfless, almost certainly to a fault: “I have a pattern in my life of getting away with things too easily. So I ask myself, ‘Why? Is there a reason?’ I have yet to know what it is. Other people don't get the breaks I get, and that bothers me sometimes.”

“Here's a funny example,” Jack says. “Funny to me at least. I had just signed on with the military and I was waiting to go to basic training. My only job for those few weeks before being shipped off was to not get into trouble. Meaning, if anything happens my contract would be voided.” Jack shakes his head over and over.

So my friend had a quarter ounce of weed. We rented a small car, and we were chambering to increase the buzz. Well, we had decided to do this in the middle of a parking lot at night. Out in the open. Out in public. We thought we were invincible, smoking out of a four-and-a-half-foot bong. Anyway, about a half hour into the session—and the car is so thick with smoke you can barely see outside—it's nighttime and all you can see is this orange glow. But after a while we see among the orange glow, a blue, flashing glow. Where I grew up the police have blue lights. So this blue flashing light floated past the window at a distance, and it came right toward us. And even though we were pretty far gone, we knew exactly what it was. So the police officer gets out, grabs his Maglite, and raps on the window so hard I'm sure it's going to shatter. We rolled the window down and all the smoke wafts right up into the cop's face.

Long story short, he threw the bong on the ground and broke it. He took the weed and probably smoked it himself later. Then he gave us a huge lecture, took our IDs, and wrote our names down. But he didn't call us in. He didn't report us. But as he was writing my name down, he did a double-take, stared at me, took out a separate book and wrote my name in that separate book. Then he looked me straight in the eyes, singled me out from my friends, and he said, “You shouldn't

be fucking around.” He said, “You have somewhere to go.” I couldn’t move. I still don’t know what that means.

Anyway, he told us to get in the car, and he followed us back to my buddy’s place. We parked the car, and he left. I don’t know what the maximum penalty would’ve been, but it would have been substantial jail time. Not to mention he could’ve gotten at least the guy behind the wheel for impaired driving. Realistically the least that could have happened is that he would have filed a report, I would have not been able to join the military, and I wouldn’t be where I am right now. And so I thought about it, and I still think about it, and it’s just not what I deserved.

This story isolates so many fascinating aspects of Jack’s character: his discomfort with being singled out, his guilt over catching breaks, and his curiosity about why certain things happen and what he should do in response. “When it happened it was horrifying, but at the same time it was somehow gracious and beautiful,” he remembers. “I felt relieved, but perhaps more than that, I felt purpose. I felt like there was something out there for me. That somehow someone had higher expectations for me. I honestly felt like it was confirmation that I needed to get my shit together. That doesn’t mean I learned my lesson, but in the moment, I felt like I needed to get my shit together.”

Jack continues to struggle to try to deserve all the good things he’s been given. “There’s an underlying theme of grace and mercy in my life when there shouldn’t be. And there must be a reason *for* this grace and mercy, but I don’t know what that is. So I’m confused. I’m glad that I’ve received grace in my life, but frustrated that I don’t know why or what the plan is.”

Jack’s struggle to understand his meaning and purpose intensified during his deployments to Iraq and became complicated later on due to Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. “When I deployed to Iraq, I had no idea what I was going to be doing. Even after the first six weeks. I was with all these Special Forces guys. I was normal, but these

guys were exceptional.” Jack learned that his job would be to provide communication and tactical support. He was the eyes, ears, and mouth for his team during their missions. “I thought because I was a normal guy that I would be outcast and shunned. They’re elite dudes.”

I asked Jack if he ever earned the respect of his Special Forces colleagues.

“Yeah,” he said. I asked if he could tell me that story. He paused for more than a minute, doing nothing more than breathing. I suggested taking a break or taking on a different topic, but he insisted we continue. He paused longer.

“It’s hard to talk about that. It goes back to this theme of getting more than I deserve. One of the things that I had to provide was an uplink and downlink of data. It could be reports, video feed, images, whatever.” But most often, Jack was insuring the communication between his mobile command center and Unmanned Aerial Vehicles. “It was real-time imagery of something [the] guys needed to see. And when they lose that, they lose a tactical advantage and bad things can happen.” On this occasion, that’s exactly what happened:

So we were using regular commercial internet—something even an Iraqi could get if he could pay for it. I was able to use those feeds and encrypt them and use them for our purposes. It was bandwidth limited and the feed would go up or down, but I was able to improve the quality of service. I don’t know how much I should say, but some people got hurt because we lost sensor feeds. I was able to re-establish the feed, which prevented more people from getting hurt.

Jack tells the story in a way that makes his actions seem mediocre, of course. But from his team’s perspective, he pulled them out of disaster and prevented even more tragedy. “Instantly I became part of the group, even though I didn’t feel like I deserved it.”

What was Jack’s initiation into the team?

We got shit-faced. In Iraq, you're really not supposed to do any drinking, but the rules don't really apply to these guys. They're Special Forces. And I started to live like them. I was one of them. I stopped wearing my uniform. There were no grooming standards. I could basically do whatever I wanted. . . . Once you prove your worth, that's all that matters. It stopped being about rank, position, and training, and it became a human connection—surviving as a team rather than as individuals. . . . So being invited to operate on that level was life changing. But I still felt that it shouldn't have been happening. I didn't deserve it.

Jack was honored and delighted to find camaraderie in Iraq, but returning home proved devastating for Jack and his family. His PTSD caused erratic, dangerous behavior, poor decision-making, and long-term blackouts:

There are weeks and months of my life after Iraq that I simply cannot remember. They shipped me home, and that was hard. It was great to be home, but it was hard to be without a mission, without a purpose. I was no longer able to do what I was good at doing. They shipped me home, I was severely physically limited, and then the mental limitations came. It was a huge loss. I actually lost the will to keep going.

Believe it or not, this was a time when I actually felt I deserved something good. I deserved to be able to continue in my missions. To make a difference. Everything I'd been learning was for this. And to have this taken away, knowing you can't get it back, was like . . . I don't know what to compare it to.

It was a job where you have immediate gratification. You see the impact of what you do in real time. If what you do directly facilitates the capture of a high-value target, then you feel like you made a difference and it gets addicting. It feels like a good versus evil thing. At the time, at least. And there are only a few places in the world where you can be on the front lines of something like that. War is a horrible thing, but it became addicting. It was a drug. And there is stuff that came along with that drug.

A lot of times in Iraq, I felt like I got way more than I deserved. I should have been dead. And that compounded things in my head. But if other people are getting hurt or worse, and you're not, but you could . . . then it really makes you wonder why you're still there. It's a total contradiction. You want to live, but you're upset that you're still alive. And you want to keep doing the job, but you want to go home. And when you're home, you're glad to be home, but you wish you were back there. And you think you both deserve to be doing the job and you deserve to be dead.

Embracing the Post-Christian Story

While their stories are all their own, Camille, Jane, and Jack are dealing with common themes of human life. Inside the church and out, people are struggling with questions around identity, presence, and purpose. People in the church, perhaps more than anyone, can be guilty of focusing more on what sets them apart from people who are different, rather than focusing on what they have in common.

But the church has often lazily and shamefully believed that people who don't go to church with us, simply aren't like us. Even at Alger Park Church, when good-intentioned folks brainstorm about better engaging our neighbors, people wonder out loud, "Well, what are *they* like? What do *they* want? What can *we* provide for *them*?" The assumption is that we Christians are fundamentally different from people who are not. And while some difference may exist on an anecdotal basis, the struggles, hopes, and dreams of our neighbors simply aren't that different from our own. Hopefully the stories of Camille, Jane, and Jack, as well as the discovered themes and applications in chapter five will make it clear that listening to the stories of post-Christian people can be mutually beneficial and that communal worship can be a place where we rally around common passions in God's presence.

Chapter 5: Discovered Themes and Applications

In many, if not most of my interviews, the participant would interrupt and wonder (in one way or another), “When are you going to ask me about church stuff?” These interviews weren’t at all what they expected. They expected that, at one point or another in the interview process, I would begin to preach to them. To me, their suspicion of a bait and switch evangelism program highlighted the need for this project in two ways. One, there seems to be little reciprocal trust between Christian and post-Christian people. Two, my interviewees had no sense that the intimate details of their lives might have anything to do with Christianity. These people were telling their stories, recounting significant moments in their lives, and wondering what the future might hold. But for many of them, these discussions were totally separate from any discussion they might have about faith, religion, or the church.

A few interviewees seemed to expect questions about abortion and gay marriage. At least one interviewee came prepared to debate evolution and creationism. Some arrived defensive—especially those I didn’t know well ahead of time. When I insisted that I only wanted to hear their stories, and that this time, as an unofficial representative of the church, I wanted to listen while *they* talked, they seemed puzzled but appreciative.

In each interview, I asked questions that corresponded with different elements of Christian liturgy:

1. Community (environment, gathering, call to worship, God’s greeting)
2. Renewal (confession, forgiveness, reconciliation)
3. Wisdom (Scripture reading, sermon)
4. Sacredness (Lord’s Supper and sending)

Each of my questions had its root in one or more liturgical movements. For example, to discover themes around confession, I might ask, “Tell me about a time you felt guilty.” Or, “Tell me about a time someone you love forgave you.”

After the interviews were completed, transcribed, and coded, I studied the data to determine (1) how these post-Christian people engage with prominent themes in Christian liturgy (evident structure), (2) how the narratives of these post-Christian people inform Christian liturgy (description structure), and (3) recommendations for how the church can do liturgy in a way that better resonates with the narratives of post-Christian people (evaluation structure).

**Community:
Environment, Gathering, Call to Worship, God’s Greeting**

Some liturgical resources call this section of the liturgy “The Opening of Worship” or “Gathering.” I’ve titled this section “Community” to be more descriptive for my purposes. Connection is a universal human need, and it’s at the heart of the first moments of worship.

At the beginning of worship, God offers introductions through the worship leaders. He’s here. You’re here. We’re here together. It seems strange to belabor these realities that are so obvious. Should someone really have to point out to a sanctuary full of people that they’re sitting in a sanctuary full of people? As a worship leader, I’ve heard almost as many complaints about our mutual greeting time as I’ve heard about our song selection. And as an introvert, I understand the aversion. Many of us would rather show up at church the way we would show up at a movie theater. We want to enter discreetly, take in the activities from a distance, and be on our way.

But worship (in this way at least) isn't like watching a movie. It's very public, communal, and intimate. The first words in worship are spoken on behalf of God, to each of us as individuals and to all of us together. They're simple yet profound: "Hello. I see you. I invited you to be here with all the rest of these people. I'm glad you're here."

There's no such thing as anonymous worship. Worship is intensely communal, which can be good news or bad news, depending on your disposition.

Discovered Themes in Community

To discover some post-Christian themes around community, I asked questions like, "Tell me about a time when you felt accepted." "Tell me about a time you found yourself in the inner circle." "Tell me about a time someone saw you in a vulnerable situation." "Tell me about a time when you felt a part of something special." "Tell me about a time when you felt known by someone else."

Belonging Because of Commonality

Many of those I interviewed found belonging with a group of people based on what they had in common. For example, Rupert is friends with our common friend Jim because they're neighbors and football fans, while Oscar finds that he belongs in his workplace with the other nineteen medical practitioners. Oscar explains:

We're all doing very similar work in the world, and I feel belonging and acceptance with them. I feel like my presence matters. Everyone here has the same calling to help the world heal. To be around people who are all called to the same thing—amazing. This whole place is filled with people who are aligned with truth and love and beautiful things. These are my people.

Rob loves to keep in touch with his friends whom he met running the bulls in Pamplona, Spain:

These people would come up to me and say, "We saw you run. Come to breakfast with us." And I felt like I was a part of this clan, this crew. In previous years, I

was obsessed with learning how to do it properly, and now these people that are celebrities, for me at least, who have been doing it so long—now they were hanging out with me and saying “*suerte*” to me, which means “good luck.”

For Rob, commonality can be one of the most important parts of belonging. He has a tattoo on his arm that reads, “I can’t believe in the things that don’t believe in me.”

I asked him to tell me about what that means for him:

It’s a Marilyn Manson lyric from the album *Antichrist Superstar*, which is an awesome album. It just means that I’m only going to support the people who support me. Everybody else can go to hell. People who are judgmental of my beliefs . . . I’m not going to listen to what they have to say.

Belonging Beyond Commonality

Rob’s position on other people’s point of view might seem a little heavy handed. But we shouldn’t mistake his sharp edges for hard-heartedness. As he goes on to describe his relationship with his bull-running friends, it’s clear that these relationships have meaning far beyond the commonality of bull running.

