

**God's Story, Our Story:
A Narrative Approach for Discovery
of Congregational Identity and Purpose**

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Title of Project: God's Story, Our Story: A Narrative Approach for Discovery of
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Abstract

Many North American Mennonite churches live in a climate of confusion and anxiety struggling to understand who they are and why they exist. This project explores how a congregation's self-understanding is shaped by stories they tell and live. The context for this project was my ministry leadership in three Mennonite congregations during pastor transitions. I started the project by researching ecclesiological themes of importance to these congregations: sixteenth-century Anabaptism, missional ecclesiology, and narrative theology. I crafted and implemented a process of engagement utilizing these themes allowing congregations to take steps toward discovering identity, purpose, and a hopeful future. I conducted ethnographic research and facilitated congregational interaction with their stories, ecclesiological themes, and the defining narrative of scripture. This resulted in a narrative summary, written identity, and purpose statement for each congregation. The outcome of this narrative approach for ecclesiological understanding is seen in the clear, hope-filled identity and purpose statements developed by these three Mennonite congregations.

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List of Abbreviations

AMBS	Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary
BMC	Boynton Mennonite Church
CO	Conscientious Objector
Evana	Evangelical Anabaptist Network
GOCN	Gospel in Our Culture Network
HMC	Hopedale Mennonite Church
IMC	Illinois Mennonite Conference
IMMC	Indiana Michigan Mennonite Conference
IMN	Interim Ministry Network
LBGTQ	Lesbian, Bi-sexual, Gay, Transgender, Queer
MCUSA	Mennonite Church USA
MRMC	Maple River Mennonite Church
MWC	Mennonite World Conference
MYF	Mennonite Youth Fellowship
PCRT	Pastor-Congregation Relations Team
VBS	Vacation Bible School
VMC	Valparaiso Mennonite Church
WWII	World War II

Chapter 1

The Christendom Confusion of Congregational Identity in North America

The scope of this D.Min. project is broad and touches on the future state of Anabaptist-Mennonite congregations in North America. The contemporary North American expression of the Christian Church is marked by loss and uncertainty. Christendom,¹ the experience of Christianity's symbiotic bond with political and cultural forces that shaped "Western churches until after the First World War..., was based on the deeply held conviction that the church was moving toward a triumphant future."² Struggling to make the transition from centuries of cultural influence in the West, congregations are facing a rapidly shifting future without sufficient practical-theological-ecclesiological understandings of who they are and how they should be.

The central questions of this project, grounded in the Church's transition into post-Christendom, are twofold: 1) How does the discernment of identity and purpose take place within a local congregation? and 2) How does clarifying a church's understanding of its identity and purpose influence its ability to move into the future with hope? These questions are self-reflective in that they emerge from a convergence of my own personal, pastoral, and academic narratives. It will be helpful, therefore, to briefly explore the experiences that brought this project forward.

1. The term "Christendom" first emerged in the ninth-century as a description of the experiences created by the union of Church with state authority. Thus, the reality of Christendom began in the fourth-century when Christianity was embraced by the Roman state powers. Stuart Murray, *Post-Christendom: Church and Mission in a Strange New World* (Bucks, UK: Paternoster Press, 2004), 23-26.

2. Alan J. Roxburgh, *The Missionary Congregation, Leadership & Liminality, Christian Mission and Modern Culture* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997), 7.

Personal and Pastoral Background

I entered, as an infant, into the life of Bethel Mennonite Church in Ashley, MI; the same congregation which had nurtured both of my parents from birth and childhood to young adulthood, courtship, and marriage. My journey to Christian faith was ineradicably planted in a community committed to an Anabaptist spirituality even as it was influenced by Western evangelicalism. The marks of an Anabaptist vision such as non-conformist faith community, self-giving love, and community based interpretation of scripture, were modeled and taught from childhood into my adult years. Alongside this foundation of faith, my family and church drank from streams of evangelicalism, as it had from the holiness movement generations earlier. Through the preaching of evangelists like Billy Graham and David Wilkerson, and preachers like Charles Swindoll, we learned, unquestionably, that faith was essentially personal. We learned the prevailing ecclesiology of the day which divided the church into clergy and laity, and elevated the Sunday morning worship gathering to be the primary essence of a church's identity.

With this Mennonite-Evangelical ecclesiological perspective, I entered into a formal theological education. I studied the Bible, religion, and philosophy at Goshen College. I then entered Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminaries (AMBS) with the intention of serving the church as a sort of resident biblical expert, thinking this would certainly enable me to bring the church to a new place of wholeness and life.

For twenty-seven years, I served as a pastor with three Mennonite congregations in Northern Indiana. Entering the pastoral ministry in 1989, I was a youth minister with a 400 member Mennonite Church in the tourism-driven town of Shipshewana, Indiana. My next experience was in the role of Associate Minister of a predominantly young-

professional Mennonite congregation in a prospering area of Goshen Indiana. From 1998 through 2015, I was the Lead Pastor of a Mennonite congregation whose building bordered on an impoverished side of Goshen. The diversity of these experiences was in the distinctiveness related to the immediate contexts of the congregations; one rural and two city/suburban. One congregation in a very poor neighborhood, and two in upper-middle class areas; all three struggling to understand their identity and purpose for existence. Through my years of pastoral ministry, I observed beleaguered congregations in the Indiana-Michigan Mennonite Conference (IMMC), the Illinois Mennonite Conference (IMC). These congregations faced a similar struggle to understand God's calling and purpose.

Meeting leaders of local Anabaptist congregations from across the country of Colombia, while accompanying John Driver on a teaching trip in 2010, may have been the most formative experience of my life as a pastor.³ The challenge of Anabaptist congregations in Colombia was quite different from that of the Mennonite church of North America. In the midst of violence driven by political, economic, and social corruption, the struggle for the Christian communities in Colombia was in staying abreast of how God's Spirit was igniting the movement of faith in their country. I returned home from the trip marveling at the passion of the Anabaptist movement in Colombia while we, their North American brothers and sisters, were sliding deeper into loss and decline. Anabaptism for passionate Colombian church leaders was a swiftly moving experience in

3. "John Driver worked for many years as a missionary in Puerto Rico, Uruguay, Argentina, and Spain and has continued to travel regularly to Latin America, the Caribbean, and Spain for teaching assignments. Driver has been a professor in several seminaries and Anabaptist institutions in Latin America." Plough Publishing, "Our Authors: John Driver," accessed January 16, 2020. <https://www.plough.com/en/authors/d/john-driver>.

God's activity in their communities. In the congregation I was serving, like all other Mennonite Churches I knew, Anabaptism was no longer a bracing movement, but confined to history; nothing more than a label. The critical discussions of Colombian Mennonites revolved around formation of the Christian community as a contrasting witness to a society broken by violence. What seemed most important to my North American Mennonite church, was finding enough people to teach Sunday School and debating human sexuality. I yearn for the Mennonite congregations of North America to experience being swept into life as communities led by the Spirit.

I came to a personal and pastoral watershed moment in 2014. After two and a half decades of church ministry, and almost seventeen years in the congregation I was then serving, my heart was pulled towards helping congregations embrace an identity and purpose based on God's present and future reign and their place within the world. At the same time, I realized that my congregation expected me to be more of a teacher, chaplain, and organizational manager, than a catalyst for missional engagement.

Less than a year later, having resigned from my beloved congregation, I entered WTS's Doctor of Ministry program and began to seek the Spirit's guidance toward a future role with congregations. Within a few months I was invited by a small congregation in Northern Michigan to help them find a way to move forward. About a year later, a North-Western Indiana congregation asked me to walk with them through a year of transition following the retirement of their long-term pastor. In late 2017, a congregation in central Illinois asked me to guide them through a time of discernment and preparation for the future. More than anything else, my experience with these transition ministry opportunities shaped this project.

Project Purpose and Design

The baseline purpose of this project which reflects the questions of congregational discernment of identity and purpose for future engagement, is to a) help congregations explore who they are (identity) and why they exist (purpose), and b) cultivate a developing narrative ecclesiology.

By nature, this project is not merely intellectual in approach, nor should be any project based in practical theology. It is my aim to conduct a project that yields insights and proposals, and can contribute to understandings and practices applicable to the discovery of congregational identity and purpose. In order to ground theory, theology, and research, the design of this project integrates my involvement in the particular context of interim/transitional ministry in three Mennonite Congregations.⁴

Transition Ministry

Congregations often respond to a pastor's resignation or retirement by immediately beginning the search for their next pastor and in doing so avoid addressing any particular transition challenges. In the 1970's, the concept of interim ministry was developed as a way of covering pastoral responsibilities until a new pastor could be found. However, an interim pastor does not necessarily help prepare a congregation for the future following long-term pastorates, particularly when they are experiencing trauma and conflict, or lack missional orientation. Transition ministry, conversely, focuses on preparing the congregation for calling new long-term pastoral leadership by fostering healing, clarifying identity, and focusing on purpose. Transition ministry is concerned

4. My ministry context was time-limited (12-18 months) in each of three congregational settings. The ministry context of this project, therefore, includes three distinct Mennonite congregations with which I served as a transition pastor, from June 2015 through December 2018.

with the spiritual and organizational health of congregations during times of transition, typically involving the departure of a pastor. The duration of a transition ministry in a congregation is typically twelve to twenty-four months. A transition pastor can help cultivate greater shared understanding, which in turn enables the congregation's search committee take a more focused process approach.

Ministry Context

There were striking resemblances and distinct dissimilarities among the congregations in my ministry context. The three congregations had contrasting practices, and were unique geographically, theologically, and organizationally. At the time of my research, all three congregations were affiliated with Mennonite Church USA (MCUSA).⁵ Despite inspiring stories of the past, each of the congregations struggled with diminishing membership and estrangement from their communities and neighbors. All three congregations expressed a longing to solve their present challenges and return to a time of perceived strength and vitality. In addition, they all were experiencing a leadership transition due to the retirement or resignation of a pastor.

A number of factors contributed to each congregation's decline and diminishment. They all were experiencing cultural disorientation, or a general sense of loss, causing them confusion and anxiety. The losses began with a decline in membership as well as a lack of involvement of people under the age of thirty. Their neighbors' expressed ambivalence towards the church, creating feelings of irrelevance led the congregations to question their future. Additionally, each congregation struggled with the loss of leadership and the general reluctance of members to step into the roles. Dealing

5. The Valparaiso Mennonite Church withdrew from MCUSA in the Winter of 2018.

with the disorientation resulted in some members wanting to become more resolute towards moral purity , thus clarifying the rightness of their doctrine in the face of apparent threats.

Each congregation had experienced the loss of a pastor resulting in uncertainty regarding how to move forward, leading them to search for a transition pastor. I was invited to serve the congregations based on my availability, experience, my growing experience in transitional ministry, and a recommendation from Regional Conference leadership.⁶ Serving these congregations in transition provided the ministry context of this project. It has fostered my passion for the work, vitality, and development of God's future Church. I have been inspired by the desire for wholeness that these three congregations have expressed during times of challenge and struggle.

Pursuing this three-congregation ministry context project was not without limitations. First, my role as a transitional pastor did not put me in a position of ongoing leadership or formal influence in the congregations. Rather, as a temporary voice I could not make decisions, implement strategies, or change structures based on the findings of my research. Second, I chose to explore the theology and praxis of congregational narrative identity and purpose, taking a long-view as a congregation discovered and embraced the story of God's church. In a climate dominated by church-growth tactics, congregations yearn for readymade solutions and interventions, rather than discernment and practices that shape a congregation over time.

I addressed these limitations by intentional and clear communication with each congregation. Additionally, I strove to equip leaders for their role in guiding

6. Valparaiso Mennonite Church contacted Design Group International, a consulting group to which I am connected, rather than seeking recommendations of the Regional Conference leadership.

congregations in the continuous process of discovery and engagement of their narrative identity and purpose. Ultimately important in addressing the above limitations, is the recognition that narrative ecclesiology is constantly being shaped by God's missional purposes. Regardless of the limitations, each of the three churches provided fertile soil for observation (ethnographic and narrative research) and engagement (exploring congregational practices of developing narrative ecclesiology).

Maple River Mennonite Church

The first ministry context congregation was Maple River Mennonite Church (MRMC). Formed around 1880, MRMC, the oldest active Mennonite church in the state of Michigan, is a small congregation that gathers weekly in a former one-room school building in the unincorporated village of Brutus, Michigan, just off US 31 between Petoskey and the Mackinaw Bridge.

Anxiety within the congregation was high due to a number of challenges. First was the ongoing search for a pastor. Three years after Pastor Jim retired in 2003, Pastor Rudy began serving the congregation. One year later, Rudy was killed in an auto accident. After three years of searching, the congregation welcomed Todd, a part-time hospital chaplain, as their pastor. After twelve months, Todd resigned due to an offer for a full-time chaplaincy position. Never a large congregation, MRMC faced a decline in active participation to about twenty-five people. In the past, the building was often full and there had been talk of expansion. In addition, the congregation included no children and only one person under the age of sixty (a woman in her mid-thirties) further contributing to the decline in membership.

The nearest Mennonite church to MRMC was eighty miles away. The center of the regional body, Indiana-Michigan Mennonite Conference (IMMC), was three hundred miles from Brutus. I served MRMC as Transition Pastor from July 2015 through June 2017.

Valparaiso Mennonite Church

Valparaiso Mennonite Church (VMC), in Valparaiso, Indiana, part of the IMMC, was started in 1966 as an offshoot of a church in the nearby village of Kouts. VMC's much loved pastor of 26 years retired in the summer of 2016 at which time the congregation's leaders began to reflect on decades of membership attrition and lack of a clear vision for the future.

Nurtured in a conservative-evangelical-literalism view of the Bible, a central concern for the congregation was, in their perspective, the Mennonite Church had become too "liberal" by allowing openness regarding same-sex relationships. For more than a decade, VMC had been entertaining the motion to disassociate itself from the conference and denomination. Near the end of 2016, I began a transitional role with VMC, which concluded in April 2018.

Hopedale Mennonite Church

In the early 1850's, Hopedale Amish-Mennonite Church (HMC) was started by Swiss-German Amish-Mennonite immigrants who settled in Central Illinois soon after arriving in the United States. The land was available and cheap because it was low and wet. The Amish-Mennonites, many of whom had been tenant farmers along the Rhine River (in Germany, Switzerland, and France), knew how to drain wetlands to reveal very fertile farm land. Once distinct from their neighbors because of their recent immigration,

community practices, and use of the Low German language, the Church slowly began to integrate into the community as they adopted English in worship (1903) and changed from “Amish-Mennonite” to “Mennonite” in 1925.

Until recently, HMC was one of the largest Mennonite congregations in central Illinois. Older members recalled Sunday mornings with 300 to 350 people gathered for worship. Over the last generation the congregation has seen a decline of large farming families. HMC has experienced approximately twenty years of decline as families had fewer children, many who went to college and found work away from home. Different perspectives, or rather unaddressed differences, led many others to leave HMC over the past two decades. Worship attendance fell to less than 100 people with very few children included. In November, 2017, I began as a transition pastor with HMC.