To have that experience with those people over there, it’s kind of like going to war with other soldiers, and it’s a bond that you can only form in a dangerous situation. You rely on each other and help each other. I would get gored to help one of my friends. I wouldn’t think twice. So I feel like I truly have another family now. I have a family and we all come together and bond over something that’s extreme. People get hurt, it’s crazy, but we go into it together. Having those people in my life, knowing they’ll be there every year when I go—it feels good. I don’t let people in my life so often. I’m very selective. But now I feel like I have another family. Our bond is so intense, I can’t really describe it. I feel like I gained a whole new connection to a new group of people that I value enough to die for. It was overwhelming. I don’t know what I would do without it. It really is my church. It really is my time to be who I am and experience . . . I guess you could say, “God.”

Each of my interviewees, without exception, longed for this deeper, more durable kind of belonging. And those who had it described it in very affectionate terms. Camille described a time when she knew she was connected to her friends in such a way: “I think of two of my closest friends and us sitting together on the beach at Rosy Mound, bearing

it all. And with that small community I felt that safety and that sense of knowing and being known. . . .”

Camille pauses here and takes a deep breath. She explains that she has a good deal of sadness, as well as happiness, attached to this memory. She and her girlfriends used to meet together with their husbands, but now, after two divorces and her own marriage on the rocks, the relationships aren’t what they used to be.

Camille gathers herself and continues,

So we were trying to do this with just the women, and it was good. We brought some food . . . some really delicious food, and some hard cider, and we walked through the woods to get to Rosie Mound. . . . We talked, we watched the sunset, we laughed, and we held space for one another. We shared everything together. It’s a full orange harvest moon, and we all just got naked in the moonlight and danced. That’s probably too much information, but it was a really bonding experience. It was the ultimate revealing and vulnerability revealed with our emotions and hearts and even our bodies. Even beyond the marriages that brought us together, we were still friends as individuals.

Jack tells a story about his time in the military. In an organization where people are clearly ranked, sorted, and valued, his most profound experience of belonging was one where these classifications were disregarded:

I was with all these special forces guys. I was normal, but these guys were exceptional. I provided communication and tactical support. I was eyes, ears, and mouth for them. But I thought because I was a normal guy that I would be outcast and shunned. They’re elite dudes.

But once you prove your worth, that’s all that matters. It stopped becoming rank, position, and training, and it became a human connection—surviving as a team rather than individuals looking out for themselves. What you do stops becoming representative of your branch, force, or background. It’s very much in the moment. So being invited to operate on that level was life changing.

Of all the belonging stories I heard, Oscar’s story about a camp experience in high school most reminded me of how worship feels—or at least of how worship *should* feel.

I remember at the camp feeling a deep acceptance. That everyone was OK and no one was being mean to each other. Even the kids who were assholes in high school, when they went to this camp they stopped being assholes. Something magical happened. And I remember there was a smoking pit there, and even that was OK. There was such an acceptance of people wherever they were at and it felt like a really safe place, and that was meaningful for me because my house wasn't a safe place.

Insecurity in Identity, Lack of Self-knowledge

Most of the interviewees could recall a time when they felt secure in their identity. But every interviewee was able to identify with a loss of identity, or a crisis of identity. For Frankie, his identity crisis was also his path away from the church:

I grew up feeling like there was something special about me. In part, I think that's what happens with Dutch, Christian Reformed parents. You grow up with a sense of chosen-ness. They preach humility too, but there's also a feeling of unspoken specialness about being chosen. So, in the background of my life, there was a feeling of distinction between me and other people. There are special people in the world, like me, and then everyone else. And I feel like the church supported that message.

But when I moved to Boston for grad school, I was unable to connect with other Christians. And I was going through a time of hurt and loneliness in my life, and the only people I found were the "un-chosen"—people who I assumed would have nothing to offer me. For example, Erin. She was black, Native American, a feminist, Jewish, and hyper racially sensitive. I couldn't believe someone like her even existed. And she rubbed me the wrong way. We disagreed about almost everything. But she knew me. And loved me. And I felt like she was giving me a medicine that nobody else was. And it threw my previous identity on its head. And that shift revealed the level of my arrogance, and it made me feel less like I was special, and there was a big sense of loss in that. And it was scary.

"Where do you belong now?" I asked Frankie. "How do you think about who you were and who you're becoming?" He answered, "I'm not sure entirely what the effects of all that have been. I hope it's made me more loving and open to people."

As with Frankie, Rob's identity crisis caused him to look at his own life and the lives of others quite differently:

When I started moving weed my life became a moral dilemma. From the beginning, I wasn't going to do anything illegal. But that only lasted so long. Like I said, it was a slippery slope. Toward the end of our run, a guy in Los Angeles fucked us over and set up a robbery. We lost a ton of money. And so, just before I was busted, we were planning on getting him back. We were going to go to L.A. to meet this guy that we had trusted, bring him out to the desert, and have him dig a hole. I never would have dreamed I could do something like that. But as time went on, I became more and more a Walter White.

Rob's "Walter White" identity is just one of several he mentioned in our interview. He described going back and forth between different feelings and passions and personalities when he finds himself especially vulnerable:

I couldn't let things go. I think it's because I began to realize that this is who I am. This is who I'm becoming. And I was OK with it. I kind of liked being the bad guy. And I kind of got off to it. I got off to the fact that I was making a killing doing it. And no one was making nearly as much money as I was. I was dominating the market. Slowly but surely, I became more accepting of more dire consequences and immoral behavior. Part of that is still in me.

After he stopped moving drugs Rob struggled to figure out who he was. He missed all the electrifying cat-and-mouse games with the police and the covert operations he was running. "It was thrilling," he said. "It was like I was living in a movie. And now here I am and have to go to work at the Chamber of Commerce, and I'm making forty grand a year. I felt empty. I felt pointless. And I still do to this day, sometimes."

Today Rob is a successful salesman, having moved on from the Chamber of Commerce. But he still doesn't feel like himself. "I just don't feel like I have a very exciting life. I'm never going to go back to [moving weed], but I do regret that I don't have the exciting life I used to. I don't feel like 'me' unless I'm in some sort of danger."

Most of the interviewees indicated that they feel lost and unknown to themselves and to other people. Patrick, for example, finds it impossible to identify a single identity that is consistent throughout his life. "I can fairly easily segment my life, and I think of

myself so differently in every situation. My life isn't entirely disjointed, but pretty close.

I can't really tell a story about feeling like I was living into my identity because I feel like that would only apply for that specific time."

Many interviewees expressed a serious insecurity when discussing their identities.

Camille best expresses what many interviewees said they felt:

I feel lost. I poured a shit-ton of energy into [Christianity] and cultivating that, and I'm kinda still like, "Who the fuck am I? What do I like? What do I not like?" I shouldn't say I don't know, but I don't have the ability to tap into that knowing and to own it and hold it. I'm not a Christian anymore; I'm not looking to Christ or the Bible to define my life for me. Also, I'm not a Buddhist. Now I really have to find myself. That's really scary, but it's also really empowering. There's been a lot of deferring of power for my whole life. It's time to stop deferring my power and time to start owning it.

Others, such as Rachel, confessed their desire not only to know themselves, but also to be known by others around them. "It is a wonderful thing when you can share your deepest, darkest self with someone else and trust them. But who has the courage to do that? To go there?"

Rupert has experienced a lifelong struggle to be acknowledged and embraced, even though he longs for it deeply:

Recognition is important to me. And again, I don't want to be arrogant, it's just how I am. I don't think I ever really was acknowledged, at least not growing up. And as part of my work on my marriage, I've been reading a lot of self-help books on marriage, and I've learned that my love language is affirmation, or pats on the back. That kind of thing. That's important to me.

The point is, growing up I don't think I felt embraced by almost anybody, except my grandparents and my friends. . . Today, I would say I feel embraced and loved by my kids, some friends—that's about it. And if you want to be deep about it, I'm not sure that I feel that way from my wife. I'll leave it at that for now, but that's an area we struggle with today.

Application to Liturgy and Recommendations

The opening movements of Christian liturgy are never the headliners for the event. Often it's the music or the sacraments or the sermon that motivates us to get out of bed on Sunday morning. But these overlooked, under-utilized liturgical movements contain some of the most impactful, pertinent messages for post-Christian people who often feel disconnected. For those who feel disconnected to their true identity, the liturgy introduces a God who knows them intimately, and greets them warmly. For those who are longing for community and questioning their identity in relationship to the cosmos, these liturgical elements offer a place for knowing and being known.

The phrase “knowing and being known” came from an interview with Camille. As mentioned before, she described a time she and her two best friends went out into nature to watch the sunset with some good food and drink. They “held space” for each other while one by one they dared to be more and more vulnerable. They were able to do this together because each movement toward greater honesty was lovingly affirmed. Camille recalls this one-time event with great fondness, and she wishes she these experiences in her life weren't so rare.

Obviously, liturgists can't re-create such an event for everyone present in a public worship service, but we can extract the fundamental values from these moments of knowing and being known and apply them to our liturgies.

Understanding the Environment

Before diving into liturgical applications, it's important to consider the physical and social environment of worship. To some this might seem superficial and inconsequential, but it deserves consideration. Every worship space implies a certain theology. Every building promotes a certain kind of community. Every group of

worshippers projects a certain kind of vibe. There's a reason Camille and her friends met on top of a hill overlooking Lake Michigan while the sun was setting. They knew their environment would nurture the kind of "knowing and being known" they were hoping for.

Every worship leader should be aware of the theological and social impact his or her worship environment has on worshippers. Some worship spaces feel cold and outdated, some stuffy and uncomfortable. Some feel ancient and meditative, some feel contemporary and exciting. Some spaces are conducive to interaction between worshippers, some place the focus entirely on the stage. Some spaces are set up for informal mingling before, during, and after the service, some are built to get people in and out.

Obviously, there's no prescribed, preferable environment for worship, but it is important for worship leaders to be aware of what their worship space says to people without saying a word, and to consider how their space can help create the kind of environment they are aiming for. It's the task of the worship leader to design and lead worship that plays to the strengths of her environment and makes all people, especially post-Christian people, feel welcome and comfortable.

Discovering What Brings Us Together

It takes some courage to attend a worship service. Even though I'm a lifelong Christian and it's part of my job to lead worship, I often have to decide to be brave enough to participate in worship—especially in an unfamiliar church. These are just some of my worries: Will I have to talk to (let alone *hold hands* with) the person next to me? Will I fit in or stick out? Will I miss a cue and be the only one left standing? Will the

service be a waste of my time? Do I even believe any of this stuff? Am I like these other people? Do I even *want* to be like these other people?

It's the task of the worship leader to reward the courage of everyone in attendance by making it OK for each of us to be there, just as we are, without exception. Leaders must usher everyone into belonging.

In my research *belonging* emerged as a major theme for my interviewees. They crave it. They go looking for it. They speak eloquently about the times they've experienced it. I divided the belonging they described into two categories: (1) belonging because of commonality and (2) belonging beyond commonality. These two kinds of belonging are related but different. Belonging because of commonality can happen quickly. Two college freshmen roommates meet each other for the first time and are immediately relieved that they have so much in common: they're both female, they're both 18, and they both like country music. What a relief. They belong together.

This kind of belonging because of commonality is important to many of my interviewees. They prefer to spend their time with people who are similar to them. This, of course, is understandable and universally human. But in the interviews, it became clear that people's most significant stories of belonging transcended social commonality. Their experiences of greatest connection and belonging were not rooted in commonality, but in things like trust, vulnerability, self-sacrifice, forgiveness, acceptance, and love. When someone loves me, and trusts me, it doesn't matter whether or not they like country music.

In *Making Room* Christine Pohl rightly insists that Christian hospitality, both at home and in the church, must “cut across cultural, ethnic, and racial differences.”⁷² These radical acts of hospitality most often come with a cost to the host, bending to the needs of the guest. When congregations have the courage to act in such a way, the sense of belonging can extend far beyond commonality. These stories of connecting beyond commonality offer hope that churches can nurture community, in and outside of worship, that create community based on trust and love.

Worship must be a place where post-Christian people are able to recognize what they have in common with regular worshiping communities and to understand that these commonalities are more than skin deep. With all our might, worship leaders need to fight the assumption that post-Christian skeptics have little or nothing in common with longtime believers. This assumption is not only totally false; it’s poison in the well of our churches. Any air of superiority or classification will send a right-minded post-Christian person running. Instead, by emphasizing the human spiritual journey, honoring questions and frustrations, and recognizing our level-grounded stance as we come before God, each worshiper can find commonality with those around them.

Practically speaking, how can worship leaders promote this belonging beyond commonality? To begin, it is important to live as much as possible in the common denominators of language and practice. Pious language and Christianese must be forgotten. Each congregation must decide for themselves what this means. Perhaps, it means changing the greeting language to “welcome” rather than “the Lord be with you.” Certainly, it means never assuming theological or biblical literacy. It’s important not to

⁷² Pohl, *Making Room*, 157.

talk about sanctification without explaining sanctification. And nothing feels more exclusive than a worship leader who says, “We all know the biblical story of...” when some worshippers simply don’t. Whenever the pronoun “we” is used, it must be 100% accurate in describing every worshipper and every potential worshipper at the worship event.

Also, worship leaders can tactfully recognize and name the diversity in the room—as long as the comment ultimately brings the group to see how they are the same. Without outing anyone or making anyone feel uncomfortable, the worship leader can make it clear that one value of their worship is that all people, no matter what they believe, or how confidently they believe it, would be welcome. At Alger Park Church, we like to emphasize that no matter where someone find themselves on the spectrum of belief or non-belief, each of us is invited to take one step closer to God in worship. The invitation is the same for all, no matter how naïve, experienced, confident, or skeptical. We might all be in different places, but that’s something we have in common—our individuality. No matter how different we may be from one another, the worship experience invites us all to the same goal: intimacy with God.

To varying degrees, the ten people I interviewed were most comfortable with people who are like them. They want to fit in. Because of this, it’s important for worship leaders not to insinuate that the diversity of a worship event is only due to the presence of a few post-Christian oddballs. If a worship leader does choose to tactfully recognize and name the diversity in the room, the diversity must always be descriptive of the entire group, not a few aberrations scattered throughout the pews. The goal of recognizing the diversity in the room is to make people feel that they belong *because* they are different.

We're all individuals. Differentness is encouraged and valued. It's one of the things that holds us in common.

A couple of years ago I had the honor of listening to one of my favorite preachers, Jack Roeda, in person. Noticing that his sermon text was Galatians 5:19-21 ("Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality impurity, sensuality, idolatry..."), I was curious to see if and how he might get everyone this fairly diverse congregation, which includes many recently immigrated families from all over the world, to engage the theme. This is a pretty polarizing and condemnatory text, after all. I wondered how he might pull this off.

To begin his sermon, he stood up, walked to the front of the platform, paused, and launched directly into this Cherokee proverb:

An old Cherokee was teaching his grandson about life. "A fight is going on inside me," he said to the boy. "It is a terrible fight, and it is between two wolves. One is evil—he is anger, envy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority, and ego." He continued, "The other is good—he is joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion, and faith. The same fight is going on inside you—and inside every other person too." The grandson thought about it for a minute and then asked his grandfather, "Which wolf will win?" The old Cherokee replied simply, "The one you feed."

I love what Jack did here. He prepared us to encounter a tricky text by first reminding us about the nature of the human heart and the universal need to mind our actions. He found common ground for us to stand on from the outset. During his sermon, I remember feeling very human, and very connected to the preacher and my fellow worshippers. Would this relatively diverse congregation have been able to walk together through that very "preachy" text if this wise worship leader hadn't helped us belong together at the beginning of the service? I have my doubts.

It is necessary to prove to worshippers—Christians and post-Christians alike—that the theme of our worship service is relatable, practical, and reliable. If worshippers cannot see how a text, sermon, or liturgical movement applies to them, they won't be able to connect with it, and they won't feel connected to the worship event. But once we are able to establish a common connection across diversity, there is opportunity for the congregation, even in its diversity, to feel a sense of belonging beyond commonality.

And yet, belonging beyond commonality cannot be forced. Forced intimacy is no intimacy at all. At Alger Park we talk about allowing post-Christian people to “See the exit from wherever they sit,” which is a metaphor for doing whatever is necessary to keep people from feeling trapped or forced into something that's uncomfortable for them. Everyone should have an out. My co-pastor and I often say, “The last thing we want is for people to feel forced to do something that isn't a genuine expression for them.”

One way of developing this belonging beyond commonality is to make time for testimonies in worship. A post-Christian person who is experimenting with worship might not want to bear their soul, but it might be helpful for them to hear someone else do it. When done well, testimonies can produce in a community trust, vulnerability, and love—all the raw materials necessary to take the pressure off post-Christian worshippers and offer opportunities to grow beyond commonality.

Assessing Tribalism

A mentor of mine insists, “One of the greatest things about church is belonging with people with whom you have nothing in common but Christ.” This may be true, but it's not something that is obviously evident, or even attractive to those who haven't experienced it. The fact is, tribalism is a major issue inside the church and everywhere

else. People like to be with people who are like them. This may be especially true for the Christian Reformed denomination, whose story begins with a close community people immigrating to a new continent, mostly so that everyone else would leave them alone.

The world sees tribalism manifest itself in subtle and obvious ways. A sign that says “Whites only” is quite clear. But a church that claims, “All are welcome,” might be almost as exclusive. Sometimes it only takes a minute to find out the guidelines for being one of the “all.” Additionally, what some call tribalism isn’t necessarily a bad thing. Coming together around a passion or a cause can give a strong, positive identity to a community. It can create communities and churches that do wonderful things, with remarkable efficiency, because of the common vision they share.

Tribalism is a two-edged sword. It can be dangerous and exclusive. But if a community doesn’t have a passion around which people can gather, no one will gather. Members of Alger Park who have recently immigrated from Burma also attend a Burmese church on Sunday afternoons where their heart language is spoken and their culture is celebrated. What a gift for them! And at the same time, could this little church be putting itself at risk of the tribalism that threatens the Christian Reformed denomination and Alger Park Church? Tribalism is always a danger.

It is an indisputable fact that some people, based on their beliefs and preferences, will be a better fit at Alger Park than other churches. The converse is also true. While this is perfectly natural, it’s important that Alger Park doesn’t become “tribal” for the sake of preserving a cultural style that is non-essential to the gospel of Jesus and the mission of God. In the last few years we discovered a dormant tribalism around Christian day school education. New families, some unchurched, others without a Christian Reformed

background, joined the church and became a part of the community. Many of them sent their kids to public schools. With no ill intention, these families began to be passively excluded from our community. The majority of our established members sent their children to Christian schools, and therefore talked often about the Christian schools, met at Christian school events, and relied heavily on the relationships formed around the Christian schools. The parents of public school children (not to mention the children themselves!) began to feel like they didn't fit. Some of the families have since left our fellowship.

In this situation, a non-essential to the gospel of Jesus and the mission of God, Christian day school education, presented as a tribal barrier to people who should have felt entirely welcomed and supported. Alger Park faces other tribalism risks, including collective priorities about worship style, politics, culture, and values. Alger Park's leadership needs to be continually assessing our tribal tendencies so that our community is prepared to emphasize the ecumenical nature of the church, mutually benefit from those who bring new perspectives, whether they believe or not.

Before something like this can happen, a worshipping community needs to be thriving in areas of trust, vulnerability, and love—all the things that help people belong beyond commonality. Rob found friends among other bull runners in Spain, but their friendship developed into something spiritual for him when he discovered trust and love beyond their commonality. Developing these characteristics takes practice and takes time, vision, and lots of guidance from the Spirit.

There are times, as a worship leader for Alger Park, when I look out over the congregation and think, "Can post-Christian people really find commonality here?"

While Alger Park is becoming more diverse all the time, some of us are still suit-wearing, catechism quoting, dyed-in-the-wool, third-generation immigrants. But the answer is “yes.” In fact, it’s beginning to happen more and more. We’re making strategic decisions to create a more hospitable environment physically and socially. We are finding ways to expose our congregation to new, challenging voices from within our congregation and the broader community. Change is hard, but it’s happening. And we trust God’s powerful pull on the hearts of his children, no matter what they believe, to take one step closer to him.

Shaping the Call to Worship and God’s Greeting

In my mind, at least, the call to worship and God’s greeting are liturgical transitions where the gathered people have their first full-frontal encounter with the God who invited them into his presence. Theologically, these are deeply important elements. But practically, in worship, those in attendance tend to breeze through them. It’s important not to waste these opportunities to help worshipers experience a sense of knowing and being known.

Perhaps above all, the call to worship and God’s greeting need to be personal and experiential in our worship services.

These movements should be personal to underscore the relational spirit of worship. Our worship is to a personal God with a personal name, who is himself three Persons. He is not vague or non-specific. He is “I Am.” Similarly, the people present are not an anonymous mob gathered by chance. They are the ones called specifically to gather in that place, on that day, to meet with God. And their greeting from God is not a general one, but one very specific to them.

In his book, *Sent and Gathered*, Clayton Schmit emphasizes the importance of the opening movements in worship. He lists a number of dos (practice what will be said) and don'ts (talk too long) which are helpful.⁷³ But beyond these technical practices, worship leaders must be sure that the content of a particular worship movement matches the significance of what is happening.

The call to worship and God's greeting, for example, should sometimes be shocking. No one in scripture encounters God without enduring some kind of shock, surprise, or even a wound. To achieve this, opening movements in worship may shock us too. This requires worship designers and leaders to be creative and experiential. More than words on a page, these liturgical elements can open up an environment where God offers an invitation to meet with him, then greets us happily when we arrive. When people like Camille and Frankie felt most welcome and appreciated, it was because they could feel the embrace of their loved ones. God too, must be felt.

This is where the worship leader needs to embrace the priestly nature of her responsibilities. Worship leaders stand between God and God's people, and it's our task to make that connection as electric and tangible as possible.

One way to facilitate this connection is to give God's greeting a narrative texture. Tell a story of the God who greets his worshippers or tell a story of someone coming into God's presence. These stories could be contemporary, historical, or Biblical. Tell the story of Moses' encounter with God at the burning bush. Tell the story of Elijah on Mt. Horeb, when God was experienced not in the earthquake, wind, or firestorm, but through piercing silence. Tell the story of Jesus meeting the Samaritan woman at the well or

⁷³ Schmit, *Sent and Gathered*, 169.

embracing little children as though the Kingdom of God belongs to such as them. Adding a narrative texture to the greeting engages worshippers in an experience and personalizes the moment of divine introduction.

Another way to add narrative texture to the greeting is to ask worshippers to consider what events led them to be in worship. In my research, I was impressed by how my interviewees found purpose in their presence at a given time or situation. Perhaps in the opening of worship leaders can ask the congregation to fill in the blank, “if it were not for _____ I would not be here.” There is power in reminding worshippers that God has arranged their meeting with him in worship, and he has been orchestrating events to make it happen. This approach causes the worshipper to consider their own story and to consider how God has been actively intervening to create this meeting in worship. Any time worship leaders can draw on stories—of God, the worshippers present, or anyone else, this liturgical movement will be much more personally engaging.

It takes some creativity to give these liturgical movements a greater sense of personal connection. The best ideas will come from individual worship leaders and planners who know their congregation best and can imagine new ways to help people connect better to the liturgy and one another.

Community Summary

The post-Christian people I interviewed experience community on different levels but crave it on the deepest level, where they know and are being known by those they're with. This belonging can transcend commonality and allow for diversity if values like love, trust, and vulnerability are developed. Many of my interviewees admitted being insecure and struggling to understand their identity. In worship, the physical environment

of the worship experience can make a big impact. Worship leaders must be careful to lead in a way that doesn't presume too much Bible knowledge, vocabulary, or ritual practices that aren't explained. We can use the call to worship and God's greeting to personalize God's presence and help all worshipers feel welcome.

Renewal: Confession, Forgiveness, and Reconciliation

Confession is hard. Whether you're confessing to a friend, a priest, a police officer, or an unseen God, the need for confession implies addressing a personal shortcoming, or perhaps outright evil. Even though confession is a central element of Christianity, I don't often find myself leading with confession when discussing Christianity with others. I'd rather bait with more positive, uplifting aspects of my faith.

But there's no getting around confession with Jesus. He came as a doctor for the sick. He came to heal the broken. And unless we're willing to show him where it hurts, his gospel won't be good news for us.

There seems to be an assumption that post-Christian people are especially allergic to confession. This may be true to a degree, but through my research I've found it might be more accurate to say that post-Christian people have an especially complicated relationship with some ideas associated with confession. More than objecting to practicing confession in their lives, my interviewees simply failed to see the benefit of confession as it's traditionally understood. Initially, my interviewees struggled to remember or appreciate the role of confession and forgiveness in their stories, but when we adjusted our language and were better able to understand one another, the stories came like a flood.