Broad Contextual Challenges: Christendom and Liminality

Maple River, Valparaiso, and Hopedale Mennonite Churches, like all Christian congregations in the West, have been marked by the social-ecclesiological experience of the state-church fusion introduced by fourth century Emperors Constantine and Theodosius. Commonly referred to as “Christendom,” this epoch of history is the story of the ruling powers’ endorsement of Christianity and the raising of the church from society’s margins to become a central institution of authority. Christendom also refers to a framework of thought, a philosophy not easily unlearned by the church hundreds of years after the dissolution of the church-state arrangement which began during the Protestant Reformation. Christendom describes the union of the state with the church which began in fourth-century Rome when Emperor Constantine adopted Christianity as his favored religion. This union subsequently granted the church authority and privilege

within society. Post-Christendom, began during the sixteenth-century Reformation. The demise of Christendom has been quite gradual through the centuries. Post-Christendom refers to a culture in which “churches are alien institutions whose rhythms do not normally impinge on most members of society.”⁷

“The decline and humiliation of Christendom,” writes Douglas John Hall, “is a process.”⁸ As Christendom has been unraveling over the past 500 years, the church has been involuntarily relocated back to the margins of society. Patrick Keifert speaks of the church’s *disestablishment* describing how the church, once a central fixture in American culture, has been pushed to the edges.⁹ The disestablishment of traditional Western Christianity, writes Hall,

“is experienced by all of us at levels of recognition that go deeper than our knowledge of church membership rolls, finances, and other readily quantifiable data...we have witnessed the advent of public attitudes toward religion that are vastly different from those that were prevalent [thirty to forty years ago]. Not only have we seen the rapid growth of an almost complete religionlessness on the part of our contemporaries; not only have we observed the erection, in our towns and cities, of temples, mosques, and pavilions of faiths known to us formerly out of storybooks of our youth; not only have we lived to see the proliferation of Christian sectarian groups and their elevation to high social visibility and even to the status of normative Christianity; not only have we observed how the instinct to belief may now satisfy itself in literally thousands of ways that have little or nothing to do with the Christianity that we took for granted; but beyond all that the discriminating among us have discerned the appearance of new attitudes toward the whole phenomenon of religion: that it is strictly an option; that it is a purely individual decision; that there is no reason why the children of believing parents should be considered potential members of religious communions; that religion may be useful, but truth does not apply to this category, and so on.”¹⁰

7. Murray, *Post-Christendom*, 1.

8. Douglas John Hall, *The End of Christendom and the Future of Christianity, Christian Mission and Modern Culture* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1996), 3.

9. Patrick R. Keifert, *We Are Here Now: A New Missional Era, a Missional Journey of Spiritual Discovery* (Eagle, ID: Allelon Publishing, 2006), 32-34.

10. Hall, *End of Christendom*, 38-39.

Unfortunately, many North American congregations and their leaders, through limited vision or lack of awareness, are bound to the church of Christendom. These congregations are undergoing unprecedented disorientation as they battle a besieged self-understanding and the loss of standing in their communities. The church's disestablishment has replaced confidence and certainty. Congregations are engulfed in marginalization and loss when their status/role in society has radically changed. With only the memory of the church's place of honor and strength in society, we move away from the edge of what we know, into an unknown future.

Cultural anthropologist Victor Turner, developed the concept of "liminality" (from the Latin *limen*, meaning "threshold") as a way of describing the experience of transition involved in change.¹¹ Congregations which acknowledge the losses brought about by change, and are willing to move toward a new identity, understand liminality as an experience of opportunity. Liminality for the North American church, therefore, is movement away from bondage to the patterns of Christendom, toward a future of trusting God's transformative Spirit.

Reeling from broad-sweeping changes in cultural relationships, congregations tend to take a passive stance feeling like something is being done to them. Hall suggests that the North American Christian community embrace this disestablishment as an opportunity to "engage in radical reassessment and reforming of our calling, our mission,

11. Victor W. Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure, The Lewis Henry Morgan Lectures* (New York, NY: Aldine de Gruyter, 1995). For a clear explanation of the concept of liminality see: "Liminality: The Space in Between," accessed Mar 10, 2016. <http://www.liminality.org/about/whatisliminality/>.

our structures and ministries.”¹² Doing so would enable the Church to grow in self-understanding and faithful obedience, therefore evolving into a new identity.

The Mennonite congregations in North America are generally small and geographically scattered.¹³ Based on a twelve-year-old survey of Mennonite Church USA, Conrad Kanagy reported, “The size of Mennonite congregations is slightly larger than the U.S. national average, where 71% of religious congregations have fewer than one hundred adult participants and the median attendance is fifty participating adults.”¹⁴ The weekly experience of most North American Mennonite congregations is prompting restless questions of sustainability: “What is our future when our children seem disinterested and move away?” “Is there any way to regain a place of significance in our community?” “How long can we continue to exist in this pattern of decline?”

The solution is not in expansive church buildings, nor is the answer for the church to wield the kind of influence it had during Christendom.¹⁵ As much as Christians grieve the loss of valued norms such as prayer in schools, the passing of Christendom has challenged the centrality of the church in society.

12 . Hall, *End of Christendom*, 20.

13. For example, the fifteen MCUSA congregations in Michigan are spread out over more than 400 miles: from Manistique to Liberty Township. The average distance between these congregations is about 60 miles.

14. Kanagy, Conrad L. *Road Signs for the Journey: A Profile of Mennonite Church USA* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2007), 30-51.; Powell, John. e-mail message to author, April 29, 2016. Estimated membership numbers for all the Northern Region churches, which generally tend to be greater than the actual number of people involved, is about 330 people, averaging a congregation of about 37 people.

15. “Christendom was a historical era, a geographic region, a political arrangement, a sacral culture, and an ideology.” Alan Kreider and Eleanor Kreider, *Worship and Mission after Christendom, After Christendom* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2011), 15.

Ecclesiological Themes

The experiences of my personal and pastoral journey, combined with invested ministry context, formed the foundation for determining the particular fields of study in this research project. With a personal desire for congregations to discover faithful engagement of God's call, I explored ecclesiological identity formation and engagement in time of loss. This area of interest and inquiry was placed within the specific ministry context of three Mennonite congregations who were seeking God's leading in an increasingly post-Christendom society.

Three ecclesiological themes were identified to address the practices which may lead to congregational (re)discovery of God's gift of identity and purpose: *Anabaptist ecclesiology*, *missional ecclesiology*, and *narrative theology*. Each theme is reviewed more detail later, but the rationale for selecting each one is described briefly below.

Anabaptist ecclesiology, or more specifically, the identity of the sixteenth-century Anabaptist movement, was chosen because it represents the radical heritage of present-day Mennonite congregations. Reviewing the early Anabaptist movement reflects the historic critique of Christendom. For congregations that assume Anabaptism is nothing more than a heritage story, it is time for a fresh look to discover the ways in which Anabaptist ecclesiology can shape the church's life today.

Missional ecclesiology was selected as a theme due to general confusion about missional language among Mennonite congregations in spite of the prevalence of the language in MCUSA and its regional conferences.¹⁶ As churches struggle to understand

16. George Hunsberger and Darrell Guder, pioneers of missional ecclesiology from Reformed traditions, pointed out in conversations with me that Anabaptist theologians and missiologists were partners in the missional movement from the beginning.

who they are, missional ecclesiology centers ecclesiology on the mission of God in the world. Rather than the common view that church is a Sunday event providing spiritual goods and services, missional ecclesiology calls on the church to be the hermeneutic of the gospel.¹⁷

Narrative theology emerged as a theme in conjunction with the development of this project's methodology. It also provides a bridge to understanding the Church's relationship to the historic-future story of God's creation of a people. Many Mennonite congregations have been polarized by the rhetoric of conservative versus liberal biblical interpretation, and narrative theology provides a framework for inviting congregations to lay aside their sectarian views of the Bible in order to be shaped by God's story.

Purpose

The significance of this project in my life and ministry is the potential for equipping me to serve as a catalyst of congregational transformation. Additionally, I hope that in the process of researching the areas of Anabaptist theology, missional ecclesiology, and narrative theology, new insights and connections might emerge. It is my desire that such learnings will bear significance for the missiological shape and purpose for Anabaptist congregations in a post-Christendom world, and reveal the possibilities of embracing narrative formation in Mennonite congregations.

Research Questions

There are two primary questions centering this project: 1) How does the discovery of identity and purpose take place within a congregation? 2) How does clarifying a

17. Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1989), 227.

church's understanding of its identity and purpose affect its ability to move forward with hope?

Assumptions and Limitations

This project makes four assumptions. The first assumption is the church in North American Western culture is in a state of transition from Christendom to Post-Christendom. The second assumption is that sixteenth century Anabaptism, as a theological and ecclesiological movement which rejected the state-church alliance, provides a witness to congregational identity in an increasingly Post-Christendom context. The third assumption is that a missional ecclesiology is crucial as churches reconsider their role in a Post-Christendom society. The fourth assumption is a narrative engagement provides congregations a hermeneutic for discovering and communicating their God-given identity and purpose.

Based on these assumptions, I hope that the engagement in this project will enable the context congregations to realize four objectives. First, that they will begin to recognize and understand their God-given identity and purpose. Second, that it will provide interaction with story of God in scripture. Third, that it will engage congregations in narrative practices. Fourth, that through this project, each congregation will take steps toward a hopeful future. In the final chapter of this thesis, I will look to these congregation's objectives for validation of the project's assumptions.

The primary limitations of this project are related to time, proximity, and the congregational participation. The limits of both time and proximity reveal the challenge of transition ministry with congregations which are geographically distant from my

home. In this respect, I am serving congregations as an outside observer. The most substantial limitation is the willingness of churches to participate in learning together.

Research Design

In her book, *The Story of Discipleship: Christ, Humanity and Church in Narrative Perspective*, Elizabeth Barnes claims that narrative, particularly the biblical narrative, has the capacity to shape us and our worldview.¹⁸ “The power of the Spirit,” writes Barnes, “is the power to interlace the biblical narratives with humankind’s multitudinous narrative so that transformation occurs and the true story is told.”¹⁹

This project is grounded in narrative research methodology. Narrative methodology attends to the lived stories of the people involved in the context, in the case of this project, it focuses on the experience of a congregation. D. Jean Clandinin, a pioneer in the use of narrative research, describes the narrative process as “living, telling, retelling, and reliving stories.”²⁰ Carl Savage and William Presnell, in their book *Narrative Research in Ministry*, describe a narrative methodology for faith communities which involves four foundational research practices: 1) clarifying the situation, 2) uncovering the narratives, 3) reflecting on other relevant stories, and 4) rewriting the congregation’s story.²¹

18. Elizabeth B. Barnes, *The Story of Discipleship: Christ, Humanity, and Church in Narrative Perspective* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1995).

19. *Ibid.*, 9.

20. D. Jean Clandinin and F. Michael Connelly, *Narrative Inquiry: Experience and Story in Qualitative Research* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 2000), 71.; D. Jean Clandinin, *Engaging in Narrative Inquiry, Developing Qualitative Inquiry* (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, Inc., 2013).

21. Carl Presnell and William Savage, *Narrative Research in Ministry: A Postmodern Research Approach for Faith Communities* (Louisville, KY: Wayne E. Oats Institute, 2008), 88-90.

The first practice for Savage and Presnell is clarifying the *theological situation* of the congregation. This involves identifying the concern or opportunity which the congregation is facing. In transitional ministry this is central to the reason for the transition itself and is typically expressed in early conversations with the church's leaders. Clarifying the theological situation requires asking the question, "Why is this concern or opportunity theologically meaningful?"²²

The second practice in narrative research is to invite people to *tell the story* while listening for common themes, meanings, symbols, and language. This practice is facilitated by ethnography, which is the study of the congregation through face-to-face interviewing and observation in group interaction. Inviting people to tell their story requires the establishment of an environment that is viewed as safe. Mary Clark Moschella, in her book *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice*, writes that ethnography is a way of entering the life of a people group in order to learn about and from them.²³

The third practice in narrative research is to consult *research stories* relevant to the congregation's concern or opportunity. Research stories are relevant histories, research findings, and other narratives which function to bring new shape to the congregation's story. Examples of research stories utilized in this project include the creation of a *collective memory timeline*, summaries of group interaction, and retelling stories of Anabaptist and missional ecclesiologies.

The fourth practice in narrative research is to cultivate the development of a *preferred or altered story* through reflecting on the larger narratives that illuminate the

22. Ibid., 88.

23. Mary Clark Moschella, *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice: An Introduction* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2008), 4.

congregation's concern or opportunity. The emerging narrative, or preferred story, represents the congregation's understanding of "what could or should be."

Findings and Conclusions

The findings of my research were lifted out of the narrative expressions of identity and purpose of each context congregation as they sought direction moving forward. When brought into conversation with the ecclesiological themes of early Anabaptism, missional ecclesiology, and narrative theology, the conclusions open new approaches for helping Mennonite congregations to embrace God's calling.

Summary

Many Mennonite congregations have been unable to resurrect their identity from the recent North American Christian past, rather than through the discovery of God's vision for present and future realities. This can be attributed significantly to a nostalgia for the strength and vitality derived from the Church's Christendom legacy. The inheritance left by Christendom includes a number of corrupting narratives of mutual affection between the Church and society. There may be no better description of these corrupting narratives than these four words offered by Walter Brueggemann: "technological, therapeutic, military consumerism."²⁴

The goal of this project is to explore the capacity of congregations to release narratives bound in Christendom and discover identity as God's people using God's narrative of reality (God's present-future reign). I suggest that with an identity rooted in

24. Walter Brueggemann and Patrick D. Miller, *The Word That Redescribes the World: The Bible and Discipleship* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2006), 104-105.

God's narrative, congregations understand that their purpose is to be a sign, foretaste, and instrument of God's reign in the world.²⁵

I have a specific objective for each of the following four chapters. In Chapter 2, I will explore the following themes: Anabaptist ecclesiology, missional ecclesiology, and narrative theology. I intend to identify resources which may benefit Mennonite congregations in the discovery of their God-given identity and purpose. Chapter 3, will describe my research engagement with my ministry context. I will outline descriptions and outcomes following ethnographic research and narrative process in three Mennonite congregations in transition. In Chapter 4, I will return to themes and resources explored earlier, considering any short-comings and contributions they offer. In the final Chapter, I will submit an evaluation of, and offer some proposals for, a narrative approach for discovering congregational identity.

25. Lesslie Newbigin, *Mission in Christ's Way: A Gift, a Command, an Assurance* (New York, NY: Friendship Press, 1987), 12.

Chapter 2

Congregational Identity and Purpose Themes

This chapter explores literature and themes in the fields of early Anabaptism, missional ecclesiology, and narrative theology, in relation to the research interests of this project. Research areas were selected based on the intersection of the experiences of the context-congregations and my perception of what may be helpful. I wish to explore essential themes in each field which may provide alternatives to the dominant narratives of Christendom still shaping the identity of congregations. An exploration of these themes hold great promise for reshaping local Mennonite congregational ecclesial vision and witness. Themes in each of these three areas were presented to congregations through the practices of preaching, teaching, focus group input, and leadership formation.

Themes in Early Anabaptist Ecclesiology

There are multiple and diverse understandings of what is meant by “Anabaptist.” For most, the word “Anabaptist” is an ambiguous label differentiating those who are a part of a group which claims historical connection to the Anabaptist tradition.¹ Others, make a personal claim on the label of Anabaptist by a theological affinity, including many who add “neo” to the title demarking them as Anabaptist by choice rather than one who is born into the faith tradition. I suggest that the truest understanding of Anabaptism is more about theological praxis than a label. Still, because the congregations of my ministry context were Mennonite from inception, they have to varying degrees, been formed within the tradition of Anabaptism. These Mennonite congregations, like others

1. Traditional Anabaptist groups include Amish, Hutterites, and Mennonites.

which are steeped in Christendom, struggle today to understand the difference their Anabaptist heritage makes related to their practical identity and purpose.