In the Christian liturgical tradition, the act of confessing is only part of a larger liturgical movement. For my purposes, I'm calling the movement "renewal." Renewal involves self-examination, confession, forgiveness, and reconciliation. Liturgically, it's a snapshot of the cosmic redemption God is bringing to the whole world. The challenge of the worship leader is to help post-Christian worshipers see the connection between these liturgical practices and the cosmic story being written by God. Confession isn't often thrilling, but it's the necessary hard work required to benefit from the wholeness we deeply long for in Christ.

Discovered Themes in Renewal

To discover some post-Christian themes around renewal, I asked questions like, "Tell me about a time when you had to forgive someone." "Tell me about a time when you had to be forgiven." "Tell me about a time when you felt guilty." "Tell me about a time when you felt the impact of being loved more than you deserved." "Tell me about a time of growth that came from a hard experience."

The Need (or Not) for Transactional Forgiveness

Perhaps the most remarkable trend in my interviews was how nearly every interviewee struggled to put into words his or her feelings about confession and forgiveness. These articulate, thoughtful people simply didn't know where to start or what story to tell. It became clear that something about my questions, or the way they were being understood, was getting in the way of our mutual understanding. Some couldn't remember (or perhaps didn't want to remember) stories of confession and forgiveness. Some insisted that confession isn't really important or productive in their

lives. And others, like Oscar, most closely associated confession and forgiveness with their religious past. Those were not pleasant memories.

“When I was a Christian and going to church, confession was a very important part of my life,” Oscar said. “I did it every week in church. And I guess there was something cathartic about it. I would prostrate myself, humble myself, and tell God about the guilt and the sin and the masturbation.” Oscar laughs here, but his face changes quickly:

I beat myself up over things that simply weren't bad. But in Christianity I was made to believe that I was first and foremost sinful, and I had a lot of sin to confess. And when my daughter was born and my son was three, I had this really intentional moment where I said, “I don't believe this anymore. I just don't.” The thing that tipped the scale for me was this [Christian] belief that we are inherently flawed. I don't believe that. My belief has become that we're all made in this divine goodness and we're radiant and wonderful. And I would look at little children and see that in them. I saw the light in their eyes.

That's the main reason I couldn't believe anymore: I didn't believe we were bad; I believed we were good. I believe I'm a beautiful, full person who makes mistakes. I don't need Jesus to forgive me for my broken self. I'm already whole.

For Oscar, his wholeness contains whatever brokenness remains in his life. For him, there's no need for an exchange of forgiveness when he's already whole and beautiful. He knows he's not perfect and doesn't pretend to be. He also knows he does bad things and has bad habits. I asked for a story of a time he owned his imperfection and tried to move on constructively. He shared with me an email exchange between him and his wife where he asks for her forgiveness for booking a show for his band without consulting her first. He does this a lot, he says. “It's a super asshole thing to do.” Here's the email exchange:

Rebecca,

We play at Harvest Gathering at 1pm Saturday on the main stage. We also booked a show that Saturday night at a festival in Grand Haven from 7pm-10pm. They are paying us quite a bit, and the guy who reached out to us is really connected in the music scene. Although I feel really committed to playing this show, I realize however I should have run this by you first. I apologize for that. I will keep working on not just making plans and telling you about them later. I hate fighting with you, and these conversations generally create a fight, so I resist these conversations and the tension they create.

So, we as a band will need to leave about 3:30 or 4pm to make it to Grand Haven for sound check. If Billy wants to come too I would be fine with him coming, although we will obviously be back pretty late.

I know that we are celebrating Julia's birthday at harvest, and it is very important for me to celebrate that as well. I propose we have a birthday lunch or brunch around 10:30 or 11am on Saturday. I should not need to check into the stage until around 12:20pm. We could also do a Sunday morning celebration, or Friday night instead, although I am not sure what time everyone is showing up.

How does that sound?

This is Rebecca's email response:

I can't respond to this because it hurts deeply; and with that decision you've tossed us aside once again.

Oscar tells me, "So that's my own shit I have to keep working on. My family feels tossed aside. So, that's painful for them, and painful for me to see what I've done." He tells me that Rebecca did forgive him and that they're both continuing to learn, through trial and error, how to better care for each other.

Oscar makes mistakes, messes up priorities and hurts people he loves most, and apologizes for his behavior, but none of this requires confession to the source of that divine beauty inside him. He doesn't see the need.

Rachel has a similarly complicated relationship with confession. For her the words *confession* and *forgiveness* are antiquated associations with her childhood, growing up in the church. She waffles back and forth about whether confession and

forgiveness are still part of her life or a thing of the past: “I’m not saying I don’t do things wrong; I certainly do. But those are really religious words for me, so I wouldn’t say that.” Rachel pauses for a few seconds. She seems to be reassessing. She admits she’s a little confused about her current beliefs on confession and forgiveness:

I apologize to people all the time, but I wouldn’t say that . . . hmm . . . am I asking forgiveness from them? Maybe. Forgiveness is a gift, right? I don’t know that I need that. I don’t know that I need someone’s forgiveness.

I guess if I do something wrong, I need them to know that I’m serious and I intend to make it right, but [the actual words] “I forgive you,” I don’t need that. But is it forgiveness if someone says, “I know you didn’t mean to do it?” Hmmm. This is interesting. I don’t think a lot about forgiveness. I feel like that’s a word from my past. I mean, yeah.

I ask for a story about forgiveness. She thinks for a moment, gets an embarrassed look on her face, shakes her head in disgust and says, “Oh crap. Here’s one.”

It’s about softball. I get competitive to the point of being embarrassing sometimes. And we had a game that was really close. There was a girl on our team—a decent softball player—and all game long, [the opposing team’s] shortstop was very inconsistent with fielding the ball and making an out at first. If your shortstop is inconsistent, you’re screwed. It was late in the game and it was close. And a girl who I don’t know very well—

Rachel stops and shakes her head in disgust again. “I’m so embarrassed. This is the worst of my stories. So, you’re very privileged.” She takes a deep breath and dives back in:

The girl hit the ball to shortstop and assumed she’d be out, despite their terrible shortstop, and didn’t run to first. And in my competitive spirit I started screaming at her, “Run! RUN!” I didn’t curse, until she came back into the dugout after not running to first. She would have been safe; the throw was way off. She probably could have made it to second if she was simply jogging. But they got her out. I was nothing short of completely ticked off. I threw my managerial clipboard against the fence and I screamed, “You stupid bitch! Why didn’t you run?” And she just looked at me, and I immediately [thought], “Oh my God. That came out of my mouth . . . about a softball game.” And I didn’t say anything to her for the rest of the game.

But I came home, and we have a party on our deck after each softball game. She didn't come. And that story is getting tossed around. Everyone says, "Ha ha ha, don't worry! She deserves it." Everyone's trying to make me feel better, but I feel horrible.

Everyone leaves, we clean up the party, and I sat on the couch and balled. I sat there with my husband and I was like, "I'm the worst human being ever." Who does that? She's like 20 years old, and I'm old. What am I doing? Who does that?" I just thought, "I don't even care if she's upset or not. I need to email her and apologize." And I sat up for hours writing this huge apology email about how inappropriate I was and how that's not like me. . . . Or I don't want it to be me. I needed her to tell me it's OK.

And the email I got back from her was, "I didn't even hear you. Don't worry, I've had coaches all my life yelling at me."

I know she heard me because she recoiled while I was screaming at her. Nothing gives me the right to treat you like crap, whether you hear me or not, and whether it's happened to you in the past or not.

I thought, "What a gift." She could have made a big deal out of it, but she chose to forgive me. I'm never going to do that again.

Rachel initially insisted that confession and forgiveness don't play a significant role in her life, then proceeded to tell a powerful story about needing and receiving the "gift" of forgiveness after she'd made a mistake. Just like Oscar, she claimed not to need a transaction of forgiveness but later produced a powerful, personal story about the importance of forgiveness. Both Rachel and Oscar seemed to be inhibited by some of the language in my questions. Both of them acknowledged a strong association with negative church experiences when it came to confession, forgiveness, and guilt. But when the language was changed a bit, and the focus was shifted from transactional forgiveness to relationship health, their stories began to flow. The words confession, forgiveness, and guilt caused them seize up. But discussion about healing in relationships resonated well with them.

Healing and Growing

While my interviewees were hesitant to discuss confession and forgiveness, they were eager and articulate when it came to discussing the growth and healing that can spring from brokenness. The positive side of renewal was a wheelhouse for many of them.

Jane's life has brought her a great deal of pain, but she will be the first to tell you—not at all in a white-washing or overly simplistic way—that her pain has allowed her to heal and grow and become something refined and beautiful:

I remember at one point when I was journaling religiously, I wrote something about getting wounded. You get a wound and the body heals, but there's scar tissue that remains. And then you get wounded again and there's more scar tissue. And there's more scar tissue. And more scar tissue. . . . In the end, you can't really think of removing the scar tissue without damaging the whole body. What if it's near a vital organ? The scar tissue is a new normal. You have to live with it.

Jane, who is in her early seventies, has the story of such a life—scar tissue upon scar tissue: abuse, divorce, broken relationships, mental illness, a disastrous house fire. But even with all this brokenness in her story, she's eager to let it shape her future for the better, rather than to try to forget that any of it ever happened.

“The Dalai Lama talks about this,” Jane says. “Someone once asked him if there's anything in his life that he really regrets, that he really feels bad about. And he said 'yes.'” She goes on to tell the story of an elderly monk who needed extra help with some yogic exercises that were difficult for him because of his age. The Dalai Lama told the monk not to try the exercises because they were too difficult for him. The monk pleasantly obliged and left. The next day, the Dalai Lama learned that the elderly monk had committed suicide, hoping to be reborn as a younger, more physically able person.

Pema Chodron, an American Tibetan monk, recounts the Dalai Lama's response to this event as he discussed it years later in an interview:

So the Dalai Lama was left with regret that he had unintentionally nevertheless been responsible for this man's death, this man's suicide. The interviewer was stopped in his tracks and he said, "Oh my goodness, how did you ever get rid of that feeling?"

The Dalai Lama paused for quite a long time and he thought about that and then he said, "I didn't. It's still there. I just don't allow it to drag me down and pull me back. I realized that being dragged down or held back by it would be to no one's benefit . . . not mine or anybody else's, so I go forward and do the best I can. We have this idea that we either have it or we get rid of it, and the question came from that point of view. . . . But there's an ability to be pierced to the heart by the sorrow of the world and your own regrets without it dragging you down."⁷⁴

Jane personalized the Dalai Lama's wisdom this way: "Quite often bad stuff will happen to us, and we have the opportunity to learn from it. We learn things that we wouldn't if tragedy didn't hit our lives. Even with everything that happened to [my son when he was abused], that situation exposed a lot of dysfunction in our lives and in our family, and in a way, that was a gift."

Jane is convinced that the challenging and tragic things that happen to us can make us into more durable people. "When you break a bone and it heals, it heals stronger. The place where it heals is really strong. In Japan, there are vases that have cracked, and they repair them with gold so the cracks stand out. It's a metaphor for life being more valuable after it's been cracked and repaired, rather than new and perfect. We should celebrate our cracked-ness. We should embrace it."

About two years ago Jane lost all her belongings in a house fire. It brought about a lot of change for her and her sons, much of it positive, she says.

⁷⁴ Pema Chodron, "Getting Unstuck: Breaking Your Habitual Patterns and Encountering Naked Reality." Sounds True, 2005.

The house fire enabled me to grow. I got rid of a lot of baggage. I'm not weighed down by all that stuff anymore. I didn't have to go through the trouble of selling my house and selling all my stuff. The universe took care of that and burned it all for me. . . . Not with my permission, but . . . I had said so many times before that I should get rid of my house and get rid of all my stuff. I guess you have to be careful what you wish for.

Jane's response to the tragedies in her life has allowed for growth and healing.

For her brokenness is not a place to wallow and mourn—at least not for long. It's a place to begin again, learn what needs to be learned, and change what needs to be changed.

Application to Liturgy and Recommendations

Renewal is one of the more provocative movements in Christian worship. Some people love it; some hate it. Some find it liberating; others, regressive. At Alger Park Church we find that some post-Christian people come out of the woodwork to observe the penitent season of Lent. Other post-Christian people recall the season of Lent as one of the primary reasons they can't go back to church.

Why all the strong emotions around confession and reconciliation? The service of renewal is somewhat offensive by nature. It invites worshipers to admit their faults and own their sin. For some of us, it's just what our souls need to begin to soar again. For others of us, it's an embarrassment to be avoided.

The service of renewal is raw and intense. As a pastor friend of mine once wrote, "Confession calls us to fasting, moderation, discipline, and repentance. For this reason, you need never fear the commercialization of Lent. Hallmark will never spend much money on research and design; shopkeepers will not dress their windows in sackcloth and ashes."⁷⁵

⁷⁵ This little nugget comes from my friend, mentor, and co-pastor, David Deters

Yet I believe that the raw, provocative nature of the service of renewal is one of the best ways to connect with post-Christian people who can find this humbling, down-to-earth experience almost nowhere else. This, of course, doesn't mean leaving worshipers in the dust to languish and brood. It means showing them things as they are, and inviting them to be honest, take courage, pick up the pieces and emerge powerfully and beautifully—renewed by the God who redeems us with great joy.

Making Renewal Make Sense

Many of my participants, most notably Oscar and Rachel, bristle at the idea of being responsible for sin against an unseen God. They are quick to admit that they make bad choices, yes, but is God angry at them because of these choices? Who's to say? They haven't been struck by lightning yet. Additionally, the terms confession and guilt were non-starters for them. Not only did that language fail to resonate with them, but it also brought to mind unhealthy aspects of their history in the church.

When it comes to the liturgical aspects of renewal, it may be that traditionally people didn't need to be convinced of their guilt and their need to confess. But my research suggests that post-Christian people do think about guilt and confession, they just think about it very differently than Christians might imagine. It is true, as James K.A. Smith points out in *How (Not) to be Secular*, that more traditional paradigms for ministry won't deconstruct the "constructed webs of significance" that support the so-called "secular" lives of our non-believing friends and neighbors.⁷⁶ A Roman's Road argument won't connect. But a better understanding of the how guilt and confession function in the

⁷⁶ Smith, *How (Not) to be Secular*, vii.

lives of our post-Christian friends and neighbors might keep us from abandoning the service of renewal all together.

In order to make renewal make sense, there needs to be a common understanding of what renewal means.

Part of this disconnect has to do with language. The words confession, guilt, and forgiveness are very churchy words—especially to those who have consciously decided to leave the church. Not only that, but these words simply fail to capture how people like Rachel and Oscar think about and deal with their brokenness. Post-Christian people aren't necessarily looking for absolution of their guilt—or at least, they wouldn't ever use those words. But they are looking to repair relationships, to bring reconciliation, to find wholeness, to make sure they're OK. My interviewees weren't slow to recall stories about confession and guilt because they don't have those stories. It just took them time to figure out exactly what I meant by those words, and how to translate their stories into my language. Post-Christian people can't be expected to do this in worship.

This doesn't necessarily mean that we remove confession, guilt from our worship vocabularies. They're good, important words. It just means that we have to use them carefully, appropriately, and with context. Worship leaders need to be able to see human brokenness and the desire for wholeness through new lenses. Let's be honest, as valid as it might be to say, "Let us confess our sins before God," it is much more powerful and descriptive to invite people to "be honest with what we need, and with God's grace, work to put things right."

Also of note, is the relational element of Rachel and Oscar's confessions. They knew exactly who they offended and how they offended them. These were very personal

situations. It wasn't that they needed to hear the words, "you're forgiven," as if those were magic words somehow. More importantly they needed to know that their relationships would be OK. As worship leaders direct their congregations in the service of renewal, relationships need to be at the forefront. Generic "I'm sorrys" to a generic deity in the sky means nothing. Understanding the delicate nurturing required in our relationships makes sense to people like Oscar and Rachel, and encourages them to think deeper about making things right.

Another important theme to emphasize is our common longing to do better and be better in the future. Based on their responses, my interviewees agreed without exception that things in this world could be and should be better. This disposition is a gateway for helping post-Christian people understand God's desire for redemption, to think honestly about their culpability in the brokenness of life, and dream hopefully about how things can change for the better.

As worship leaders lead services of renewal, it is important to make sin make sense for people in a way that doesn't sow shame or negative religious associations. This means using words that connect, emphasizing relationship, and being as practical and hopeful as possible.

Honesty Before a God of Love

Each of my interviewees would be quick to admit that they're not the person they want to be, and that they've made mistakes which need to be set right. And yet, each of my interviewees also displayed a certain antipathy to confession. Why?

Beyond the language and perspective barriers discussed above, many of my interviewees' experience with confession in the Christian church has been quite negative.

They've heard, "You're bad. Now you need to admit that you're bad." But in reality, Christian confession shouldn't begin with the message, "You're bad." It should begin with the message, "You're good."

You're good, and God created you to be good, and God loves everything about you that is good, especially his image, which you bear. But your goodness has been compromised. You'll know it if you're honest with yourself. Your light is being clouded by darkness, but God wants the darkness in you to give way to the light. For this to happen, we need to come to terms with our darkness and deal with it. It's time to fight for the good in you by addressing the darkness.

The focus in the service of renewal needs to shift from a negative sense of, "I'm bad and God is angry with me," to a more constructive, "I need to be honest about my humanity and God wants the best for me." Oscar and Rachel don't fear the wrath of an angry God, and such language will be a non-starter for them. But they are both highly self-aware human beings who want to be the best people they can be, in spite of their shortcomings. With all due respect to the great Jonathan Edwards, the emphasis is not on being sinners in the hands of an angry God, but being the beloved of God being transformed by their loving Father. It's a shift in perspective that is essential to allow people like Oscar and Rachel to partake in one of the most formative aspects of worship.

The reason God desires our confession is because, by his grace, we're valuable and worth renewing. It seems to me that this theme has been under-emphasized in American Christianity for generations. Jumping right into the guilt and shame sets the wrong tone for why and for what reason God means to change our hearts. God desires our holiness because he loves us and wants nothing but our flourishing. And the purpose

of our holiness is for the healing of our lives, our relationships, our communities, and our world. This message needs to undergird the entire service of renewal.

And what's more, a message as difficult to believe as, "You're good," deserves to be repeated on a weekly basis. Several of my interviewees, like Rupert and Rob, described how hard it can be to feel loved, and how desperately they crave affirmation. David Stubbs encourages us to "practice patterns of eternity" in worship.⁷⁷ This is one practice—knowing the unconditional love of God—that no one can afford not to practice every week.

God should not first of all be conveyed as angry in the service of renewal—concerned, perhaps, but not angry. This is not to suggest that God isn't righteously angry. He is. It's also not to suggest that God's judgment doesn't burn against the darkness which lives, with our help, as a parasite on our hearts and on his good creation. It does. But these images of a wrathful, judging God (gracious as they are, in the end) simply won't be absorbed by post-Christian people who have almost always heard shame before love, anger before mercy.

Yes, many of us are dealing with some American evangelical baggage here. And in some cases, this is why post-Christian people with no exposure to Christianity can sometimes have an advantage over those who grew up in the church. They don't have a negative history from which they need to recover. For the rest of us, though, there's some unlearning that needs to be done, both in the hearts of those who wander restlessly for Christ, and in the church.

⁷⁷ Stubbs, in Leanne VanDyk, ed., *A More Profound Alleluia*, 136.

For this reason, the call to confession, or invitation to renewal, becomes a vital part of the liturgy. Worship leaders must explain what's going on here, and we must do a superb job. A quick reading from Scripture, explaining the need for Christians to confess, might give a sanctuary full of Christians every reason they need to confess. Not so with post-Christian people. They need to see where this need for renewal ties into the grand narrative of the story of God and how it is constructive for their lives. They need to see that renewal is a means through which they can connect to God's grace and receive the fullness of life God desires for them.

At Alger Park, we have often found it helpful to introduce confession simply as “a way to be honest with God about your situation.” This allows the worshiper to decide for himself or herself what kind of interaction this will be. We might add something like, “Sometimes you can't really engage meaningfully with someone unless the air has been cleared, certain words have been said, and you've told each other what you mean to one another. What does God need to hear from you? What do you need to hear from God?” This kind of invitation to confession doesn't mandate a desperate plea for mercy, but it doesn't close the door on it either.

Beyond the call to confession, the confession itself must also validate the inherent goodness of us, God's children, but it must effectively illustrate how that goodness has been compromised. At Alger Park we talk about how everything we do is slightly off-target, slightly askew, or misdirected (as discussed above). We might mean well, we might be trying to do our best, but even in those moments we're not hitting the bull's-eye. And a world full of off-target archers is a very dangerous place.

This, of course, says nothing about the times when we make consciously mean-hearted decisions, try to hurt others, and look out for our own interests above others'. Add those arrows into the mix, along with the arrows fired from systems and governments and corporations and cultures, and it becomes clear that we're living in a war zone—and that we're part of the problem.

God help us.

One might call this confession, or perhaps one could call it being honest with God and with each other about the real situation we all live in, and the liability we all share in it. The narrative changes from being, “You're bad, God is angry, you better change fast,” to, “You're valuable, God is here to help, and by his grace he will.”

Giving Forgiveness a Chance

Forgiveness is a tricky topic for the post-Christian people I interviewed. At first, they just didn't perceive much of a need for forgiveness.

However, based on Oscar and Rachel's confession and forgiveness stories, I believe that if the call to confession and the confession appropriately illustrate God's love and passion for his children's well-being, as well as the benefit of being “honest with God about your situation,” worship leaders can help re-cast this seemingly archaic practice. It takes time for those new to the faith to understand the depth of their brokenness, and they deserve some time to figure this out. But as they begin to do so, and as the Holy Spirit moves their hearts, I believe the need for forgiveness will become more and more realized.

In the case of Rachel, who grew up in the church, she was hard-pressed to share about a time when she needed forgiveness. But once she did, she shared about what was

obviously a landmark moment in her life. She wasn't trained to be looking and longing for forgiveness, but when she suddenly needed it, she had to have it. Perhaps other post-Christian people need a similar kind of patience as they engage in confession and forgiveness.

One way to accomplish this, I believe, is to make a strong liturgical connection between God's forgiveness and our new ability to live forgiven or renewed lives. Transactional forgiveness meant little to so many of my interviewees because they saw no real meaning to the transaction. For them, it was just lip-service, like a child forced to say he's sorry for stealing his sister's toy. He's not sorry, so what good does it do to apologize?

But God's forgiveness is different. It truly is liberating and it truly does make a difference in our everyday lives. For this, too, worship leaders must place God's forgiveness into the grand narrative of redemption, illustrating how by the Spirit we can be unburdened and gifted to become instruments of redemption, love, and grace. Without our burdens lifted and without our new spiritual gifts, this life of redemption wouldn't be possible. But because we've been honest with God and ourselves, it is possible.

Moreover, if it's true that God is primarily more interested in our flourishing than our feeling guilty, our liturgy should reflect that as well. I have no hard evidence, but I think it's safe to guess that most churches with traditional liturgies spend more time on confession than forgiveness, on sin rather than grace. Moreover, I also believe it's important not to label confession as the negative part of the liturgy and forgiveness as the positive. A good liturgy that draws deeply from the grand narrative of redemption will

more quickly see all the different parts as pieces of the beautiful whole. It's all good news in the end.

In his book, *Missional*, Alan J. Roxburgh advocates shifting the church's ministry to places in our neighborhoods and common spaces—where God is already doing wonderful things. He writes:

Over the past twenty-five years much has been written about the need for the church to change; however, if we are to hear what God might be doing in the massively shifting contexts in which we live, we must move beyond conversations about the church, about how to make it work, and about patterns of success.⁷⁸

While I share Roxburgh's passion for out-of-the-church, on-the-ground, incarnational ministry, I cringe at his appeal to "move beyond conversations about the church."⁷⁹ He may be embellishing, but there are things that happen "in the church" which generally only happen in the church. Confession and forgiveness—the service of renewal—is one of those things. The church has the corner on the market when it comes to confession and forgiveness. The church definitely needs to rethink how and why we do renewal (all the more reason to continue the conversation), but we certainly shouldn't give it up. The service of renewal is one of the things that gives the church its distinction and beauty. Renewal represents the best aspects of Hunsberger's "contrast and companionship."⁸⁰ A renewed sense of renewal can draw the church and the world closer together.

⁷⁸ Roxburgh, *Missional: Joining God in the Neighborhood*, 21.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁸⁰ Hunsberger, *Contrast and Companionship: The Way of the Church with the World*.

Growing Through Brokenness

My interviewees, especially Jane, found great value in seeing the challenges of their lives turned into areas of growth and healing. They reacted positively to the idea of using for growth what was once broken in us.