Identifying the essential themes in Anabaptism is particularly difficult. When asked to identify core themes of Anabaptism, John D. Roth, editor of *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* and director of The Institute for the Study of Global Anabaptism, responded:

This has been a matter of intense discussion and debate among historians, theologians, and congregations interested in *restoring* the essential themes. To summarize essential themes is more presumptuous than I would want to do. I think H. S. Bender's *Anabaptist Vision*² has been useful in as much as it has been portable. It's an idealization, a transferring of practices into ideals. And so you can say 'the church is defined by community, the gospel of peace, and discipleship.' ...And yet we know that how those themes actually get embodied in practice is still highly contested – in positive as well as negative ways.³

According to Roth, there are 103 different Anabaptist groups included in the Mennonite World Conference (MWC). In 2015, they adopted a statement of shared convictions, "but it is rather general and it will be tested."⁴ The MWC statement includes the following seven characteristics of contemporary Anabaptist belief and practice:

First, a Trinitarian understanding of God "who seeks to restore fallen humanity by calling a people to be faithful in fellowship, worship, service and witness." Second, an understanding of Christ's model of life and calling to disciples. Third, the church is understood as a community under the lordship of Christ, baptized upon confession of faith, and "following Christ in life." Fourth, the Bible is the church's authority, is interpreted in community led by the Spirit, and is intended to reveal God's will for the church to obey. Fifth, followers of Jesus become peacemakers who renounce violence, love enemies, seek justice, and share with those in need. Sixth, the church gathers to worship, "celebrate the Lord's Supper, and to hear the Word of God in a spirit of mutual accountability." Finally, in recognition of the global community of faith, the church will not conform to evil, serve others, care for creation, and invite all people to faith in Jesus Christ. The

2. Harold Stauffer Bender, *The Anabaptist Vision* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1944).

3. John D. Roth interviewed by Steve Slagel, November 18, 2015, Goshen, IN.

4. Ibid.

statement ends with this summary: “In these convictions we draw inspiration from Anabaptist forebears of the 16th century, who modeled radical discipleship to Jesus Christ. We seek to walk in his name by the power of the Holy Spirit, as we confidently await Christ’s return and the final fulfillment of God’s kingdom.”⁵

Historiography of Anabaptist Ecclesiology

The process of creating a statement of Anabaptist theology and practice, along with testing and refining it, is essential for building a present understanding of Anabaptist ecclesiology. Still, it seems important to comprehend the ecclesiological formation in the early years (sixteenth-century) of the Anabaptist movement. Who was the sixteenth-century Anabaptist community? Why did they form and what was their reason for continuing? How did they embody core convictions of beliefs and practices?

Historians Franklin H. Littell and William Estep, neither of whom are self-professing Anabaptists, provide a historiography that suggests sixteenth-century Anabaptism has much to offer today’s church.⁶ The challenge that Littell engages is in uncovering an essential ecclesiology of Anabaptism from the movement’s origin story. Among the many sixteenth-century groups which broke from the established Church, Littell suggests that Anabaptists were distinct in the constancy of their “concern for the restitution of the ‘True Church.’”⁷ Littell concludes that “the Anabaptist life is especially relevant to present problems in sectarian Protestantism, and in the Free Churches in

5. Mennonite World Conference. “Shared Convictions.” Mennonite World Conference. July 2015. Accessed November 2015. https://www.mwc-cmm.org/sites/default/files/website_files/shared_convictions_en.pdf.

6. Franklin H. Littell, *The Anabaptist View of the Church: a Study in the Origins of Sectarian Protestantism* (Boston, MA: Starr King Press, 1958).; William Roscoe Estep, *The Anabaptist Story: An Introduction to Sixteenth-Century Anabaptism* (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1996).

7. Littell, *Anabaptist View*, xvi.

general; coming to grips with the Anabaptist church view has both historical and contemporary significance.”⁸

In the *Anabaptist Story*, Estep narrates the history of Anabaptism beginning with the first days of the Reformation launched by the 1517 publication of Martin Luther’s Ninety-five Theses. The Swiss Reformation began in 1519 with Ulrich Zwingli, whose teachings largely paralleled Luther’s. With the revolutionary practice of preaching directly from the Bible, Zwingli attracted fame and was called the “People’s Priest.” In addition to his acceptance of *sola scriptura*, Zwingli opposed the Swiss mercenary system and the church’s selling of indulgences. Under the leadership of Zwingli and the Zurich city council, the reformation was making slow, orderly change. “He never broke, however, with the cultural and political life of the Swiss city-states....”⁹ Conrad Grebel, Felix Manz, and other associates of Zwingli were growing impatient with the pace and depth of change.

On January 21, 1525, following the order by the Zurich council to stop disseminating their views, these “radicals” met in a nearby village and baptized each other. This event marks the birth of Anabaptism, according to Estep, who writes,

“With this first baptism, the earliest church of the Swiss Brethren was constituted. This was clearly the most revolutionary act of the reformation. No other event so completely symbolized the break with Rome. Here for the first time in the course of the Reformation, a group of Christians dared to form a church after what was conceived to be the New Testament pattern.”¹⁰

8. Ibid., 160-161.

9. Ibid., 51. Littell states, “the radicals (Grebel, Manz, Baurock, Reublin) who left [Zwingli] and went beyond him were following the logic of his message.”

10. Estep, *Anabaptist Story*, 14.

Later, detractors named them Anabaptists. “The word ‘Anabaptist’ is a Latin derivative of the Greek original *anabaptismos* (re-baptism),” meaning one who re-baptizes.¹¹ The Anabaptists themselves denied that they were in fact re-baptizing since, in their view, infant baptism was not true baptism.

For historians like Estep, Anabaptism began as a movement of the Swiss Brethren and spread to southern Germany, Austria, the Netherlands, and northern Germany, where it evolved into various sects. The story told this way identifies Anabaptism as an ancillary movement of the Reformation, “a correction of a correction, ...the completion and conclusion of the whole reformation.”¹²

Recent historiography suggests that the genesis of Anabaptism was a diverse phenomenon developing simultaneously among Swiss, southern German, and Dutch Reformers. Historical origins identify Anabaptism as a distinct movement of reformation, rather than a branch of the Magisterial Reformation.

The scope of Anabaptism’s genesis indicates that the movement developed rapidly (1525 to 1530) in various places with independent impetus. The story of Swiss Anabaptism, briefly re-told above, began as a movement of true congregationalism. South German Anabaptism was rooted in German mysticism with an emphasis on inner holiness. Dutch Anabaptism came together through social unrest and leader Melchior Hoffman’s apocalyptic visions.

While the relationship of Anabaptism to the Reformation is re-interpreted and the theological voices become more complex by recent historiography, undeniable

11. Littell, *Anabaptist View*, xi.

12. Cornelius J. Dyck, *A Legacy of Faith; the Heritage of Menno Simons* (Newton, KS: Faith and Life Press, 1962), 79.

ecclesiological values emerge that can provide a narrative influence for the church today. “As a rule, Anabaptist theologians did not live very long, nor did they erect elaborate speculative systems of theology.”¹³ Ecclesiological values, however, grew out of the Anabaptist’s experience of life together as they sought to embody the true church.

Voluntary Participation

Central to Anabaptism’s ecclesiological foundation was the emphasis on voluntary participation and renewal vision, based on the church of the New Testament.¹⁴ Expressions of voluntary association and adherence to the New Testament model are consistently found in early Anabaptist writing in response to what was viewed as the failure of the Church. “The whole idea of the recovery of New Testament Christianity is tied up with the thought that at some point in Christian history the pattern was lost.”¹⁵ The Anabaptist belief in the fall of the Church was shared by most Reformers with one very significant difference. Reformers attributed the fall of the Church to practices that they considered corrupt, such as the sale of indulgences. Anabaptists were certainly concerned about such venality, however, they saw it as symptomatic of the Church’s union with the state. The fall of the Church, in the estimation of Anabaptists, progressed through events from Constantine, the rise of Christianity as the State religion (c. 324), the Christian Church’s dependence on the State, and acquiescence to war and military service.¹⁶ Anabaptists responded to this failure by striving to become the *true church* of the New Testament which necessitated a non-compulsory community.

13. Estep, *Anabaptist Story*, 177.

14. Littell, *Anabaptist View*, 46.

15. *Ibid.*, 55.

16. *Ibid.*, 56.

Recovery of the New Testament Church

Outside the ecclesiological foundation of the New Testament model, there is little agreement among Anabaptist researchers on any complete view of the movement's distinctives. William Estep follows a traditional historiography. He identifies early Anabaptist practices of believer's baptism and the Lord's supper and the emphasis on community ethics of mutual accountability and discipleship. In addition, Estep points to the Anabaptist's repeated references to the Great Commission of Matthew 28 in their writing and testimony. Mennonite scholar, CJ Dyck, summarizes the Anabaptist vision as radical commitment to the authority of scripture; dependence on the Holy Spirit to lead the community to be of one mind; necessary obedience in following Christ in life; a loving concern for others and refusal to cause harm as taught and practiced by Christ; free and voluntary belonging enacted through adult baptism; a community formed and maintained through mutual admonition ("The Rule of Christ"); and mutual support for each person's well-being.¹⁷

In defining the development of the Believers' Church, historian Donald Durnbaugh begins, interestingly, with Martin Luther.¹⁸ Luther may have expressed the first post-Christendom understanding of the kind of church sixteenth-century Anabaptists sought to form. In Luther's "Preface to the German Mass and Order of Service," written in 1526, he lists the following characteristic elements for the church: 1) a community of free and voluntary participation; 2) a community of faith and life; 3) a community

17. Cornelius J. Dyck, *An Introduction to Mennonite History: A Popular History of the Anabaptists and the Mennonites* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1981), 136-145.

18. Donald F. Durnbaugh, *The Believers' Church: The History and Character of Radical Protestantism* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1985). Durnbaugh writes that the term "Believers' Church" was first used by Max Weber to describe Anabaptists and Quakers; Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York, NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958), 144-145.

committed to mutual development and mission; 4) a community of mutual accountability; 5) a community of mutual generosity; and 6) a community of the Spirit.¹⁹ Luther, “concluded that this was an impractical dream, and that to be realistic, given the mixed multitude, he would have to turn to the prince in order to get on with the task of securing the Reformation.”²⁰

Menno Simons, the sixteenth century Anabaptist leader whose followers became known as Mennonites, offered a similar definition of the *true church*: 1) “the salutatory and unadulterated doctrine of [God’s] holy and divine Word”; 2) “the right and scriptural use of the sacraments of Christ”; 3) “obedience to the holy Word...in Christian life which is of God”; 4) “sincere and unfeigned love for one’s neighbor”; 5) “the name, will, Word, and ordinance of Christ... confidently confessed in the face of all cruelty, tyranny, tumult, fire, sword, and violence of the world”; and 6) “the pressing cross of Christ, which is borne for the sake of his testimony and Word.”²¹ Both Luther’s and Menno’s lists “suggest that it is not a simple task to define the nature and mission of the true church.”²² History has shown that it is even more challenging for people to embody such ecclesiological ideals.

Anabaptist Vision: Jesus, Community, and Reconciliation

At the December 1943 meeting of the American Society of Church History, then President Harold S. Bender delivered a 30 minute address titled “The Anabaptist

19. Ibid., 3.

20. Ibid., 4.

21. *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons*, ed. J.C. Wenger, trans. Leonard Verduin (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1956), 739-741.

22. John Driver, *Life Together in the Spirit: A Radical Spirituality for the Twenty-First Century* (Walden, NY: Plough Publishing House, 2015), 36.

Vision.”²³ Bender began this speech by offering a synopsis of the Anabaptists’ role in the Protestant Reformation. As a historian addressing historians, Bender’s objective focused on acclaiming Anabaptism as a worthy movement of Reformation history. In the second half of his address, Bender presented three essential principles of the Anabaptist movement.

The first essential principle was the concept of Christianity as discipleship to Jesus. The very heart of Anabaptism, according to Bender, was the transformation of the believer according to the life and teachings of Jesus. Furthermore, the life and teachings of Jesus should be the lens through which all God’s revelation are understood. The second essential principle in the Anabaptist vision centers on the church as a voluntary fellowship of disciples. Voluntary community, stands in stark contrast to Christendom, which legislated the entire church membership from cradle to grave. Rejection of the state church relationship for Anabaptists led to the “highest standard of New Testament living and an insistence on the separation of the church from the world, that is nonconformity of the Christian to the worldly way of life.”²⁴ The third essential principle centered on Christian ethics related to love and nonresistance. Anabaptists were committed to “complete abandonment of all warfare, strife, and violence, and the taking of human life.”²⁵

Bender’s *Anabaptist Vision* became a defining expression of values for congregations. It served to describe Anabaptism to the American Church in the midst of

23. Harold S. Bender, "The Anabaptist Vision," *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* 18 (April 1944): 67-88.

24. *Ibid.*, 85.

25. *Ibid.*, 87.

World War II. Its three essential principles have largely been considered by Mennonites as a foundational source of identity since 1944. In 2008, Bender's vision was reintroduced by Palmer Becker in an issue of Mennonite Mission Network's publication, *Missio Dei*, entitled "What is an Anabaptist Christian?"²⁶ Drawing heavily on Bender's three distinctives of Anabaptist vision, Becker iterated the "core values of Anabaptist Christians" in three statements: "1. Jesus is the center of our faith.; 2. Community is the center of our lives.; and 3. Reconciliation is the center of our work."²⁷ In 2017, Becker's book *Anabaptist Essentials*, presents the Christian faith through the perspective of these same basic concepts (Jesus, community, and reconciliation).²⁸ Through his reworking of Bender's vision, Becker provides an updated perspective that succinctly describes contemporary Anabaptism.

One significant critique of the classic three distinctives of Jesus, community, and reconciliation, as presented by Bender and reinterpreted by Becker, is the lack of recognition that Anabaptism was rooted in, and fueled by, an undeniable mission impulse. The mission impulse faded as later generations of Anabaptists sought to live quietly away from threats of misunderstanding and persecution. Missiologist, Wilbert Shenk wrote, "Anabaptism is a *historical* phenomenon. Anabaptism is a specific religious reform movement of the sixteenth century."²⁹

26. Palmer Becker, "What Is an Anabaptist Christian?" *Missio Dei* 18 (2008), accessed March 2019, <https://www.mennonitemission.net/Downloads/DL.MissioDei18.E.pdf>.

27. *Ibid.*, 2.

28. Palmer Becker, *Anabaptist Essentials: Ten Signs of a Unique Christian Faith* (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 2017).

29. Wilbert Shenk, "A Traditioned Theology of Mission," in *By Faith They Went Out: Mennonite Missions, 1850-1999* (Elkhart, IN: IMS, 2000), 111.

Shenk goes on to offer a contrasting definition of “Mennonite” or “Mennonitism:”

Mennonitism, as it evolved in the seventeenth century, was what survived the persecution of the Anabaptists in the sixteenth century. The price of survival was to come terms with the larger society, that is, the world. In other words, survival was contingent on accommodation to the demands and reality of society at large.³⁰

Most Mennonites viewed accommodation as a way to minimize persecution without giving in to the demands of society. The socio-cultural accommodation of Mennonites runs directly counter to Anabaptism’s commitment to an ecclesiological vision that was in stark contrast to the State and the Church of the sixteenth-century. Accommodation for Mennonites led to significant shifts away from Anabaptism’s historic and theological identity, thereby forgetting the Jesus centered ethical foundation and instinctive purpose of mission and witness. In contrast to the dynamic mission impulse of Anabaptism, says Shenk, the Mennonite preoccupation with conservation created a mindset and ethos of ambivalence towards mission.³¹

Anabaptist missionary, pastor, and professor, John Driver wrote a small book, *Life Together in the Spirit*, presenting the radical spiritual practices of the early church and sixteenth century Anabaptists.³² Driver concludes the ecclesiological characteristics that sixteenth-century Anabaptists endeavored to embody:

1. *Theology of the Spirit*. It was inspired by the Spirit of the Living Christ.
2. *Biblical Authority and Interpretation*. It was oriented by the Scriptures, read and interpreted in the faith community.
3. *Vision of the Church*. It was consciously corporate – nourished and shared in the context of the community.