Interviews with Jane and others suggest that the service of renewal might be much more helpful and relatable to post-Christian people when our liturgy emphasizes the more positive aspects of this liturgical movement. Worship leaders can strike a powerful connection between this desire to be better and the redeeming power of God. The story of redemption is written on every page of Scripture. Already in Genesis chapter 1, our Creator spoke light into darkness and order into chaos. The patterns of slavery and exodus, death and resurrection show that God is eager to help us grow through and in spite of our brokenness.

Jane's desire to grow through and in spite of her struggles embodies the term "renewal." But as worship leaders emphasize this growth through trial, there emerge a number of theological and pastoral landmines. Worship leaders must avoid explaining pain, evil, and guilt as God's wicked instruments to make us do what he wants. It is not the case that every pain has a silver lining, and every evil a purpose. Instead, the emphasis must be that God meets us in our brokenness and walks the difficult path with us. Emphasizing the story of the incarnation in the service of renewal can be an effective way to help people understand the nuanced way God blesses us and cares for us when we need him the most.

Many of my interviewees suggested that Christians seem mostly interested in pointing out sin and expecting the sinner to, according to Jack, "knock it off." Jack was

raised to think of sin as something God despises and therefore won't come near.

Therefore, if you want God to be near, you have to first get rid of your sin.

What if Jack could come to experience how God wants to be involved in the sin-extraction process? That God isn't appalled by Jack's brokenness, but eager to turn his brokenness into something beautiful?

In the service of renewal, worship leaders can consider a new expression of what was once called a "reading of the law" or "guide for grateful living." Usually this was a reading of the Ten Commandments or of the Great Commandment from the New Testament. It was meant to remind worshipers of the right way to live.

This kind of reminder can be brought back in a powerful way to reflect John Calvin's third use of the law: as a guide into the fruitful life that God desires for us. The Hebrew word for law, *Torah*, also means "guide" or "path." God doesn't give us his rules just because he wants us to follow in line. God does so because he can see around the corner and, knowing what's around the corner, he has some strong advice about how we can thrive.

Worship leaders can offer great hope and excitement for what God can do in and for each of us. God wants to partner with us and bring light where there was once just darkness.

Renewal Summary

In my interviews, post-Christian people mostly downplayed their guilt and their need to give and receive forgiveness. However, we soon discovered that language around the liturgical movements of renewal were getting in the way. When my interviewees spoke about the dissonance in their lives through the lens of relationship and a longing to

be better, they were much more energized in conversations about renewal. Interviewees also indicated that difficult experiences in their lives have offered opportunities for growth and have turned them into more durable people. With the right pastoral sensitivities, this emphasis can be a powerful liturgical connection point for post-Christian people and Christians alike. In worship, it is important to emphasize God's love and the inherent goodness of all creation to inspire renewal. Worship leaders can remove some of the stigma of confession by thinking of it as a time of being honest with God. Above all, worship leaders can emphasize God's desire to heal and bring redemption.

Wisdom: Scripture Reading and Sermon

Reformed folks like to talk about the "centrality of the Word." This doesn't necessarily mean that the sermon is the most important part of a worship service. It means that everything that happens in worship should flow from the Word of God. Our prayers, songs, and readings should be saturated with the Word of God. They should prepare us to hear the Word of God and motivate us to respond to the Word of God.

The reason for this high emphasis on Scripture is the belief that the wisdom found in God's Word is authoritative for our worship and life. The point is, it's not up to us to decide what the truth is or what life-lessons are authoritative or what direction we should go as human beings.

In recent years, however, the concepts of authority and wisdom have come under significant scrutiny, especially for post-Christian people. The so-called "authority" of Scripture is easily contested. It's understandable that people might wonder, "Why are these seemingly arbitrary books, arbitrarily compiled over thousands of years, from

dozens of different ancient cultures, somehow universally authoritarian for life in every time and place forever? Sure, there is some wisdom to gain from these artifacts, but not all of their wisdom applies directly to our situation. And some of the wisdom that seems to apply doesn't seem altogether wise."

If the Word is central to Trinitarian worship and the Christian life, what can we learn from post-Christian people about how wisdom and authority function in their lives and, by extension, in our worship services? How can preachers preach from the Word in a way that is personal, understandable, and relatable to post-Christian people and Christians alike?

Discovered Themes in Wisdom

To discover some post-Christian themes around wisdom, I asked questions like, "Tell me about a time when you were given a great piece of wisdom." "Who is the wisest person in your life?" "Tell me about a time you witnessed someone acting wisely." "What are the most significant lies you've been told?" "Tell me about the last time you heard something that was really true."

Learning from Skepticism

As I had expected, most of my interviewees carried some deep suspicion about ultimate authority and universal truth, especially those who had been raised in environments where the authority of the church and Scripture were unquestioned.

Oscar wasn't raised Christian, but his conversion at age sixteen and his ensuing head-first leap into church helped him catch up fast. In adulthood, however, some of his sure-thing beliefs came into question when he explored the world of natural medicine: "I was worried that I was going to be swayed by crazy New Age mysticism. So I decided I

was going to keep my heart committed to God and that none of that was going to get embedded in me. But that also I was not going to throw the baby out with the bathwater.”

But the longer Oscar was in school, the more his definition of truth was “broadened and enlightened.”

“I was realizing that these other forms of spirituality were actually God’s truth too,” he said. “Some of the packaging was New Age bullshit, but in that bullshit, was some really valuable stuff.” Oscar had some difficult decisions to make. He was taught, and had believed, that pretty much everything in the universe was true or false, good or bad. Everything could be categorized either as God’s truth, found in Scripture, or as worldly deception:

I remember trying to figure out how I was going to fit all of this new stuff and this experiential stuff . . . how am I going to fit all of this into the Bible? I was doing a lot of rationalizing and justifying how these new experiences of truth are going to fit into Christianity.

And then at one point I just got tired of all the justification. I decided that I’m just gonna pray a simple prayer, that whatever truth God will show me would be what he would want me to know. Then I wouldn’t have to work so hard to fit what I’m learning into this really old Bible that’s been translated a bazillion times by a bazillion different people. And I thought, if I ever have to stand before God in heaven and he was like, “What the fuck, Oscar?! You were deceived by the fallen spirits and the gods of the ages!” Then I could say, “Well, I was really just trying to follow truth. And I was trying to discern what was truth and what was garbage.” And if God was gracious, he would say, “OK, cool. I’m glad you were trying to follow truth.”

I decided, “Hey, I think I’m going to trust that God is more loving and caring than we presume, and that he’s going to err on the side of grace.” So this is the risky choice I made at one point. I decided to stop trying to fit the truth I was experiencing into this truth that I was given. At that point I started to form my own thesis around what spirituality is and who God is. I stopped categorizing the Divine in categories like “Jesus” and “God” because I saw that the Divine could show up in all kinds of crazy ways.

As his journey progressed, Oscar encountered wisdom in many different forms and from many different sources. He began to find the Bible particularly limited in its scope and accessibility. The piece of wisdom that he values most comes from a teacher of his who herself journeyed into and out of Christianity in her lifetime. “I had an old herbalist teacher, Delores. She passed away a few years ago. And she was this fiery old lady, and she would say, channeling Jesus, ‘If your truth is not setting you free, then it’s time to re-examine your truth. The truth is supposed to set us free. It puts us in line with what’s good, what’s beautiful, what’s true.’”

Oscar fears the kind of “truth” that most Christians carry around is actually inhibitive and dangerous: “Some of the Christian ‘truths’ can end up being the biggest lies.” What are these truths/lies? Oscar explained:

That you’re not OK. That you’re not lovable. That you don’t deserve good things. You’re a failure. You’re a sinner. You’re not enough.

West Michigan people have a very strong inner critic, and religion has planted those seeds. The religious organizations have told people they’re not enough and not OK, which feels really contrary to what Jesus said.

Wisdom is a Person

I expected to hear some suspicion and criticism for the ideas of ultimate authority and universal truth, but the second main theme about wisdom that I discovered in my interviews came as something of a surprise: my post-Christian interviewees found value in wisdom personified, rather than wisdom proclaimed. Wisdom for them isn’t a clever aphorism crafted by an ancient sage; it’s the example of a humble leader who lives an especially gracious life. Wisdom isn’t the authoritarian rhetoric of the “man in charge”; it’s the humble apology of someone who needs forgiveness.

I asked Jack to tell me a memory of someone in his life who acted wisely:

Of all places, it was where I went to high school and it was our principal, who I despised. He was a super holier-than-thou kind of person. Everything he did was better than everyone else. He was always on my case, as he should have been. But he had a talk with me one time, and he ended up being wrong about something. And so here's this principal who's always on my case, always right, who knows more, and after years of telling me he's right and I'm wrong. ...I won't go into details, but he basically taught me what it was to admit to being wrong about something. It went against everything he was to admit he's wrong. It ended up being a great wisdom.

For Jack, humility and wisdom go hand in hand. There was something about his authority figure seemingly yielding some of his authority that made Jack pause and admire the man:

The way I grew up, everyone else was always right, and I was always wrong. So to have someone in authority admit he was wrong and tell me there are times I'll have to do the same, that was significant to me. He apologized to me, and I don't think it was easy for him to do that. He showed great wisdom.

During another interview, Rupert suggested to me that the wisest people in his life were the ones who had made the most mistakes and, in the end, learned from them:

That's my grandfather. He was the wisest man in my life because he had been through all the bad things. He was very anti-drinking, but that's because he was an alcoholic before I was around. He was anti-smoking because he was a chain smoker. He was a horrible dad, but a great grandpa. And a better dad as he got older. He made amends for that. He took his second chances and made the most out of them. That's part of the definition of wisdom, I think: to go through something and to know more about how to do things better the second time around. Wisdom requires mistakes to have prior knowledge. Fuck, from that perspective, one day I'll be the wisest person you'll ever meet.

Similar to Rupert, Rachel finds wisdom in people who prove themselves to be wise over time. She tells the story of getting to know the newest pastor of the Unitarian church they've been attending lately. When she first met Pastor Matthew, she thought he was "ridiculous." "He would do these things from the pulpit that seemed very weird to me, like having the entire church breathe. He'd say, 'Everybody [breathe] in; everybody,

out.” She was not a fan. “I’m not lovey-dovey, touchy-feely like that. He’s not like me. But then I came full circle on him.”

Rachel’s opinion of Pastor Matthew shifted not because she was deeply challenged and enlightened by his preaching: “He imparted a lot of wisdom, but it wasn’t in the talks that he gave or the sermons that he preached. It was much more about how he lived his life. He did really, really simple things that had a profound impact on me.”

On one occasion, Rachel and her husband took their kids to the Diwali celebration their church shares with the Hindu temple down the street. It’s an opportunity for members of the two congregations to mingle and get to know each other better:

I was nervous to bring our kids because of the Indian food, and many other reasons, but they wanted to go, which was great. At the end of the night, when the leader asked if there were any questions, Anna, my six-year-old, who’s sitting with other kids at a different table, raises her hand. I wanted desperately to tell her to put her hand down. I’m thinking, “Oh shit, oh shit, oh shit.” I was wondering if she had enough sense to not say something offensive. Then Pastor Matthew went up to her and put his arm around her, and I thought, “Oh great. He’s going to tell her not to ask a question.” Instead, Matthew stood up and said, “We have a question back here,” and the leader came back with a microphone and she asked her question.

I don’t remember what her questions was. I’m sure it was fine. But I was just so moved by Matthew’s support of her and his care for her when I was a million light-years away from that. That’s when I decided, I love this man because he shows true wisdom. That, to me, is wisdom. Go, get down on her level, and be there for her. Support her questioning. That’s what this church does for us in a very real and physical way. And I thought, “He is wise. What a wise move to make for the sake of a kid.” From that point on, I’ve loved him with a visceral love. Now he can do whatever he wants from the pulpit—do the breathing and all the weird things—because I trust him and I see that he’s wise.

Application to Liturgy and Recommendations

In worship, when the liturgist opens the Bible to read a text, it’s important that everyone know that what’s happening is sacred. Sacredness, as we’ll discuss in the next section, is something highly valued by both churchgoing and post-Christian people alike.

But when it comes to reading and submitting to Scripture, sacredness becomes especially difficult for some post-Christian people.

For many it is a matter of personal history. People like Jack spent most of their young lives feeling harshly judged and ridiculed by Scripture and by those who quoted it at him in detention hall. Some, like Rachel and her husband, both of whom studied medicine, were unable to reconcile what they knew about science with what they were taught about the unquestionable realities of God's universe.

So how can worship designers and leaders create Scripture-saturated worship services that don't compromise the wisdom and authority of the Word but also keep engaged those who have complicated histories with God's Word? In a world where authority seems to belong to all and none, and wisdom is increasingly allusive, this is another important question for the church to answer. Once again, we're going to have to do some deep thinking and some unlearning.