30. Ibid., 112.

31. Ibid., 113.

32. Driver, *Life Together*.

4. *Christ and Salvation*. It was a Christ-centered spirituality of discipleship in which following Jesus was neither the privilege of an unusually committed minority, nor reserved for a “spiritual” elite, but the calling of the entire community of Christ.
5. *Justice and Peace*. It was characterized by a commitment to justice and peace in every aspect of life, as expressed by the biblical term “shalom.”
6. *Missionary Vocation*. It expressed itself by participating fully in God’s saving mission in the world, a mission that anticipated, announced, and embodied the reign of God in this world.³³

These six characteristics were not merely a set of theological ideals, but the aspirations of

Anabaptist life lived together. Driver wrote,

“In a context where the marks of the true church were understood largely in static or abstract categories – such as a ‘sacramental communion’ (Catholic), a custodian of sound doctrine and worship practices (Reformed), or ‘where the Word is preached in truth and the sacraments are celebrated correctly’ (Luther) – the Anabaptist vision of the church was outrageously bold. The Anabaptists viewed the church as the community of brothers and sisters authorized to interpret scripture in order to practice the ‘rule of Christ,’ that is, to communicate God’s forgiveness [by reconciliation].”³⁴

Engagement with Anabaptist Ecclesiology

It is a significant challenge for Mennonite congregations to understand and appropriate the early Anabaptist ecclesiological formation and witness. Many congregations have accepted the safe and domesticated identity of “Mennonite-ism.” Anabaptism, as a movement, claimed the ecclesiological story of church of the New Testament against the competing stories of accommodation to the state church. They resisted accommodation and domestication with their life together based on the ecclesiological scripture narrative. Could such a radical prophetic witness have the power to rouse present-day Mennonite Congregations to a transformed ecclesiological story? Can Mennonite congregations embrace the distinctiveness of their Anabaptist story

33. Ibid., 66-74.

34. Ibid., 68.

against the competing stories of today's social polarization and civil religion? I have attempted to present Anabaptist ecclesiology as a normative narrative to the three congregations included in this project.

Themes in Missional Ecclesiology

George Hunsberger said that when the collaborating authors of *Missional Church: A Vision For the Sending of the Church in North America*, were choosing a title for the book, they realized that "Missiological Ecclesiology" would not be appealing for people in congregations.³⁵ Their work was missiological because it was rooted in the history, theology, and practice, of Christian mission. Furthermore, their missiological focus was inseparably connected to the core identity of the church, or ecclesiology. While the phrase "Missional Church" has found its way into common church vocabulary, there is so much more behind these simple words.

The missional conversation has "gone viral," and a flood of missional definitions, images, models, and lists, have been propagated in the process, making clarity and understanding extremely difficult.³⁶ Alan Roxburgh and Scott Boren state, "Missional church has become a label used to describe practically everything a church does."³⁷ The challenge is, "once we offer a model of missional church, the focus of our imagination turns to internal questions about how to do missional church correctly or how we can measure ourselves against this predetermined model."³⁸ Because many prefer to define

35. George Hunsberger, interviewed by Steve Slagel, Western Theological Seminary, Holland, MI, May 16, 2016.

36. A Google web search on the word "missional" nets about 727,000 results. November 29, 2015.

37. Alan J Roxburgh, M. Scott Boren, and Mark Priddy, *Introducing The Missional Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2009), 31.

38. *Ibid.*, 22.

missional ecclesiology as a church renewal program, Roxburgh and Boren, like most diligent missional practitioners, are reluctant to articulate a list of elements, or answer questions such as: What is the essential definition of missional ecclesiology? How was it formed and refined? How do congregations embrace and practice an ecclesiology that is missional?

In following the missional stream back to its source, essential themes emerge. These themes illustrate that missional ecclesiology, as a theological study of the church, is not so much about *what the church does (programs and activities)* as it is about *what the church is (identity)*.

Historiography of Missional Ecclesiology

The book *Missional Church*, was a project of the Gospel and Our Culture Network (GOCN), an organization that sought to advance in North America the global discussions of *missio Dei* (“the mission of God”) and Leslie Newbigin’s missionary and theological reflection.³⁹ According to *Missional Church*, the North American church had become tethered to Christendom focusing on self-preservation and societal privilege. As Christendom recedes, the church faces an opportunity to rediscover its identity as a people sent into the world by God as a witness to God’s reign.

Missional ecclesiology developed decades earlier in a time of global mission awakening. Significant mission shifts were underway when the International Missionary Council (IMC) conference met in Tambaram, India, in 1938. Rather than an ongoing discussion of how the Christian West could carry out mission to the rest of the world, the central focus of the conference was on the role of younger churches in missionary work.

39. Darrell L. Guder, et al., *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1998).

This is understandable since more than half of the conference's delegates represented non-Western churches. Furthermore, conference delegates began to consider the West as a potential mission field. "In a world context where peace was increasingly threatened by fascist-type regimes (Germany, Italy, Portugal, Spain, Japan), the discussions focused on the importance and centrality of the church (in particular the local church) in mission."⁴⁰

In 1947, still dealing with the after-effects of World War II, the IMC Conference met in Whitby, Canada. A spirit of rebuilding and reconciliation was evident in the conference's slogan, "partnership in obedience." Distinctions between young and old Churches, and Western and non-Western countries, were disappearing as the IMC affirmed that the mission field was global.

The formation of the Communist State in China around 1949, Chairman Mao's discouragement of formal religion, and the exit of missionaries from the country, seemed like a lethal blow to Christian mission world-wide. However, when the IMC Council met in Willingen, Germany in 1952, the rediscovery of *missio Dei* (mission as the purpose and action of the Triune God) provided the beginning of mission vision renewal.

Missiologist Michael Goheen says, "at Willingen we find a shattering of all the colonial and Christendom assumptions that captured mission in the earlier part of the century."⁴¹

Lesslie Newbigin authored the conference summary statement which included this expression of *missio Dei*: "the Father sent the Son to reconcile all things; the Son sent the Spirit to gather and empower the Church; and the Church is now sent to continue Jesus' mission."

40. World Council of Churches website: <http://www.mission2005.org/Tamaram.561.0.html>, accessed July 2019.

41. *Ibid.*, 69.

Most significant in the history of world mission challenge and response, was the theological-ecclesiological-pragmatic move from church-centered to God-centered mission. Beginning in the mid-1950's, the central question in missiology was about the relationship of the Church to mission. In 1962, Johannes Blauw wrote *The Missionary Nature of the Church*, in which he reflected on the mission conversation from the previous 30 years regarding the Church's calling.⁴² Blauw concluded that "the Church is a missionary Church or it is no Church," and "there is no other Church than the Church sent into the world, and there is no other mission than that of the Church of Christ."⁴³

In 1966, the World Council of Churches study project titled, "The missionary structure of the congregation" advocated rearrangement of the traditional sequence of God-church-world to God-world-church.⁴⁴ Dutch missiologist Johannes Hoekendijk was a major contributor to the project and likely the primary influence in this shift. Hoekendijk had been a participant in the IMC Council meeting in Willingen 1952 and had been critical of the missionary community's preoccupation with church. Mission, according to Hoekendijk, does not take place between the church and the world, but between the world and God's kingdom. Hoekendijk's views were directly opposed to others at Willingen, who believed that God's action in the world was facilitated in and through the church. While Hoekendijk's missiological perspectives were viewed with skepticism throughout the mission community, he was instrumental in the shift away from church-centered mission.

42. Johannes Blauw, *The Missionary Nature of the Church: a Survey of the Biblical Theology of Mission* (New York, NY: McGraw-Hill, 1962).

43. *Ibid.*, 120-121.

44. Bert Hoedemaker, "The Legacy of J. C. Hoekendijk," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, October (1955): 168.

Mission-Shaped Church

The shift away from church-shaped mission became an opportunity for renewing a mission-shaped church identity and purpose. In his book, *The Open Secret*, Lesslie Newbigin shares his observations of returning to the church in England after his missionary service in India in 1974. He noticed the church had come to view mission as its own program and initiative.⁴⁵ Spurred by Newbigin's work, the movement embraced the mission of "God's initiative, rooted in God's purposes to restore and heal creation."⁴⁶ Missional is "not to make a proposal, not to commend one type of church over other types, not to claim that a church is somehow incomplete or inadequate until it adds this to its programs. It is simply a statement of fact. Missional says what the church is."⁴⁷

Missional ecclesiology's use of *missio Dei* is synonymous with the reign of God, a gift to be received, and a realm to be entered.⁴⁸ God's reign is characterized by shalom (justice, peace, wholeness, and joy).⁴⁹ In the New Testament, "good news" is defined by Jesus' announcement that the reign of God comes as clearly seen in Jesus' teaching, healing, and liberating. Reflecting on Jesus' reading of the Isaiah scroll in Luke 4:16-21, Newbigin says that Jesus "is the proclamation of a new king in the messianic tradition. It is the function of a just ruler, a true king, to bring deliverance to the oppressed. This is an

45. Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret* (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1978).

46. Guder, *Missional Church*. 4.

47. George R. Hunsberger. "Missional is...What difference does it make when you put the word *missional* in front of the word *church*?" Presentation at Western Theological Seminary, Holland, MI, December 2, 2014.

48. Hunsberger, "Missional Vocation" in *Missional Church*, 94-95.

49. *Ibid.*, 90-91.

application of the Davidic strand in Old Testament teaching about the kingdom.”⁵⁰ As a declaration of his mission, Jesus was announcing the physical presence of the kingdom of God. The reign of God presently overcomes sin, evil, death, principalities and powers as it ushers in reconciliation of all things (new creation).⁵¹ Therefore, missional theology of God’s reign is also eschatological.⁵² Jesus announces that God’s reign is both present and future. “It is precisely in this creative tension that the reality of God’s reign has significance for our contemporary mission.”⁵³

The Sending Nature of God

A theology of the Trinity is another essential theme in missional ecclesiology. God’s mission depends not on the church, but on the identity and project of the Triune God. Early in the 20th century, Karl Barth “stressed that ‘the term *missio* was in the ancient Church an expression of the doctrine of the trinity – namely the expression of the divine sending forth of self, the sending of the Son and Holy Spirit to the world.”⁵⁴ Newbigin understood “the work of the Triune God as *calling* and *sending* the church through the Spirit into the world to participate fully in God’s mission....”⁵⁵ Rather than originating in the imagination of the church, missional ecclesiology recognized the

50. Lesslie Newbigin, *Sign Of The Kingdom* (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1981).

51. Lois Barrett, presentation, “What’s Mennonite about missional church?” Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary.

52. Guder, *Missional Church*, 11-12.

53. Bosch, *Transforming*, 32.

54. Craig Van Gelder and Dwight J Zscheile, *The Missional Church In Perspective* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 26-27.; Karl Barth in *Classic Texts in Mission and World Christianity*, ed. Norman E. Thomas (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995), 106.

55. Bosch, *Transforming*, 38.

church is participating in the sending of the Triune God. Mission is not an activity of the church but “an attribute of God.”⁵⁶

Sign, Foretaste, Instrument of God’s Reign

In 1986, Lesslie Newbigin spoke at the meeting of the synod of the Church of South India, encouraging the church not to be distracted by debates between the proclamation of the kingdom and engagement in acts of justice. The kingdom of God is not only to be proclaimed as a future reality, it must also be understood and embraced as present reality. “The church,” he said, “is only true to its calling when it is a sign, and instrument and foretaste of the kingdom.”⁵⁷ In *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, Newbigin reiterated these words by writing that congregations must “renounce an introverted concern for their own life, and recognize that they exist for the sake of those who are not members, as a sign, instrument, and foretaste of God’s redeeming grace for the whole life of society.”⁵⁸

Just as God called the family of Abraham to be a light to the nations, the church is called for a mission, not as God’s favorite people. “In accord with this theological understanding, the church is understood to be the ‘hermeneutic of the gospel.’ It exists in the world as a ‘sign’ that the redemptive reign of God is already fully present. It serves as a ‘foretaste’ that the eschatological future of the redemptive reign has already begun. It also serves as an ‘instrument’ under the leadership of the Spirit to bring that redemption reign to bear on every human dimension of life.”⁵⁹

56. Ibid., 390.

57. Newbigin, *Mission in Christ's Way: A Gift, a Command, an Assurance*, 12.

58. Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 233.

59. Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 124.

George Hunsberger writes that the church serves God's reign as *community*, *servant*, and *messenger*.⁶⁰ Each of these words describes the way in which the church embodies the reign of God in the world. The community of God's reign speaks of being a distinct people with a corporate sense of vocation. The church is a servant of God's example of Jesus' response to human need. As the messenger of God's reign, the church proclaims its presence and authority in the world. Extending Newbigin's sign-foretaste-instrument paradigm, Hunsberger says, "If in our being the church, the world *sees* God's reign, and by our doing justice, the world *tastes* its gracious effect, then the call to all on earth to receive and acknowledge that reign begs to be expressed."⁶¹ Whether we use the words "sign," "messenger," or "witness," missional ecclesiology stresses the word's indicative nature. "When Jesus said, 'You will be my witnesses' (Acts 1:8), he was not issuing a command but making a statement about the nature of his followers. Likewise, the New Testament's metaphors for believers – salt, light, fishers, stars, letters, ambassadors, and good seed – are never made into imperatives. They are always indicative, attesting that mission is the natural activity of the church."⁶²

Particular Community

In 1996, two years prior to the publication of *Missional Church*, Inagrace Dietterich had already identified four secular ways of thinking that impact healthy congregational identity: 1) "anti-institutionalism," 2) "individualization and privatization," 3) "the romanticization of the congregation," and 3) "the distinction

60. Hunsberger, "Missional Vocation," in *Missional Church*, 102.

61. *Ibid.*, 107-108.

62. Art McPhee, "The missio Dei and the Transformation of the Church," *Vision: A Journal for Church and Theology* 2, no. 2 (Fall 2001): 9-10.

between the social and religious.”⁶³ By anti-institutionalism, Dietterich indicates that the church as an institution is considered irrelevant to the “real” world, and is relegated to serve the religious life of the individual. An effective church, is one which finds a way to serve individuals in the congregation as consumers, and attract people from the “outside” to come “inside” and be served. This mindset ultimately leads to a “market-driven” rather than a missional congregational identity.

The second challenge, religious individualization and privatization positions faith as an individual and private matter. The church, then, is reduced to a “place” and is defined by its structures and management practices. “[It] is assumed that only the individual Christian can believe, only the individual Christian can have religious experiences, and only the individual Christian can authentically practice the Christian faith.”⁶⁴

The third obstacle is the romanticization of the congregation. The advent of congregational studies in the 1980’s made the local church an object of study. Dietterich’s example of congregational studies can be found in James Hopewell’s narrative research book, *Congregation: Stories and Structures*. Her apprehension about congregational studies is how they are typically carried out; by an “objective” researcher who does not engage “the congregation in a self-study and thus giving them the opportunity to interact with, contribute to, and learn from the study.”⁶⁵ This results in an objectified, analyzed, and categorized congregation.

63. Inagrace T. Dietterich, "A Particular People: Toward a Faithful and Effective Ecclesiology," in *The Church between Gospel and Culture*, ed. George R. Hunsberger and Craig Van Gelder (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1996), 349.

64. *Ibid.*, 356.

65. *Ibid.*, 360.

The final challenge to healthy identity, Dietterich says, is the distinct perception between the social and religious as two divergent realities. This challenge assumes an unbiased distinction between social and religious realities. When this distinction is included in congregational studies, it diminishes the lived experience of the congregation to objective sociological and historical fact. Dietterich concludes by defining healthy ecclesiological identity in theological and community-centric terms. She orients her ecclesiological definition within congregational worship through which people are shaped into a “particular” community equipped to live in God’s mission.⁶⁶

Engagement with Missional Ecclesiology

In 2011, the Executive Board of Mennonite Church USA, announced a denominational plan to “move more deliberately toward the fulfillment of our missional purpose as a church.”⁶⁷ The fullness of missional ecclesiology has not been realized in the relationships and identity of Mennonite churches or denominational structures, any more than the recovery of sixteenth-century Anabaptist ecclesiology. Contributing to this failure, is the reality that Mennonite congregations do not have an operative understanding of a mission-shaped ecclesiology. Missional ecclesiology, declares the story of God who is calling the church to be a distinct people of witness against the competing narratives of individualism, consumerism, and tribalism. Themes in missional ecclesiology make up the second account which I presented to the congregations of this project.

66. Ibid., 362-368.

67. Purposeful Plan: A Vision for Mennonite Church USA, accessed December 6, 2015, <http://www.mennoniteusa.org/resources/purposeful-plan/>.

Narrative Theology

Classically defined, the word “narrative” is an oral or literary account of events within a story. In the adjective (attributive noun) form, *narrative* has become a prominent subject of discussion in theological and practical theological disciplines, including “ethics, biblical studies, homiletics, pastoral care, and Christian education.”⁶⁸

Historiography of Narrative Theology

Discussion grew regarding narrative theory and its relationship to theology, during the 1970’s and 1980’s, which led to the development of two views emerging from the debate: the *postliberal* “Yale school” and the *revisionist* “Chicago school.” Narrative theology for the Yale school was pioneered by Hans W. Frei and emphasized a realistic reading of the biblical narrative as the definitive source for the faith and practice of the Church. In his 1974 book, *The Eclipse of the Biblical Narrative*, Frei presented the biblical text as neither moral teaching nor historical account, but as fundamental narrative.⁶⁹ He implored the Christian community to return to its vocation by telling stories about how God related to biblical Israel, and of incarnate life of Jesus Christ.

The Chicago school of narrative presented by Paul Ricoeur, David Tracy, and others, introduced a theological approach employing a *rhetorical-hermeneutical analysis* of narratives from a vast mixture of texts, traditions, and human experiences. This

68. George W. Stroup, "Narrative Theology," in *The Cambridge Dictionary of Christian Theology*, ed. David A.S. Fergusson Ian A. McFarland, Karen Kilby, et. al. (England: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 331. Stroup also points out that even beyond theological disciplines, narrative practices have been gaining credibility in “psychology and psychotherapy, philosophy, literary studies, anthropology, law, and medicine.”

69. Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: a Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1974).

involved consideration of cultural-historical-political narratives, both internal and external to the biblical text, in order to develop theological understanding.⁷⁰

There exist significant conflicting positions between the Yale and Chicago narrative typologies. The tension between theological camps increased by the fact that “each thinks itself fighting for nothing less than the continued existence of the Christian tradition.”⁷¹ While the word “narrative” is used by each school of thought, its meaning is different. For those associated with Yale, “narrative” is a principal category in terms of its connection to scripture as the source of understanding. Conversely, the Chicago school views “narrative” more in terms of collective human experience.⁷²

Niebuhr had significant influence on one of his Yale Divinity School students, Hans Frei. Frei wrote his doctoral dissertation on Karl Barth’s early doctrine of revelation under Niebuhr. In North America, Barth was identified with the ‘neo-orthodox movement’ which was largely a reaction against 19th-century liberal theology and biblical literalism.

Critical to the development of the narrative approach to theology, was the “rise and fall of ‘neo-orthodoxy’ ... in mid-century American theology and the related faith-and-history debate that preoccupied theologians and biblical scholars during that period.”⁷³ In 1941, neo-orthodox theologian H. Richard Niebuhr’s book *The Meaning of*

70. Scott Holland, "How Do Stories Save Us? Two Contemporary Theological Responses," *Conrad Grebel Review* 12, no. 2 (Spring 1994 1994): 139.

71. Gary L. Comstock, "Two Types of Narrative Theology," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 55, no. 4 (Winter 1987): 687.

72. Chris K. Huebner, "Mennonites and Narrative Theology: The Case of John Howard Yoder," *The Conrad Grebel Review* 16, no. 2 (Spring 1998): 32 see endnote #4.

73. Charles L. Campbell, *Preaching Jesus: New Directions for Homiletics in Hans Frei's Postliberal Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1997), 4

Revelation, addressed the question of how historical events can reveal meaning in contemporary experience.⁷⁴ Niebuhr makes three general statements about revelation which have bearing on narrative theology and the nature of Christian identity. First, revelation cannot be detached from history and is substantiated in the lived histories of people. Second, when a Christian expresses something of their faith they do it through narrative. Third, faith narrative-telling is taught and appropriated in the shared life of the Christian community.⁷⁵

Barth had noted that at the end of the seventeenth century, the scriptures were evaluated on the basis of its historicity.⁷⁶ The result of this trend was the division of the church into two parties. “Liberalism attempted to purify the Bible historically through the methodological application of objective reason. In response, a new theological orthodoxy arose that denied such a need.”⁷⁷ The second group, also using the tools of reason, came to the conclusion that the Bible is nothing but history. Both groups assumed that the most important thing was the objective history behind the text. Both groups, in their marriage to rationalism, effectively dismantled the foundations of the church’s narrative reading of scripture.

At the same time that “neo-orthodoxy” was gaining ground with Protestant theologians in the United States, the Biblical Theology Movement was developing (mid 1940’s). The Biblical Theology Movement rejected both liberalism and fundamentalism,

74. H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation* (New York, NY: The Macmillan Company, 1941).

75. George W. Stroup, *The Promise of Narrative Theology: Recovering the Gospel in the Church* (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1981), 70.

76. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (New York, NY: Scribner, 1955), 82.

77. John W. Wright, *Telling God's Story: Narrative Preaching for Christian Formation* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2007), 50.

and sought to recover the Bible for theological reflection. The movement waned in the 1960's as "contradictions between the movement's grand theological assertions and its reliance on historical criticism were never adequately defended. The approach to the Bible was fundamentally schizophrenic, divided between careful historical inquiry on the one hand and 'rhetorical' theological assertions on the other."⁷⁸

In 1970, Yale theologian, Brevard Childs, reflected on the fading of the Biblical Theology Movement and concluded that it needed to address several points: first, the church's use of scripture as a normative text should be the primary context for Biblical interpretation; second, instead of going "behind" the text, the focus for biblical interpretation should be on the Bible that is used by the church; third, biblical interpretation should take literary approaches into consideration; and finally, the tradition of pre-critical exegesis should be recovered.⁷⁹ Pre-critical exegesis employs a view which attends to the biblical narrative while restricting the modernist tools of historical and textual criticism.

The Loss and Recovery of Biblical Narrative

Through analysis of the historical, cultural, and theological relationship of revelation and scripture, Hans Frei addressed the critical issues that lay in the dichotomy between the "Jesus of History" and the "Christ of faith." In his seminal book, *The Eclipse of the Biblical Narrative*, Frei denounced the hermeneutical shift away from *biblical realism* that took place during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries – the period

78. Campbell, *Preaching Jesus*, 10.

79. Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1970). In Campbell, *Preaching Jesus*, 13.

commonly known as the Enlightenment.⁸⁰ Frei argues that, prior to this time-frame, biblical reading presupposed a unified narrative structure; a belief that the Bible was a cohesive story which provided the Church a standard for life. Therefore, reintroducing a narrative approach stresses a pre-critical hermeneutic and displaces the rationalist, individualist, and romantic principles of liberal theology cast in modernist scholarship.⁸¹ Frei suggests that as the principles of the historical-critical method of biblical interpretation took root, the church lost its place and began to read scripture in search of historically verifiable, propositional, cognitive truth.

Walter Brueggemann also points to the Enlightenment and modernity saying sixteenth-century voices like Hobbes, Descartes, Galileo, Locke, and especially Kant, brought about “a knowing revolt against the superstitious traditionalism in the church.”⁸² The result was a new rationalization that became a normative narrative in the Western worldview rooted in reason and individual authority. This narrative, which Brueggemann terms “the dominant text,” has even become normative for the church, and has resourced both sides of a liberal-conservative theological polarity. Brueggemann writes:

The power of this text shows up in an excessive *theological conservatism* that has transposed fidelity into certitude and believes that if we dig deep enough we will find certitudes that are absolutes about morality as about theology, as though somewhere there are rational formulations that powerfully veto the human ambiguities so palpable among us. The power of this text also shows up in overstated *theological liberalism* in which every woman and every man is one’s own pope, in which autonomous freedom becomes a fetish and all notions of communal accountability evaporate into a polite but innocuous mantra of “each to her or his own.”⁸³

80. Frei, *Eclipse*.

81. R. Ruard Ganzevoort, "Narrative Approaches," in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology*, ed. B. Miller-McLemore (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 215.

82. Brueggemann and Miller, *The Word*, 4.

83. *Ibid.*, 5. (italics mine)

In favor of the Enlightenment narrative, the biblical narrative had been overlooked, and possibly even lost by a church torn between propositional certainty and individualistic freedom.

Narrative theology insists that the Bible is normative; it is the primary narrative for the shaping of the Church.⁸⁴ Therefore, congregations must focus on the language of the biblical narrative rather than that of external philosophies or human experience. “The language of the biblical narrative must shape the world of human experience as members of the church community become disciples of a language larger than their individual utterances and subjective experiences.”⁸⁵

In his *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy*, Brueggemann suggests that the diachronic reading of the text needs to be replaced by a dialogic approach.⁸⁶ A diachronic reading is one which centers on events and circumstances in the text’s history. Conversely, dialogical, or intertextual reading “generates a realm of discourse, dialogue, and imagination that provides a world in which to live.” Narrative theology “engages a different type of epistemology, one that is not based in a systematic structure, nor does it begin with propositional certitudes.”⁸⁷

84. George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009).

85. Holland, *How Do Stories*, 136.

86. Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1997).

87. Walter Brueggemann, interview by Steve Slagel, Traverse City, MI, October 18, 2019.

In a recent conversation, Brueggemann highlighted Paul Ricoeur's development of the post-critical method in narrative theology.⁸⁸ Ricoeur names three moments of hermeneutic engagement with scripture: pre-critical, critical, and post-critical. The first moment, which he also calls the moment of naïve understanding, takes place when the text is first presented. At this point the text speaks with its own voice and reference. The second moment occurs when the interpreter engages the text using critical methods in the attempt to hear the text speak in a new setting. The use of historical-criticism, for example, begins with the suspicion that the text must be first understood in its original context and interpreted to have bearing on the present. Ricoeur calls his third hermeneutic moment post-critical, or the second-naivete. In the post-critical moment the text is interpreted by engaging with the testimony of the text "in spite of conscious contradictions in reality."⁸⁹ This moment of interpretation simultaneously integrates meaning from the ancient (pre-modern) and contemporary worlds. Post-critical method does not disregard critical method, rather it intentionally moves beyond the critical as the interpretive community "claims the testimony of the text as [their] own."⁹⁰

An Alternative Narrative

When asked about narrative theology's contribution to the church, Walter Brueggemann said, "We must insist on the peculiarity of our narrative against the competing narratives of technological, therapeutic, military consumerism."⁹¹ By "our

88. Ibid.

89. Dale A. Brueggemann, "Brevard Childs' Canon Criticism: And Example of Post-Critical Naivete," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 32, no. 3 (September 1989): 312.

90. Ibid., 312.; Jason P. Roberts, "Conceptual Blending, the Second Naivete, and the Emergence of New Meanings," *Open Theology* 4 (2018), accessed October 20, 2019: 30.

91. Brueggemann, interview.

narrative” he is suggesting that we (the church) claim the narrative of God offered to us in scripture. The phrasing of his answer was not done exclusively for the sake of my question: he uses the words “technical, therapeutic, military consumerism” with frequency. I attended a lecture in which Brueggemann said, “The dominant culture presents reality through a network of symbols and sacraments of technological, therapeutic, military consumerism.”⁹² The church’s call, he concluded, is to participate in an alternate narrative of the world, with symbols and sacraments of the alternate reality.

In a 2005 interview with author Tim Suttle, Brueggemann said, “I worked really hard on those four words: technological, therapeutic, military consumerism.”⁹³ He unpacked his four-word narrative understanding in a 2005 *Christian Century* article titled, *Counterscript*. In the article, he lays out 19 theses regarding the Bible in the church – here is a summary list:

1. Everybody has a script.
2. We are scripted by a process of nurture, formation and socialization that might go under the rubric of liturgy.
3. The dominant script of both selves and communities in our society, for both liberals and conservatives, is the script of therapeutic, technological, consumerist militarism that permeates every dimension of our common life.
4. This script — enacted through advertising, propaganda and ideology, especially in the several liturgies of television — promises to make us safe and happy.
5. That script has failed.
6. Health depends, for society and for its members, on disengaging from and relinquishing the failed script.
7. It is the task of the church and its ministry to detach us from that powerful script.

92. Walter Brueggemann, “Amnesia and Dominant Culture.” Lecture, Gospel of Hope from Central United Methodist Church, Traverse City, MI, September 21, 2018.

93. Tim Suttle, "Walter Brueggeman's 19 Theses Revisited: A Clarification from Brueggemann Himself," *Paperback Theology*, 2014, accessed 2019, <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/paperbacktheology/2014/04/walter-brueggemanns-19-thesis-revisited-a-clarification-from-brueggemann-himself.html>.

8. The task of describing, relinquishment and disengagement is undertaken through the steady, patient, intentional articulation of an alternative script that we testify will indeed make us safe and joyous.
9. The alternative script is rooted in the Bible and enacted through the tradition of the church.
10. The defining factor of the alternative script is the God of the Bible, who, fleshed in Jesus, is variously Lord and Savior of Israel and Creator of heaven and Earth, and whom we name as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
11. The script of this God of power and life is not monolithic, one-dimensional or seamless, and we should not pretend that we have such an easy case to make in telling about this God.
12. The ragged, disjunctive quality of the counterscript to which we testify cannot be smoothed out.
13. The ragged, disputatious character of the counterscript to which we testify is so disputed and polyvalent that its adherents are always tempted to quarrel among themselves.
14. The entry point into the counterscript is baptism.
15. The nurture, formation and socialization into the counterscript with this elusive, irascible God at its center constitute the work of ministry.
16. Ministry is conducted in the awareness that most of us are deeply ambivalent about the alternative script.
17. The good news is that our ambivalence as we stand between scripts is precisely the primal venue for the work of God's Spirit.
18. Ministry and mission entail managing that inescapable ambivalence that is the human predicament in faithful, generative ways.
19. The work of ministry is indispensable.⁹⁴

Engagement with Narrative Theology

Whereas systematic theologies construct a rational and methodic framework for understanding the church's belief and life, narrative theology is primarily concerned with the practices of reading and interpreting scripture by "living the story" together with a community of faith shaped by the story. The starting point in narrative theology is not with historical-critical-rational structural theories of faith and life. Rather, narrative theology invites congregations to read scripture while giving attention to the metanarrative of God's activity, and then to continue the story in their own cultural

94. Walter Breuggemann, "Counterscript," *Christian Century* (2005): 122.

context. Narrative theology, therefore, must be embedded in congregational practices of biblical reading and embodiment.