What Scripture Does is Complicated

Both post-Christian people who have never picked up a Bible as well as people who have already been heavily indoctrinated tend to share a pretty similar assumption about Scripture: The Bible means what it says.

And certainly, it does. But often the difficult part of reading Scripture is *knowing* what it *actually* says. Like many great literary masterpieces, the Bible doesn't always mean what it literally says. And what about the contradictory claims in Scripture? Don't the dates, names, numbers, and chronologies sometimes fail to match up? Could it be that some things recorded in Scripture really happened in history, while others did not?

We need to promote a more nuanced, mystical, humble approach to reading and submitting to the Word of God that doesn't run from these questions but, rather, embraces them. Our theological fathers and mothers from the Enlightenment were not able to master Scripture, and neither will we. How, for the sake of the church and all the people God has given us to love, can worship leaders better embrace the Scripture God has given us?

One good way to do this in worship is to briefly explain the genre of the text and give some guidance for interpretation. In the times that my interviewees did want to talk about scripture, they did so assuming I approached scripture with a very rigid literalism. As mentioned before, some came ready to argue. They thought that I thought and all Christians think that the world was created in 6 days, just a few thousand years ago, because the Bible says so. They thought that I was eagerly awaiting the opening of seven literal scrolls and the destruction of seven literal plagues marking the beginning of the apocalypse, because the Bible says so. Because what scripture does is complicated, preachers and worship leaders need to make it as accessible as possible in worship. Some genres and texts need little introduction and are easily engaged. Others, like some in Genesis and Revelation, need to be explained. This can happen prior to reading a text, or during the sermon. Doing this pulls the Bible out from behind the curtain of mystery and allows it to be read and understood according to its genre.

Let's use the book of Genesis as an exercise. It's a treasure trove of beautiful poetry and narrative history, begging for Christological, redemptive historical exegesis. But already in the first two chapters of the book, we run into a challenge. Genesis has two creation accounts, and they simply don't harmonize well.

In the first creation account, the story begins in cosmic, chaotic nothingness, and God speaks his world into being. God has a very intentional and methodical pattern for creation. The second creation account, however, begins not in cosmic, chaotic nothingness, but in a desert landscape. There is no mention of time or days, and there seems to be no creation pattern. And in the second account, God creates with his hands and his breath, not just his words.

How can the two accounts be reconciled? Can the two accounts be so factually different and yet both be true?

The problem isn't with the text. The problem is with our expectations and demands of the text. We're trying to ask questions of the text that the text never intended to answer.

Additionally, Genesis, like every other text, must be read in the genre in which it was written. When you pick up a newspaper, you don't read the front page the same way you read the comics or the opinion pieces or the horoscopes. You read each differently because each is written differently.

In my observation, the Bible has lost much of its credibility because Christians have tried to make it something it isn't: an answer book. The Bible cannot be made into something it's not, and if the church is going to engage with post-Christian people—many of whom roll their eyes violently at six-day creationism and whales who swallow God's prophets on his command—let's stop trying to handle the Bible so aggressively and instead allow the Bible to handle us. Let's embrace the imaginative, poetic, mythical truth that God has laid out for us. Let's agree that the Bible isn't exhaustive,

chronological, or totally empirically verifiable. And let's be moved by God's Spirit in God's mysterious Word.

Very few people beside children live with a world-broadening imagination. Worship leaders can use Scripture to invite post-Christian people into just such an imagination. We live in a place where Jacob's ladder touches both heaven and earth, bringing all of us closer to God than we can even imagine. This place is where the wind of Pentecost nearly knocked over Peter and the disciples before pushing them all over the globe in mission. This is the world where Jesus Christ rose, quite literally, from the dead and made everything different. If we're going to believe this is true, we're going to need a good imagination.

This is one of the most important ways that post-Christian people can help those in the church who have read scripture in an unquestioning, non-imaginative way all their lives. As we approach scripture together in worship, new blood, new ideas, and new perspectives will breathe new life into God's word to us. If worshippers can challenge one another to approach the text from new perspectives, we will have great opportunities to step toward in maturing faith.

Preaching with Humility and Honesty

In a perfect universe, Jesus would be in the pulpit every Sunday, delivering the Word purely, personally, and directly from its source. Instead, a handful of us have the honor and challenge of standing in as priests of Christ. Preachers represent Christ and we stand in his authority, but undeniably we bring our own identities into the pulpit. For better or worse, the Word of God comes filtered through our personalities, dispositions, education, and passion.

Sometimes it would feel good to stand up and preach as though we were Christ himself, or as though Christ himself were moving our lips. We would preach with great authority, with no second-guessing, no apologizing; and everything we said with our lips, we would feel in our hearts. Other times, it would feel good to stand up at the pulpit and say, “I don’t really have anything, folks. The passion just didn’t flow this week, and honestly, I’m having a hard time knowing what I believe right now.”

Those are the two natures of the preacher: one part priest of Christ, one part son/daughter of the fallen creation. But while those two natures can be difficult to hold in balance, their balance might bring exactly the kind of humble integrity that post-Christian people long to embrace.

Rachel, Rupert, and Jack each told stories about people they found especially humble, vulnerable, and honest, and they perceived those values to reflect wisdom. As preachers stand in for Christ, it can be easy to let the authority and confidence of our priestly role overshadow our humble insecurities. Rachel, Rupert, and Jack would say that would be a grave mistake.

A preacher who doesn’t bring his or her struggles into the pulpit will be almost impossible for someone like Rachel, Rupert, or Jack to connect with. Each of those three are on the skeptical side of faith, they speak articulately and frankly about their doubt, and they’ve dismissed every Christian cliché they’ve ever been handed. Their doubts can’t be ignored, and they won’t be argued into the faith by overconfident preachers with straw-man arguments.

People like Rachel, Jack, and Rupert need to see someone who shares their same questions and admits freely that some answers are unsatisfying. They need someone who

doesn't pretend that Christianity is obviously true for anyone with half a brain. They need someone who, through her own struggle, dedicates herself to the faith even as she wrestles with unbelief.

For all that can be gained from reading (most) missional church literature, there is little attention given to meeting and understanding post-Christian people themselves. Much has been said, and should be said, about ecclesiology, missiology, cultural trends, epistemology, and the like; but these important ideas need new inroads. Mission-focused leaders need to take the discussion to the ground level. Those looking to design missional worship services and lead missional churches do well to meet and connect with those whom they would like to minister. Otherwise, I fear, the missional church will only reach out to caricatures of post-Christian people and grumpy ex-Christians.

Vulnerable conversations with genuine people are the heartbeat of a mission-focused church. Authenticity must precede authority.

For post-Christian people, Christianity might never seem so far away as when people describe it as perfectly obvious, perfectly provable, and perfectly satisfying. But when we handle Scripture carefully and honestly, and preach in a way that balances both of our natures, preachers open a path to faith that doesn't deny the reality of things or the power of Christ alive in us and the world. Post-Christian people will likely find wisdom in the same place they find humility. They have to trust the church before they will listen to the church. These are important lessons for worship leaders and especially preachers.

Wisdom Summary

Most 21st Century people are generally skeptical of autonomous authority and claims of ultimate truth. My interviewees have had disappointing experiences with the

Bible. They simply haven't found it as definitive, authoritative, and helpful as advertised. For them, wisdom is closely related to humility and experience, and wise people in their lives offer a gentle challenge when necessary. In worship, leaders can help everyone present unlearn some of what they were taught or assumed about Scripture. By underscoring the mystical wisdom of Scripture and the proper way to read different genres within Scripture, with the help of new perspectives, we can promote better understanding together. Worship leaders can reinforce that God's law is not a book of rules, but God's guide for how we can best live. Preachers and worship leaders must be honest and admit their own doubts, but also be examples of how to press on in faith.

Sacredness: The Lord's Supper and Sending

I categorized these two liturgical movements together because together they help encapsulate the narrative of Christian worship: God meets us and supplies us, then God sends us forward to bless the world. Meeting Christ in the sacrament is, for many, the climax of the worship experience. It's this encounter with divine hospitality that allows the disciple be who God has called him to be and do what God has called him to do, until he once again finds himself at Christ's table. Being sent from worship communicates how God sends us out into his world to be his hands and feet, with his blessing.

The Lord's Supper and the sending are tremendous opportunities to help post-Christian people connect to the worship experience and for the liturgy to meet their needs. It's the best liturgical opportunity all of us have to feel on equal footing with one another, to feel a part of the community, and to receive God's supernatural grace to us as we serve one another the elements of life.

The Lord's Supper creates a sense of vulnerability, love, trust, and meaning—the very elements that allow people to belong beyond commonality. My interviewees identified these things as some of their deepest cravings. I understand that many churches have clearly defined who is able to participate in the sacrament and who is not. For this reason, the possibility of connecting with post-Christian people through the Lord's Supper is severely limited.

At Alger Park Church, we invite to the table “all who are baptized and desire to live as a disciple of Christ.” This language would exclude most, if not all, my interviewees. Some were baptized, and perhaps one or two might suggest that in some way they want to be a disciple of Christ. But for the most part, they wouldn't be invited to partake.

I recognize that it may seem counter-intuitive to discuss how best to include in the sacrament those who can't be included in the sacrament; but rather than shrugging and moving on, I want to explore ways that people who may not believe can still take part in the sacrament in a way that honors everyone present.

Additionally, the sending can be a crucial liturgical movement that reiterates the core themes of our worship experience as we leave, bringing new meaning and purpose to our work and relationships. This kind of real-life connection between the sacred experience of worship and our everyday lives can powerfully impact Christians and post-Christians alike.

Discovered Themes in Sacredness

To discover some post-Christian themes around sacredness, I asked questions like, “Tell me about the last time you experienced something sacred or meaningful.”

“Tell me a story about a time when you felt like you were part of something beautiful.”

“Tell me about a time you physically encountered something that seemed otherworldly.”

“Tell me about a time when you felt most purposeful.”

Sacredness in Relationships

When searching their memories for sacred moments, most of my interviewees recalled situations that revolved around important relationships. Rachel, by her own admission, isn't a very spiritual person, “So I don't use words like *sacred* very often.” But still she is quick to identify sacred moments.

“I honestly feel like sacred times for me are different than they used to be. They are times like Wednesday-night softball league, hanging out with people from Fountain Street Church, and being together with family.” Rachel's sacredness is also very similar to belonging.

“It's really about feeling accepted and being with your people and not being judged. Pretty much short of having an altar call, with our friends I think anything goes. Just being in that community is sacred for me.” Rachel finds sacredness in her new faith community, though it's far from the Christian faith in which she was raised. “Being in this belief system that has evolved over a long time, being at church when we have a good service, when we take part in social action Sundays—those are sacred times for me.”

Rachel comments on how her kids don't want to miss out on the opportunity to help someone, and how that validates their decision to leave the church. “It's so much better and so much more rewarding to help people rather than to just learn the right Bible

verses and plan on flying away to heaven someday. Those points of affirmation that me and my family are in the right place, doing the right thing—they're sacred to me."

I asked Oscar to talk about one or two moments of sacredness that stood out for him above the others. First he referenced the birth of his children, but then he commented that his relationships with his kids grow more sacred with time.

"Here's a good one," Oscar said:

My son Billy is ten, and he's always loved nature and he's always been super connected to the outdoors, to the point that I would take him on survival trips when he was only four or five. We would only bring a water bottle, knife, cord, cover, and a combustion device to make a fire.

As a kid growing up in the city, he would bitch and whine and complain at me all the time, but when I took him to the woods and starved him, he was perfectly content. We would be boiling this nasty-tasting water pond scum, and sleeping in the freezing cold, trying to keep a fire going, and we didn't eat for twenty-four to forty-eight hours, and he was the most content soul I've ever seen. That's as a five-year-old. He didn't complain, didn't whine, and didn't even wear shoes. He just wandered around the woods with me.

So a few weeks ago I was teaching a wilderness class with my brother, and I asked Billy to teach part of the class with me. So, he taught some trees and wild edibles and herbs. And he was so content and helpful the whole time. He was so happy and joyful. And we had a forty-five-minute ride home, and he was talking about how happy he felt in the woods and how content he was and how inspired he was to learn everything he can about nature and to teach people. And at one moment in the car ride home, he looked at me and he goes, "Dad! I can just feel my essence, and I just want to laugh and cry at the same time!" And so I said, "Then just laugh and cry." So he was laughing and crying, and it was amazing.

That was the most sacred moment I've ever had with him. It's a moment I'll remember forever. I've always had a hard time connecting with him. We can be very different people. But that one thing we share—a love for the earth—that's always a bonding thing. It draws us together.

Jane, too, finds the most sacred thing in her life to be her relationships with her children. She values still being valued by them, even in their adulthood:

“When they come to me and seek my guidance or just want to talk, that’s very sacred to me. Especially Charles. He’s an adult, but he has a lot in his life that has been scary. I don’t impose myself, but when he just comes and starts talking to me, I take it as the most valuable, sacred thing in the world. I put everything down, shut everything off. I don’t judge or give advice, unless he asks. That’s sacred to me.”

Then Jane tells the story of remarkable woman in her life, whom she serves in the dementia ward.

“There’s a woman who I’m working with right now. How can I describe Virginia? She’s very demented. She can talk and do things herself, but she’s in the past. Her short-term memory is gone. But the past is still around. So she talks like she’s somewhere else.”

Jane sees Virginia a few times every week, and while each visit with Virginia is pleasant, each is a little different too. “There was one time this week when I brought her down to the therapy room, and she looked at me and said, ‘I’m just so happy that you came to visit me.’ I smiled and told her I was glad to be with her. But the more she talked, the more I realized that she thought I was her half-sister.”

For an hour, Virginia spoke with Jane, believing they were sisters. “She kept saying, ‘You look amazing, dear! I mean, I know you’re old, but you look so young. How do you do it? It’s just so wonderful to see you.’” Jane could tell that Virginia’s heart was full as she conversed with her “sister.” Overwhelmed with love for Virginia, and with compassion for the millions who suffer the way Virginia does, Jane decided to go the extra mile. She sat next to her “sister,” held her, rocked her, and brushed her hair as they

talked. “It wasn’t part of my job as a recovery nurse, but it seemed like the right thing to do.”

After an hour, Jane had to move on to other hospital patients. Virginia left her with these words, which Jane holds in her heart as sacred: “You know, dear, I get so lonely sometimes, and it meant more than anything to see you today.”

“I didn’t cry, not in her presence at least,” Jane said. “But, God, it was so precious to rock her and hold her and brush her hair. I see this woman all the time in the hall. But this event was amazing, so sacred. To me that’s what’s sacred—if I can connect with someone. I don’t have to be anything; I don’t have to accomplish anything or write impressive papers. I just have to be present and show up. And show empathy. People connect with that. That’s where it all comes out.”

Wanting to Find Sacredness, Purpose in All Things

Many of my interviewees expressed a desire, if not an ability, to experience what they called some variation of “the sacredness of all things.” They understood that we’re constantly surrounded by the sacred, and it’s up to each of us to live in awareness and wonder of this.

Camille wishes she was bursting with sacredness stories. “I wish I could give you two or three sacredness stories just from today. That’s how life should be. I think we all have to be aware of what we’re being given from the Divine on a moment-by-moment basis.”

Thinking back on a powerful experience of sacredness, Camille came up with this example:

Just a month ago, at Beaver Island, I started off with a whole day’s worth of outdoor exploration. I had a backpack with great books, a journal, some snacks,

and at each moment I was excited to choose what I wanted to do. So I hiked eight miles to a lake, Barney's Lake, and took in the scenery and the history. . . . I spent hours and hours walking through the woods around this lake, and I didn't see a person the whole time. I listened to the loon, I felt the wind, I felt the sun, I smelled the smells—I was so present. And to me that was sacred.

But what's interesting is that the sacredness of that day all had to do with ordinary, natural things: plants, beauty, wind, air, history, the sun. I get all those things every day, and I really wish I could tap into that every day. And I would love to find that holy, sacred space anytime.

Similar to Camille, Frankie believes that experiencing the sacred is a possibility at any moment, and the obligation of having that experience falls on each of us:

That's my responsibility, I think. And it's not that there's necessarily an inherent sacredness in my child being born or in this moment of intimacy amongst friends or in listening to the band Phosphorescent sing "Wolves" live, and having it reverberate through the crowd and knowing that everybody's feeling this powerful feeling. It's my responsibility to experience that sacredness, and I think things present themselves on varying levels of accessibility to experience the sacred.

Listening to "Wolves" live—it's easy to feel that's sacred. And my daughter climbing into my lap and sharing a story with me of how she had a good day because she sat in the wagon and ate apples. It's easy to feel like that's sacred. But knowing how to capture that when I'm at work and frustrated with somebody's performance or I'm sitting in traffic or there's some riff between my wife and me. . . . Then the burden of discovering the sacred in that is much heavier and harder to do, but that doesn't mean that it's not still my burden. It's unsustainable, but I feel like the ideal existence would be to continually experience the sacred.

Application to the Liturgy and Recommendations

Sharing the Lord's Supper is one of the most sacred acts of the church. It also puts a high priority on the relationships represented around the table. Post-Christian people also find a strong correlation between the sacred and their relationships. Worship leaders can use this connection to host the Lord's Supper in a way that values relationships. The sending offers one of the best opportunities for worship leaders to help worshippers connect the drama of the liturgy to the narrative of their lives. The purpose found in the

retelling of the story of the gospel can be directly applied in very practical ways as people are sent out in mission.

Hosting the Lord's Supper in a Way that Values Relationship

First, consider the hospitality of good communication. As discussed earlier in the chapter, worship can seem unwelcoming when people aren't sure what's going on and how they should participate. The same is true in the Lord's Supper. One way or another, it's important that everyone understands what the Lord's Supper is, who it's for, how someone can participate in the service, and how someone can decline to participate in that service without looking like a sore thumb.

Sadly, in many congregations, including Alger Park, post-Christian people will have a hard time not sticking out. This guarding of the sacrament is ostensibly the most inhospitable action the Church can perform in a worship service where post-Christian people are present. By inviting "all who are baptized and desire to live as a disciple of Christ," we leave people out. At Alger Park, as far as I can tell, this is the only moment in the liturgy where Christians and post-Christians are not invited to participate equally and identically in a worship service. Sadly, it's also one of the most communal, tactile, vulnerable, loving, interactive, and enfolding parts of a worship service.

As someone who cares deeply about the enfolding and formation of post-Christian people, disallowing their participation in the sacrament causes me great grief. However, from a biblical and theological perspective, I can understand how conscience might convict some to set these limitations. It's vital, however, that post-Christian people understand that limitations aren't meant to demean.

My ministry partner and I will often say something like this to make things clear: “The Lord’s Supper is a sacrament that Jesus and his disciples shared out of commitment to each other. Only take the elements today if you are committed to Jesus as his disciple. If you’re still asking questions and wondering about your relationship with Jesus, wonderful. You’re in exactly the right place, and you belong here as much as anyone else. But for now, let the bread and wine pass. The last thing anyone wants is for people to do something that isn’t totally genuine for them.”

This statement explains why the meal is only for believers and honors the post-Christian person in his or her beliefs, while validating the idea that everyone is welcome in worship. The key is to find ways to make post-Christian people feel part of the community even in their not partaking in communion.

Consider finding ways to involve people who are not partaking in the sacrament. At Alger Park, as other congregations do, we include optional silent prayers of meditation available for everyone “whether or not you are taking part in the sacrament.” These prayers range from being appreciative of Jesus, curiously drawn to Jesus, and making a commitment to Jesus. They are printed for worshipers if they care to take advantage of them. Something similar, like a journaling activity, could be offered.

Depending on your worship space, doing communion by way of intinction might be a preferable method for the sake of inclusion. Participants can go forward to receive the sacrament when they are ready, not in any particular order. Also, stations for writing prayers or lighting candles can be set up elsewhere, and those not partaking in the Lord’s Supper can participate in that way.

Sending Out to the Sacred Beyond

The final movements of the liturgy give worship leaders great opportunities to encourage post-Christian people to find their stories in God’s grand narrative, and to live in this narrative long after they leave the service. Frankie, Camille, and others were convinced that sacred moments or “connections to the divine” were available to them at any moment, and they wanted to access them more.

This is a great opportunity for worship planners and leaders to make the most of the sending and benediction, which we can sometimes speed through. The sending connects the core theme of the worship service to the purpose and work that God has for people in the coming week. It’s a great opportunity to encourage more sacred encounters.

Offering his explanation of what happens in worship, James K.A. Smith writes, “In short, liturgies make us certain kinds of people.”⁸¹ And later, “A sacramental understanding of the world is simply a short-hand way of describing the psalmist’s claim that ‘The earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it, the word, and those who live in it’ (Ps. 24:1), echoed in Paul’s claim that in the Creator God ‘we live and move and have our being’ (Acts 17:28).”⁸² Worshippers can be sent with the sacredness of worship in tow, looking for it to appear wherever they go.

A good sending will serve not to conclude a worship service, so much as to commence the activity the service will inspire. Worship leaders can use this time to draw a specific connection between the sermon or another aspect of the liturgy and offer a tangible way to practice what was preached. The worship leader might say, “Decide now which neighbor you will bless by _____.” Or, “Who is the person in your life who

⁸¹ Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 25.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 141.

needs to be encouraged today? How will you encourage him or her?” Or, “Jesus retreated to spend time alone with his heavenly Father in prayer. Take your phones out, open your calendars, and make an appointment for this week.” Or, “Every time you feel the wind this week, remember that it’s Pentecost. Maybe you should drive home with the windows open.”

We can set up worshipers to stumble into sacredness. I agree with Camille and Frankie: it’s there all the time. And as worship leaders, when we can enable worshipers to make this connection in worship, we’re helping them see a more hopeful world in which God is constantly active.

Our tendency is to see everything that happens in a worship service as sacred and everything outside of worship as secular. Perhaps we can help undo this dichotomy in the minds and hearts of our worshipers, making the “everyday” bleed into the “holy” and vice versa.

Sacredness Summary

Based on my research, post-Christian people desire a sense of sacredness and purpose in their daily lives. My interviewees felt sacredness most strongly in their relationships and in holy moments when their lives have seemed especially meaningful. Many of my interviewees suggested that they are actively looking for ways to uncover more of the sacredness in their lives and they desire help to refine their abilities to do this. In worship, through hospitality and warmth, worship leaders can create and deepen relationships with post-Christian people. We can honor everyone’s beliefs by inviting each person to partake in worship while respecting their need to be honest with their convictions. As we send out worshipers at the conclusion of the service, we can help

them connect with their hope and give them concrete ideas for better connecting with God throughout the week.

Final Observations

Interviewing these post-Christian people for my project was a great privilege and honor for me. I was amazed by their vulnerability and honesty, even though some of them, I had never met before.

Writing and reflecting on these interviews has left me with two final observations, which can be read as a kind of epilogue to my project.

First, I really, really like these people. They're good people, and their stories are exceptionally valuable to me, and, I think, for the church. Even though we're the children of God, we in the church also have a propensity to stereotype, victimize, and polarize those who don't fit our labels. I grew up believing that non-Christian people were sad, lonely, immoral people, wandering aimlessly to find the spiritual secret that would solve all their problems. The people I interviewed for my project don't fit that description. Instead, they are thoughtful, personable, curious, generally fulfilled people, who, just like church people, are trying to figure out life as it passes. They are not projects; they are not problems to be fixed. They are people to love and learn from. They're friends ready to be made, and they're not very different from Christians. They desire love, vulnerability, and trust just like anyone else. I believe that if we can go on a search for those things together, it would be in everyone's best interests.

Second, if Christians want to help these post-Christian people encounter God, the answer is not to dumb down the message of the gospel into something more palatable, more superficial, more commercial. The answer is not gimmicks or shiny distractions. Considering what I know about my interviewees and my unbelieving friends and family members, nothing shallow or gimmicky is going to get their attention. They want to be a

part of something that is deep, meaningful, and mysterious. They prefer what's ancient over what's disposable, contemplation over frenzy, timeless wisdom over "ten steps to a better you."

I've heard church people voice concerns such as, "If we become a congregation for unbelieving people, the message will get diluted, and soon enough it will become too watered down to benefit anyone." This fear arises from two false assumptions: (1) that unbelieving people are shallow, and (2) that the gospel of Jesus is nothing more than a rudimentary lesson in Christian theology. As Tim Keller says, "The gospel is not just the ABC's but the A through Z of the Christian life. It's inaccurate to think the gospel is what saves non-Christians, and then Christians mature by trying hard to live according to biblical principles."⁸³

We can write liturgy and host worship that is beneficial for Christian and post-Christian people at the same time. And when we do, we'll be doing both groups a great favor, all to the glory of God.

⁸³ Keller, *Center Church*.

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