Narrative theology need not replace systematic theology, subsequent doctrinal understandings, invalidate critical interpretive tools, or overthrow a high view of the Bible. On their own, however, each of these theological/interpretive standards can, and often does, drive congregational faith and life in a way that hinders any possibility to practice narrative theology. Theological traditions, doctrines, textual criticism, and biblical propositions, all attempt to understand the biblical narrative, but they should not replace a congregational reading and embodiment of the narrative.

Even though community reading and interpretation of scripture is a traditional mark of Anabaptism, over time Mennonite congregations like most other Western churches, have accepted individualism in biblical interpretation. The result of individualism, as well as the professionalization of clergy, has been the fracturing of congregations by disagreements over the nature and meaning of scripture. Caught between a “conservatism” that views all of scripture as propositional truth, and “liberalism” that is seeking truth through deconstruction of the text, Mennonite congregations have become increasingly divided over the last few generations. “We must,” said Walter Brueggemann, “insist on the peculiarity of our narrative against the competing narratives of technological, therapeutic, military consumerism.”⁹⁵ Narrative Theology can provide congregations with a hermeneutical lens that is neither deconstructive nor propositional. Narrative theology also opens the way for the narrative approach of this project.

95. Brueggemann, interview.

Chapter 3

Transitional Ministry: Narrative Ecclesiology in Three Congregations

As stated in chapter one, the two-fold purpose of this project is a) to help congregations explore who they are (identity) and why they exist (purpose) and b) to cultivate a developing ecclesiological narrative. The goal of the research is to develop tools for reflection and identity discovery rooted in the narrative of God’s ongoing story, enabling congregations to move forward with confidence and hope. Having identified and explored the themes and resources of Anabaptist ecclesiology, missional ecclesiology, and narrative theology, it is time to survey research related to transitional ministry with the Maple River Mennonite Church, Valparaiso Mennonite Church and Hopedale Mennonite Church.

Each congregation entered their transition with the need for pastoral leadership. I assisted with worship planning, preaching, teaching, baptisms, dedicating children, and pastoral care. I met with youth groups, worship committees, and councils within the congregations. However, my principal role as a transition pastor was to guide each congregation through the task of reflecting on change and preparing for the future.

Transition ministry is not understood by many congregations, I used the Interim Ministry Network’s (IMN) framework curriculum “Fundamentals of Transition Ministry”, five points of focus.¹ IMN stresses that transition pastors guide congregations and leaders as they engage in study and reflection on the following: 1) Heritage – the formative history of the congregation; 2) Mission – the identity and purpose of the

1. *Interim Ministry Network* is a professional network that provides education and training regarding congregational transition. <https://imnedu.org/>.

congregation; 3) Connections – the theological relationships beyond the congregation; 4) Leadership – the process of developing and supporting leaders; and 5) Future – applying what is learned and what is needed for the future.² The five focus points of this framework introduced the congregations to a basic vocabulary for transition ministry work. An agreed upon schedule of activities with each church centered on the five focus points (See Appendix A). The transition work began and sustainability was maintained by engaging in ethnographic practices.

Congregational Ethnography

Ethnography is a *way of engaging* social research to build an understanding of people and cultures, or congregations in this project. Based on this definition, a central aim of my research is to develop an “ecclesiological ethnography” of the three congregations of my ministry context. My research interest is in identifying each congregation’s self-understanding from organizational, leadership, and individual participant perspectives. The ethnographic research of this project was designed to yield an understanding of each congregation’s narratives of past experience, present challenge, and hopeful future. This chapter focuses on congregational research methodology and findings.

In *Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography*, editor Pete Ward wrote that the *way of engaging*, or “values” of ethnographic research such as participation, reflection, empowerment, and understanding, is as critical as the research methods themselves.³

2. John Keydel, “Focus Points and the Work of the Congregation,” in Norman B. Bendroth, *Transitional Ministry Today: Successful Strategies for Churches and Pastors* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 53-61.

3. Pete Ward, *Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography: Studies in Ecclesiology and Ethnography* (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2012), 6.

Translating these values of ethnography into transition ministry seems quite natural. The full expression of the relationship between a congregation and transition minister hinges on cultivating these ethnographic values. In working with each congregation, I sought to a) join into each group; b) practice and invite congregations to observe and reflect; c) empower and encourage all people to share in the congregation's narrative; and d) expand understanding among members of the congregations.

The ethnographic research of this project was introduced to congregational leaders two to three months prior to the beginning of each transition assignment. Specific ethnographic activities in all three context congregations included *household interviews*, developing a *collective memory timeline*, and *discovery groups*, which functioned like focus groups.

Household Interviews

All participant households in each congregation were invited to sign-up for a one-hour interview. Interview sign-up sheets and scheduling were managed by an available leader from the congregation. All participants were provided with interview questions at least two weeks in advance. Most interviews took place in the interviewee's home, enabling them to be comfortable and allowing me to observe them in their own environment. Single people, and those who preferred, were interviewed in a public place. The central purpose of conducting the interviews was better understand the people of the church. In addition, the interviews gave me an opportunity to become acquainted and build trust with congregants. Following the interviews, people consistently stated that they were reassured that their concerns and hopes for the church were heard. This

confirmed one of the most basic challenges of a congregation in transition is developing ways for all people to speak and be heard.

I began by thanking participants for volunteering to be interviewed, and I explained the purpose of the interview. I indicated I would be taking research notes and creating a summary report to be shared with the congregation at a later date. I invited all participants to sign a consent form (Appendix B). Initially, I made a digital audio recording of the interviews. I stopped after a number of people expressed discomfort with this method. I used an iPad and keyboard to take notes. All interviews were conducted using identical questions (Appendix A):

1. How long have you been a part of _____ Church?
2. What brought you to this church? What keeps you here?
3. How are you involved in the church? Is this what you would like it to be?
4. How would you describe the church's relationship to its surrounding neighborhood?
5. When was this church at its very best?
6. On the current course, what will this church be like in 5-10 years?
7. What is your hope for this church?
8. How united are the people of the congregation?
9. When have you been disappointed with this church?
10. Are there unresolved conflicts or hurts in the congregation?
11. What do you think the Spirit of God is asking the church to do in the next year?

Because of the qualitative nature of the research, questions were designed to be open ended and elicit shared experience and perspectives. Each interview contributed to the unabridged narrative of the congregation. The overall congregational narrative was stimulating and inclusive.

I had hoped for at least 20% participation from each congregation for the interview phase of my research. However, as the process began, interest increased. At the

end of the interview phase, no less than 50% percent of each congregation had participated.

Once the interviews were complete, I printed and reviewed my notes. I highlighted common themes that were repeated by two or more people who expressed the congregation's struggles, challenges, hopes, or opportunities. After church leaders were given time to prayerfully reflect on, and revise the interview themes, I presented the summaries to the congregation both verbally and in a print format. The themes were presented as stories; a shared experience of challenge and hope. The congregation was invited to reflect and respond to the narrative. I will focus more on congregational interaction and narratives in the section titled "Narrative Congregational Approach" later in this chapter.

Collective Memory Timeline

Recalling stories of the congregation's past can be prompted by personal faith journeys, reviewing written histories, or generating visual timelines. In order to maintain a qualitative research focus, I chose to adapt the timeline method by gathering congregations and inviting them to contribute memories of their experiences. This collective timeline activity is a "form of focused group interviewing."⁴

Nancy Eiesland and R. Stephen Warner suggest constructing a congregational timeline to build understanding of "how the congregation is situated within an inclusive conception of history, that is, local, denominational, national, and global history."⁵ By

4. Nancy Tatom Ammerman, *Studying Congregations: A New Handbook* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1998), 209.

5. Nancy L. Eiesland, Warner, R. Stephen, "Ecology: Seeing the Congregation in Context," in *Studying Congregations*, 43.

inviting all people to participate in sharing their experiences in the congregation, and by valuing each one's insight, the timeline activity was highly collaborative. In a narrative framework, the collective memory timeline is an exercise of individual stories being woven together into one. It was important to clarify that a collective memory timeline is a combined story of the congregation's history shared through many perspectives, it is not an attempt to record historic details with precision.

Each of the congregations gathered following Sunday morning worship and a carry-in meal. In groups of four to six people, we began the timeline activity. The first step was inviting individuals to reflect on four statements: 1) Name your earliest memory of this congregation; 2) Recall important events in the congregation's past (people, controversies, successes...); 3) Name one or two significant moments in your life as a part of the congregation (dealing with loss, family experiences, mission/service experiences...); 4) Reflect on the most significant events in this city/village, the region, nation, world, Mennonite Church (wars, natural disasters, social debates...). Paper was provided for each person to write their reflections. Once this was completed, participants were invited to share two or three memories with their group. Everyone was invited to write memories on four inch square sticky notes which were provided in two colors (red / green). Memories that a person understood as difficult, or painful, were written on red sticky notes. All other memories were written on green sticky notes. All the sticky notes were placed on a large illustrated timeline attached to the wall in the fellowship hall. The timeline was created on a ten to twenty foot long piece of butcher-paper, marked in increments of ten years, beginning from the date the congregation started on the left, to

the present day on the right. At the end of the gathering, the group was invited to reflect and respond to the timeline narrative.

In the days following the collective memory timeline activity, I prepared a summary handout. Along with the butcher paper timeline, I consulted with leaders and obtained written histories of each congregation in order to compile a cohesive summary. The collective memory timeline summary was distributed to each congregation (see an example in Appendix C).

Summarizing the congregational timelines allowed further exploration of each narrative history. I looked for common themes where multiple people shared the same memory. In some cases, congregational patterns emerged regarding conflicts, pastoral relationships, or openness to change. Many of the patterns were also substantiated in the household interview responses. An important part of the narrative approach was each congregation's reflection on their stories. I presented the timeline narrative summary to each congregation for their reflection.

Discovery Groups

Qualitative research often involves the use of focus groups for collecting “rich data that [is] cumulative and elaborative.”⁶ The Data is collected through a semi-structured group interview process. Focus groups are traditionally characterized by the use of standardized questions using an interview format. Groups consist of six to ten participants, all roughly the same age, race, and socioeconomic status.

6. John Swinton and Harriet Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research* (London, UK: SCM Press, 2006), 223.

I created discovery groups based on the conversational community model recommended by Peter Block in his book *Community*.⁷ They were an adapted form of focus groups and were not strictly for the purpose of collecting data from participants with little involvement in the broader process. Discovery group participants contributed by more than simply answering questions, they helped shape the congregation's narrative. Conventional focus group research works well with up to ten separate participant groupings. In this case, each congregation had between four and eight discovery groups, which met simultaneously at least four times. Each group convened at a different table for intervals of conversation as well as plenary input, activities, and reflection.⁸

The task of reflection took on a strategically narrative function. As discovery groups told and re-told their own stories, reflections evolved reshaping the overall narrative alignment. Three questions were asked for group reflection: 1) What is your *reaction* to this story?; 2) What have we *learned* from the story?; 3) What does this story *invite* us to do? These questions were adapted from the Kirkpatrick model which was designed for evaluating training and educational programs.⁹ Asking people for their initial reaction helped identify what was engaging and relevant. Asking people what they learned enabled them articulate new insights, understandings, or commitments gleaned from the stories. Participants were able to integrate the stories heard into their own

7. Peter Block, *Community: The Structure of Belonging* (San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2008).

8. *Ibid.*, 96.

9. Questions are adapted from the evaluative methodology of Donald Kirkpatrick. Donald Kirkpatrick, "Kirkpatrick Partners," accessed. <http://www.kirkpatrickpartners.com/Our-Philosophy/The-Kirkpatrick-Model>.

stories. The three reflection questions were used frequently in discovery group gatherings, in conversations with the leadership teams, and on occasion, in sermon responses.

Each discovery group was comprised of four to seven people, including a facilitator selected out by the congregation's leadership team. Participants were invited to sign-up, and then were assigned to the same groups throughout the process. All were asked to commit to attending most, if not all, of the gatherings. Collectively, we agreed that each gathering would not exceed ninety minutes.

Group facilitators were encouraged to foster a collaborative, shame-free, atmosphere enabling participant's to be heard and respected, including dissenting voices.¹⁰ "The task of leadership," writes Block, is to "...create a context that nurtures an alternative future... initiate and convene conversations that shift people's experience... listen and pay attention."¹¹

Before the first discovery group began, facilitators were encouraged to call the those who were assigned to their group and remind them of the gathering, answer questions, and build a sense of anticipation. In addition to phone calls, some leaders mailed invitations which was very effective in fostering interest. Leaders were also asked to be at their group's table a few minutes early in order to welcome each person as they joined. Tables were supplied with pens, writing paper, news-print paper and markers for presenting the group's conversations, and a specific outline for each person to follow (an example is provided in Appendix E).

10. Block, *Community*, 130-136.

11. *Ibid.*, 88.

Each of the discovery group sessions focused on specific theme. The first gathering's focus was the *New Testament images of the Church*. Each group was given a scripture text and were asked to identify a metaphor of the church and reflect on its significance. The texts and images used were: *resident aliens* (1 Peter 2.9-11); *family of God* (Hebrews 3.1-6); *salt, light and city* (Matthew 5.13-16); *new humanity* (Ephesians 2.13-18); *branches* (John 15.1-11); *the body of Christ* (Ephesians 4.1-16); *ministry of reconciliation* (2 Corinthians 5.16-21); and *clay jars* (2 Corinthians 4.1-10).¹² Each group was named after an image of the church. They were encouraged to continue their engagement with it throughout the extent of the gatherings.

The second discovery group focused on *congregational history*. Everyone, from long-term to newcomer, was invited to participate. We began with a trivia game made up of questions provided by the leadership team. This afforded an opportunity for people to bond with light-hearted fun. It was at this point that the collective memory timelines, described above, were created. In groups, participants were encouraged to reflect on the narrative of the congregation's history.

The congregation's resources for mission was the theme of the third discovery group session. Groups created an informal inventory of resources and contemplated how to join God's mission through sharing with neighbors. Each person made a list of special gifts, abilities, and assets of others in the congregation. Then each group composed a list of resources on newsprint paper. After everyone completed lists, individual groups presented their findings to the entire congregation. In all three congregations, this activity

12. John Driver, *Images of the Church in Mission* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1997).; Robert Kysar, *Stumbling in the Light: New Testament Images for a Changing Church* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 1999).

produced insights regarding corporate self-understanding and highlighted often overlooked resources. Building on identified resources, groups were encouraged to creatively consider how their congregation might employ resources in God's mission. Facilitators invited groups to share freely and took care not to discourage any responses. All ideas were written on newsprint paper and displayed on the walls for everyone to peruse. As we ended, participants were encouraged to reflect on the story of God's generosity and the congregation's resources.

The fourth discovery group session centered around cultivating awareness of *the congregation's neighbors*. The gathering began with each person creating a network map.¹³ Network maps chart places where people spend time such as home, work, school, shopping, and other everyday activities. This exercise allowed participants to consider their relational experiences as well as explore opportunities for developing interpersonal connections. The second part of the focus on the congregation's neighbors involved a walk around the community surrounding the church building.¹⁴ The intent was to provide a way for groups to learn about their neighbors. There was a range of suggested methods for conducting the walk, from knocking on doors and inviting neighbors to share prayer requests, to observing homes and the surrounding environment. In two congregations, a few groups introduced themselves to neighbors and asked for prayer requests. Most groups however, were reluctant to "be so forward." They chose instead to observe the neighborhood. One congregation, comprised largely of older members whose building is

13. Ammerman, *Studying Congregations*, 50-54.

14. *Ibid.*, 47-49.

located two miles from the closest residential area, declined to participate in the walk. The walk was a significant challenge for all three congregations.

The traditional expectation of churches is that if they are faithful, and their worship is done well, will have something to offer will attract new members. At the end of the fourth gathering, I provided a summary of missional ecclesiology elaborating on the following statement:

The North American church has been tied to Christendom, focusing on internal needs and maintaining its privilege in society. The decline of Christendom provides the opportunity for the church to rediscover its identity as a people sent by God into the world as a sign, foretaste, and instrument of God's reign.¹⁵

Groups were then invited to reflect on the story of the missional church.

A Narrative Congregational Approach

The narrative approach for this project is based on recognizing that congregations and individuals generally arrange experiences and central understanding into corresponding stories, which hold, and communicate meaning. Theologian and philosopher Stephen Crites wrote, "We live our lives from day to day, but we understand our life as if it were a story. Our collective identity, history, and religious tradition are likewise structured as stories."¹⁶ A narrative approach can, therefore, be helpful in interpreting written and verbal stories, as well as human experiences, practices and communications. R. Ruard Ganzevoort, author of "Narrative Approaches" in *Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology*, goes even further:

15. Guder, *Missional Church*, 1-17.; Alan J. Roxburgh, M. Scott Boren, and Mark Priddy, *Introducing the Missional Church: What It Is, Why It Matters, How to Become One* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2009), 70-71.

16. Stephen Crites, "The Narrative Quality of Experience," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 39 (1971).

Identity can be understood as a narrative structure, that is, the person's reflective interpretation of himself/herself. Identity is thus not some essential quality that needs to be uncovered, but the story one tells about oneself for a particular audience.¹⁷

On a larger scale, the stories people tell about their congregation reveal the identity of the congregation, an identity which is subject to change as the narratives themselves develop.

In *The Story of Discipleship: Christ, Humanity, and Church in Narrative Perspective*, Elizabeth Barnes joins together narrative process and biblical hermeneutics in arguing that the normative narrative of God's story in scripture has the power to form the story and experience of the church.¹⁸ Narrative hermeneutics, according to Barnes, interlaces the biblical story with human stories "in ways that challenge our errors, correct our distortions, and transform and complete our unfinished narratives as stories of love, justice, and peace."¹⁹ Similarly, Ganzevoort identifies three ways that the biblical narrative is theologically normative: 1) the story of God articulates our story; 2) the story of God critiques our stories; and 3) the story of God creates space to reflect on our stories.²⁰

Ganzevoort identifies a number of narrative approaches utilized in practical theological disciplines.²¹ The classic example is the narrative approach to interpretation of scripture by traditional and modern interpreters. A second narrative approach is in the discipline of pastoral care and counseling. Narrative approaches have also been widely

17. Ganzevoort, in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology*, 214.

18. Barnes, *The Story of Discipleship*.

19. *Ibid.*, 15.

20. Ganzevoort, in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology*, 218.

21. *Ibid.*, 217.

used in the area of homiletics. Finally, Ganzevoort points to many other practical theology fields in which narrative approaches are being engaged with significant potential, like worship (stories and rituals), religious education, faith formation, and congregational studies. “Unfortunately, the full potential of narrative approaches is yet to be unpacked in these fields.”²²

Narrative inquiry, as a discipline of qualitative research, can be described simply as “living, telling, retelling, and reliving stories.”²³ This clarification is essential to understanding that the objective of narrative process is not met by a one-dimensional analysis of data. Narrative process is more than research in a clinical sense. It is a way of understanding and building upon the rhythm of experience - which forms narrative - which forms experience.

I chose to use a narrative process for this project based on the fundamental argument that *narrative shapes narrative*. George Stroup writes, “In Christian faith both the individual and the community look to the narrative history of Jesus of Nazareth in order to discover the true meaning of their respective narrative identities.”²⁴ Narrative processes for this project involved exploring congregational stories thereby giving shape to shared identity and purpose. In conversation with a transition pastor colleague about narrative process with congregations, he directed me to psychologist Karl Jung’s premise of “the two halves of life.”²⁵ Jung theorized that during the first half of life there is a

22. Ibid., 218.

23. Clandinin and Connelly, *Narrative Inquiry*, 71.

24. Stroup, *The Promise*, 168.

25. C. G. Jung, *The Structure and Dynamics of the Psyche* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969).

central focus on the development of the self. These are years of focus on personal growth and gain. But through experiences of loss and failure, a person discovers that their real purpose and identity is much deeper than the acceptable image than is presented to the world. Ideally, this discovery provides the space for emotional and spiritual maturity which then introduces the second half of life. A mature sense of identity and purpose enables the person in the second half of life to take on a generative posture in relationship with others. Taking some liberty with Jung's theory, it illustrates what can happen in a narrative congregational process. As a congregation tells their stories of joy and sorrow, they also hear their stories, and in reflection they can discover their inherent purpose and identity.

Narrative reflection with each congregation occurred in three primary settings: weekly worship, discovery group conversations, and leadership meetings. In worship, reflection took place after the sermon and was free-flowing which allowed people to speak and be heard. Undirected, reflection took a meandering course, thus I intentionally asked the questions: "What is your reaction?" "What did you hear that was new for you?" and "What will you do now?" At times I was able to ask all three questions, but typically I would ask one question and the congregation would spend the time energetically answering it and asking it again. The biblical narrative themes for worship included, missional theology, forgiveness, Anabaptist spirituality, God's formation of a people, the life of Jesus, stories of Jesus eating with others, and the generosity of God. Inviting people to reflect by offering their reactions, learnings, and invitations of the morning's narrative, became a deeply formative practice.

In his book *The Homiletical Plot*, Eugene Lowry introduced preaching as a narrative act.²⁶ Lowry's book offered basic sermon as storytelling theory in five stages: 1) upsetting the equilibrium, 2) analyzing the discrepancy, 3) disclosing the clue to resolution, 4) experiencing the gospel, and 4) anticipating the consequences. Affectionately termed "the Lowry Loop" by students and teachers of homiletics, the stages progressively form a plotline as a down-pointing loop. Upsetting the equilibrium (stimulating audience interest by introducing tension), and analyzing the discrepancy (revealing the problem as a narrative climax), drop the plot to a recognition that something is needed. Then, through disclosing the clue to resolution ("the principle of reversal"), and experiencing the gospel (the liberating proclamation), the listener is brought through the transformation of the story. Finally, the stage of anticipating the consequences presents the narrative in life reflection asking what should be done in response. While the *Lowry Loop* is not limited to proclaiming the "narrative texts" of scripture, it does reveal the common plot of some of the most well-known biblical stories. The story of God asking Abraham to sacrifice Isaac (Genesis 22), for example, has all the elements of *the Homiletical Plot* from the shock that God would ask this ,and Abraham's reluctant willingness to do so, we are taken to the crisis point. But then, the angel of the Lord intervenes pointing to God's provision of a sacrificial ram to take Isaac's place. The good news presented in the story is that God is faithful to provide what is needed, the consequences for Abraham and for us, is surrendering and trusting God.

26. Eugene L. Lowry, *The Homiletical Plot: The Sermon as Narrative Art Form* (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1980).

A more recent, and arguably more accessible approach to narrative preaching, is found in John W. Wright's book, *Telling God's Story*.²⁷ Wright suggests that preaching is facing challenges in a contemporary context, not the least of which is the "bifurcation between biblical interpretation and preaching."²⁸ Wright's primary concern for preaching as an interpretive event is the way in which preaching has become the application of an individualistic, therapeutic language to contemporary concerns or disembodied calls to social justice."²⁹ Wright's chapter "Eclipsing the Biblical Narrative," presents Hans Frei's basic concern for the way in which the enlightenment shifted the intellectual landscape of the West, including the reading and interpretation of scripture.

Wright provides a brief history of modern interpretation showing the loss of narrative engagement with scripture in North America. The rest of *Telling God's Story* is a call for the church to return to its "narrative home" in the biblical story.³⁰ This return is fostered, according to Wright, by preaching that begins with a clear description of the natural experience of the congregation and then turns to the biblical narrative. The natural experiences of the congregation, or status quo, are the "narrative formation and virtues of the society at large and those that emerge from the biblical narrative." Wright suggests that this can begin with phrases such as "'We've been taught that...'" or "'The society around us has formed us to believe that...'"³¹ Turning then to the biblical narrative, the preacher invites the congregation to imagine life within God's story where they can

27. Wright, *Telling God's Story*.

28. Ibid., 18.

29. Ibid., 19.

30. Ibid., 83.

31. Ibid., 94-95.

witness God's desire for all creation. Narrative preaching, therefore, "needs to move a congregation out of narrative provided by the society at large and into the biblical narrative."³²

These narrative preaching models alone are not a solution to the loss of congregational identity, but can be quite helpful. The biblical narrative is rich in images and calling for Christian communities, which can emerge in worship and preaching. I approached preaching throughout this project as a narrative opportunity and scripture as God's Story. By narrative opportunity, I mean the sermon presented an accepted format for exploring biblical texts as the church's normative story. I intentionally placed the morning's scripture within the context of the larger story of God. I also invited comparison and contrast of the congregation's lived narratives and the biblical narrative.

Leadership Formation

A recent Facebook message posted by the Center for Parish Development read, "Healthy renewal is more of a marathon than a sprint." One critical reality of serving as a transition minister, is the twelve to eighteen month tenure of engagement. More like a sprint than a marathon, the practical terms of such a brief window of ministry are that all research, reflection, and public input (such as teaching and preaching), is limited by time constraints. Simultaneously, transition demands intense focus and energy from congregations, an unsustainable long-term expectation.

To address the challenge of catalyzing long-term change during a brief time with each congregation, I coached leaders to facilitate the ongoing transition. Upon my arrival, each church already had identified leaders. In one congregation, the identified leaders

32. Ibid., 102.

were “the Elder Team.” In another congregation, they were “the Church Board” and “Pastoral Team.” The third congregation had a “Leadership Team.”

A key aspect of coaching these congregational leaders, was encouraging them to embrace the biblical story as a conversation partner through what Alan Roxburgh calls “dwelling in the word.”³³ An important part of discernment, dwelling in the word is a practice of “‘sitting before’ and ‘living with’” scripture.³⁴ Similar to *lectio divina*, *dwelling in the word*, fosters openness and receptivity of ourselves to God, by listening as a short passage of scripture is read multiple times slowly and clearly. As the text is read the first time, listeners are invited to notice a word or phrase that catches their attention. During the second reading of the text, listeners are invited to consider how this word touches their life. Finally, as the text is read a third time, the group listens for God’s invitation (“What might God be inviting you to do or be in this word?”).³⁵ This practice was crucial to congregational leaders as they listened to God’s story for insight.

Three Narrative Ethnographies

Ethnography in this project describes the methods of researching congregations. I advanced the ethnographic work in all three congregations through the use of household interviews, collective memory timelines, and focus group conversations. The resulting congregational narratives explored, while bearing similarities with each other, were distinctly unique. Each narrative ethnography consisted of stories each congregation provided during the interview process, as well as those that surfaced in conversations

33. Alan J. Roxburgh, *Joining God, Remaking Church, Changing the World: The New Shape of the Church in Our Time* (New York, NY: Morehouse Publishing, 2015), 60-69.

34. *Ibid.*, 62.

35. R. Ruth Barton, *Pursuing God's Will Together: A Discernment Practice for Leadership Groups* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books/Formatio, 2012), 246-248.

with discovery groups and leadership teams. Many stories were first shared, sometimes in fragments, during household interviews. I summarized these initial stories and shared them with leaders, followed by each gathered congregation. Together we explored the reactions, learnings, and invitations that were identified through narrative reflection.

Maple River Mennonite Church (MRMC)

The Maple River Mennonite congregation is “the quiet in the land.” This phrase is an age old expression used to describe late sixteenth-century Mennonite withdrawal from society as the movement went underground to escape persecution. As the congregation’s stories of unresolved conflicts, unaddressed division, and unacknowledged losses were shared, their “quiet in the land” character was clearly revealed. MRMC’s narrative ethnography tells the story of a remarkable people struggling to be a community buffeted by challenges and yearning for elusive reconciliation.

Historian and former MRMC member, Maurice Eby, wrote about hardships encountered by the first non-native people to settle in the vast forest of Emmet County along the Maple River. This required cutting trees, building homes, and tilling land. “The failure rate was high among homesteaders before 1883, but the first ten Mennonite families succeeded.”³⁶ Elias Snyder and his family arrived from Ontario, Canada in 1877, purchasing about 1200 acres near the village of Brutus, Michigan. Snyder sold land to other Mennonite families who moved to the area from Ontario, Southern Michigan, and Northern Indiana.

Abraham Dettwiler, who was a preacher from Caledonia, Michigan, moved to the area in 1879 and soon after Maple River Mennonite Church was formed. In 1883, the

36. Maurice Eby, *The Mennonites of Brutus, Michigan: 1879-1969* (Nappanee, IN: Evangel Press, 2009), 10.

congregation built a meetinghouse one mile West of the village of Brutus, on property owned by Joseph Dettwiler. Today the building, while not in use, still stands in front of the church's cemetery. In 1888, Christian Dettwiler was ordained and served the congregation with his older brother Abraham. For the first thirty years, MRMC was known as "The Dettwiler Church."

In 1872, there was a reverberating split of Mennonite churches led by minister Jacob Wisler in Elkhart, Indiana.³⁷ Called the "Old Order Schism," conservative Mennonite groups, called "Old Order Mennonites" broke away from the Mennonite Church in the United States. Wanting only to use the German language in their gatherings, they refused to allow new innovations in the life of the church such as Sunday School, evangelistic and midweek meetings, and four-part singing.³⁸ Old Order divisions occurred simultaneously in Indiana and Ohio (1872), in Ontario, Canada (1889), in Pennsylvania (1893), and in Virginia (1900). "In 2002 there were approximately 20,000 Old Order Mennonite members in 150 congregations," mostly in Indiana, Ohio, and Ontario.³⁹

The Old Order Schism also divided the MRMC when a group of conservative minded members broke away, forming the Brutus Old Order Mennonite Church, in 1886.

37. J. C. Wenger, *The Mennonites in Indiana and Michigan, Studies in Anabaptist and Mennonite History* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald press, 1961), 369-372.

38. The name "Old Order Mennonites" comes from the maintaining of the "old order" of customs, more traditional Anabaptist worship practices, and communal church guidelines for lifestyle choices, like dress, vehicles, technology use, etc. At first glance, there is very little distinction between Old Order Mennonite and Amish congregations. In 2002, there were approximately 150 Old Order congregations in Indiana, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Virginia, and Ontario (Canada). John C. Wenger, "Old Order Mennonites," *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, accessed November 18, 2019. https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Old_Order_Mennonites&oldid=113859.

39. *Ibid.*

This split may have been led by Joel Snider, a member who had moved in 1882 from Indiana, where he was a member of Jacob Wisler's Old Order congregation. Snider was chosen as the first deacon of the new Old Order congregation.⁴⁰ A July 1, 1886, article in the *Herald of Truth* (semi-monthly paper of the Mennonite Publishing Co) ,suggests that the primary reason for the split in Brutus was the desire to speak German rather than English.⁴¹ When first formed, the Brutus Old Order congregation met in member's homes.

There has always been a sense of how Mennonite churches in North America are congregationally governed. Until more recently, regional bishops provided leadership and accountability among the congregations. There are stories of bishops who abused their position, but most were supportive of the congregation's authority and were respected. In 1896, MRMC's bishop came from Indiana to mediate a dispute between minister Abe Dettwiler, and his son-in-law. Abe's wife had "begun to lose her mind" so his daughter and husband lived with them and provided care. During this time, Abe confronted his son-in-law about stealing timber from a neighbor's property. The bishop asked Dettwiler to stop preaching until the matter could be reconciled. It was likely because of this "discipline" that Dettwiler switched to the Old Order church. Dettwiler then gave the deed to MRMC's meetinghouse to "Christian Shaum, [the Old Order] Bishop of Indiana and his successors in faith and doctrine and the use of the Old Order Mennonite[s]..."⁴² The question of whether it was ethical or legal for Dettwiler to give the property to the

40. Eby, *Mennonites of Brutus*, 54.

41. John F. Funk, "Church News: A Visit to Northern Michigan," *Herald of Truth*, July 1, 1886: 200-201.

42. Eby, *Mennonites of Brutus*, 106.

Old Order denomination remains unanswered to this day. Regardless, after 1896, both Mennonite congregations (MRMC and Old Order) awkwardly shared the building, coordinating alternate times for worship services.

By 1898, MRMC membership had declined to twenty-two.⁴³ By 1917, further decline was noted (seven members), and by 1919, only three remained. This decline in MRMC's membership was primarily due to the lure of the Old Order congregation which continued to grow and thrive.

Members of the two Mennonites churches in Brutus were not the only people struggling to live in peace at the turn of the century. Seven miles west of the Mennonite meetinghouse, the Burt Lake Indian Village was located on the point of a beautiful peninsula jutting out into Burt Lake. On October 15, 1900, a local developer who claimed to have purchased the village parcels for back taxes, took the land by force with the help of the Sheriff Fred Ming and his deputies. When the men of the village were out working, they forced the women and children out into the cold, poured kerosene on the homes, and set them on fire.⁴⁴ Forced to seek shelter, the tribe walked 35 miles in the rain to the French Jesuit mission at Cross Village.

In 1903, the Michigan House and Senate passed a joint resolution to set aside up to 400 acres of land for the Burt Lake Band. No such action took place. A law suit was filed by the United States on behalf of the Burt Lake Band in 1911, but in 1917 a federal court ruled against them. In 1935, the Burt Lake Band applied for federal recognition, but

43. Membership in Mennonite congregations of this period tended to be only married adults, and only members were permitted to participate in communion.

44. D. Laurence Rogers, *Historic Tales of Michigan up North, American Chronicles* (Charleston, SC: The History Press, 2018), 50-53.

they were denied because they had no land. They applied again in the 1980's and were denied. In 2007, House Resolution 1575 was introduced to offer federal recognition of the Burt Lake Band, but did not pass.

Neither the MRMC, nor the Old Order congregation were involved in the land-grab, and none of the present congregation were living witnesses to this atrocity. The plight of the Burt Lake Band is still in the news.⁴⁵ The reality that the attack occurred in their community has etched the incident into MRMC's collective memory. This memory fits into a larger category of conflict stories in which the congregation played the role of passive spectator. MRMC's conflict stories were often shared with me as matters of regrettable consciousness: "I wish that didn't happen, but it did." One person suggested that the memories of inaction at times of conflict proved that "life goes on...and that's the way it should be."⁴⁶

In 1920, MRMC experienced renewal when minister Clyde Kauffman arrived and immediately a number of families joined the congregation from the Old Order Group. By the end of 1921, MRMC had twenty-five members, and within a few years, that increased to fifty. The Old Order congregation began to decline rapidly as people left to join MRMC. The two groups still shared the meetinghouse.

Older MRMC members I interviewed spoke well of Clyde's outgoing personality. He was educated (Goshen College) and had the theological perspective of Evangelical Fundamentalism. He wanted to ensure Mennonites retained their practices of non-

45. Mardi Link, "Burt Lake Band of Ottawa and Chippewa Walk to Honor, and Remember, Their History," *Traverse City Record Eagle*, September 22, 2019, accessed February 26, 2020, https://www.record-eagle.com/news/local_news/burt-lake-band-of-ottawa-and-chippewa-walk-to-honor/article_7e43c96c-d80d-11e9-ab58-9be756a4fd89.html.

46. Quote from a household interview, July 12, 2015.

conformity and non-resistance. People were attracted to Clyde's preaching on inner re-birth and the assurance of salvation. The story was told of a grandfather who was a member of the Old Order congregation, but came often to hear Clyde preach. A number of people said Clyde was a good song leader. Some from the Old Order congregation were also swayed by modernization. For example, MRMC, unlike the Old Order congregation, allowed people to farm with tractors and drive cars, both of which became common in the region at the time. By 1941, the few people who remained with the Old Order congregation, moved to Ontario, Indiana, and Pennsylvania.

The Brutus Old Order Mennonite Church closed in 1941, and yet retained ownership of the property. Despite not owning the property, MRMC continued to gather in the old meetinghouse, undertaking significant upgrades over time. In 1941, they installed electricity. In 1950, they replaced the small wood stoves in the building with a single furnace. In 1956, they rebuilt the building entrances, built a balcony, and installed new siding.

As a result of regional consolidation, the village school in Brutus was closed in 1965 leaving the building empty. In 1969, MRMC purchased the small school house which had been built in 1893. After extensive renovations, MRMC left the old meetinghouse and moved into their own building.

When I asked if anyone knew where the deed to the old meetinghouse property was located, people replied with suspicion that it had been lost. They seemed not to care, so I did not press the matter further. The old meetinghouse has remained vacant except for one weekend each year, when Old Order Mennonites travel to Brutus for a weekend reunion of sorts. MRMC member, Jacob Snyder, lives near the old building and takes

care of the cemetery. When the building needs maintenance, Jacob contacts someone with connections to the former Old Order congregation.

During interviews, people frequently referred to the old meetinghouse with stories that revealed both pride and irritation. The former building elicited nostalgic pride as older members reflected on their own faith development experiences and the congregation's history. These stories were usually followed by some sort of acknowledgment that the building belonged to "the Old Order Group" which had not technically existed for over 80 years. Stories about the old meetinghouse would often end with an off-handed comment that MRMC's current building is better anyway. These are stories of loss. However, it is not clear if it is only the old meetinghouse at issue, or if the loss also involves the years of division with the Old Order group. I believe that the voiced frustration about the deed is a part of the MRMC's story. It reflects the congregation's broken past and their ongoing systemic inability to directly address conflicts, not necessarily because they want to own the old church building.

Another related story of conflict was about the men of the congregation who served in the military during the World Wars. This was not uncommon among U.S. Mennonites, in spite of clear peace and *non-resistance* teachings of the church. When the service members returned home, MRMC's bishop, who was known as a very strict and legalistic person, banned them from involvement in the church. This created deep pain and loss for the congregation and its families. In submission to the bishop's judgment, the congregation accepted the losses without any argument.

This story of excommunication was never resolved in the hearts of the congregation. The men were sons and brothers to MRMC members, and while they were

no longer a part of the congregation, their family relationships remained intact. The bishop's judgment caused some to question the church's peace position. Many years later, one veteran who had moved away, married, and had children, moved his family back to the area and returned to the church without censure. His widow told me that he never again felt like he was part of MRMC. One Sunday, our worship theme was biblical peace as an Anabaptist value. The central point of my sermon was the sixteenth-century Anabaptist' refusal of violence based on Jesus' words, "Love your enemies and do good to those who hate you..."⁴⁷ When I invited reflections after the message, the son of the man who had returned to the church said, "I have been in the Mennonite Church for years and I have never heard this before. My attitudes about Jesus and peace have been wrong." A number of stories followed about men serving in the military and their desire to see peace and community reconciliation.

Other stories referred to conflicts and challenges with the congregation's pastors. Clyde Kauffman, the minister who restarted the congregation in 1921 remained an involved member until his death in 1980, even though his ministry role ended in 1954. The congregation remembered Clyde's presence during those years as troublesome to successive ministers, particularly one pastor who may have left in frustration as a result of Clyde's interference. When asked if anything was said or done about the situation, people responded with uncertainty.

Jim Gerber became the congregation's pastor in 1978. He had young children and an extremely affable wife, Carol. After the Gerber children were grown and left the community, Carol was diagnosed with cancer and died in 1997.

47. Luke 6:27-28 But to you who are listening I say: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you.

Many people commented on the experience of Carol's illness and subsequent death. This was a time of deep loss in the small congregation, as a loved and influential woman was taken from them. Many people spoke of their confusion and pain as they experienced changes in their relationship with Jim. The congregation felt Jim's preaching was angry and harsh. He "refused to take time off" for healing and renewal. I was told some people left the church in frustration. Some recalled when the regional conference minister preached at MRMC, and chastised them for their lack of compassion toward Jim. In an interview, Jim shared after Carol's death, he expressed his personal "crisis of the soul" and was hurt by the lack of consolation from the congregation. Due to the intensity of their grief, the congregation was unable to care for their pastor, who was likewise unable to care for them. The pain and frustration from this situation was never directly addressed.

A couple of years after Carol's death, Jim married Barb and she moved to Brutus. Barb earnestly wanted to begin life in the congregation and community, but encountered resistance from those who felt that she "was no Carol." There were angry exchanges between Jim and one member, who had been a good friend of Carol's. Many voiced ongoing grief. A few spoke of the complicating grief of irreconciliation with Jim and Barb. One person, reflecting on the unaddressed hurt of this situation, summarized the congregation's mindset by saying, "Maybe over time it will just go away."

In 2003, Jim retired from ministry after 25 years with MRMC, but like Clyde Kauffman, chose to remain in the congregation. During my time with MRMC (2015-16), Jim and Barb lived next door and were heavily involved in the church and community.

After interviewing them, I believe that Jim and Barb remained with the congregation both out of love for the people, and the belief that they were still needed.

Three years after Jim's retirement, the congregation called a pastor named Rudy Kuyten. An exceptional artist (painter and wood-carver), Rudy seemed capable, but within a year, it became apparent his marriage was in trouble. The elders told shared that Rudy stunned them by asking for financial assistance with his divorce. One week later, before they responded, he was killed in an auto accident. No less than three different people reflected on the situation with Rudy's failing marriage by saying, "God took care of it." As unhealthy as this statement is, it reflects the epitome of the congregation's indirect approach to conflict.

Once again they needed a pastor and Jim Gerber was there. He provided pastoral care, led funerals, and preached occasionally. The congregation's leaders did not ask Jim for help, but neither did they decline it.

In 2010, Todd Thompson, a part-time hospital chaplain in nearby Petoskey, Michigan, was called to be the MRMC's pastor. Todd was not a Mennonite by tradition or training, but the congregation came to appreciate his approach to preaching and his effective caregiving. Yet, just one year into his ministry, he was offered a full-time chaplaincy and left MRMC.

Once again Jim Gerber provided ministry support for the congregation. During this time, Jim and Barb were increasingly involved with neighbors who viewed Jim as the church's pastor. Elders were uneasy and felt Jim had significant influence over the congregation. He was vocal about leadership and congregational decision making. Still, they chose to remain silent.

In 2013, the congregation invited a young man named Chris Rasper to serve as interim pastor. Chris let the congregation and regional conference know that he was not interested in being a Mennonite. In an interview, a conference leader stated, “Chris told us that he had no hope for MRMC’s future and wanted to be a part of something bigger.” The leader added, “I don’t think the congregation ever heard him say this.” Part of concern from the congregation was that Chris refused to make a commitment, yet, seemed willing to “hang around.” They appreciated his preaching, but expected more. Chris was serving in this capacity with MRMC when I was contacted. Leaders indicated there were a few individuals who remained hopeful that Chris would stay and become their pastor.

When I began as transition pastor in 2015, Chris ended his role with the congregation. At that time, Jim Gerber was providing significant pastoral support. Two weeks into my time with MRMC, Jim was asked to lead a funeral for a longtime church member. He did so with my agreement. Struggling with neuropathy, Jim was fatigued, but diligently visited shut-ins, performed community outreach, attended a regional minister’s group, and plowed the church parking area with his tractor.

I facilitated the elders discussions related to past challenges with pastors, specifically, Jim, Rudy, and Chris. They expressed feelings of anxiety, doubt, shame, and rejection. They desired reconciliation, but they didn’t know where to begin. In *Community*, Peter Block claims that “restorative community is created when we allow ourselves to use the language of healing and relatedness and belonging without embarrassment.”⁴⁸ The time had come for MRMC to foster restorative possibilities

48. Block, *Community*, 48.

through direct conversation in “declaration of the future [they would] choose to live into.”⁴⁹

Based on MRMC’s narrative, the elders began to think about possibilities for addressing the fracture with Jim and Barb who were still involved in the congregation. Jim seemed pleased to meet with the elders for a direct conversation. The dialogue was difficult and at times painful, but they were committed to seek healing. Two things emerged: 1) Jim had not heard people describe their hurt any more than the congregation had heard Jim’s, and 2) Jim desired to maintain healthy boundaries. This sentiment was echoed by the elders.

As the meeting concluded, the group agreed to invite the congregation to an open dialog with Jim about the loss associated with his previous wife Carol’s death. Here is an excerpt I presented to begin the dialog:

Why are we here?

The reason for this conversation is lingering uneasiness related to Carol Gerber’s illness and death in 1997. This was mentioned by a number of people during interviews.

Why does this matter?

Even grief handled well brings emotional pain at unexpected times. Unresolved grief, or the awkwardness that can grow out of times of significant loss, can cause us to become stuck – unable to move forward in peace. Life interrupted can seep into other relationships. For the congregation, unresolved tension with a pastor can impede healthy connections to future pastors.

Because of the mutual emotional commitment and investment between Jim and this congregation, this is a conversation rooted in love. It is a time to offer each other the gift of vulnerable love, by trusting each other with our experiences. Jim, and congregation, you each have one primary obligation here tonight: Listen to understand each other.

49. Ibid., 48.

About a dozen people were in attendance. Jim first shared his journey through Carol's illness and death, as well as the personal and spiritual crisis he encountered in the months and years following. I asked, "Jim, if you were to do anything differently, what would it be?" He said that he would ask for help. He shared how alone he felt as he struggled to conceal his anger toward God for taking Carol. I asked, "What would you like to hear from this group?" He responded by asking the group for understanding related to the mistakes he made during those dark days. (I wish I had asked Jim why he asked for *understanding*, rather than *forgiveness*. Maybe he didn't feel like he had really done something wrong, or he was asking people to empathize with him in his story of grief, or he saw it as a first step toward reconciliation.)

I invited the group to ask Jim questions to help clarify his comments. There were a couple, and Jim freely expanded his story. Then I asked people to share their experience related to Carol's illness and death. Tears flowed as a number of people spoke about their personal losses and their concern for Jim and his children. I asked, "Do you wish you would have done anything differently?" One person responded to Jim, "I wish I had invited you out for coffee, just to be with you," others nodded in agreement. Another person said, "That's right, I wish I had not assumed that you wanted to be left alone," and almost everyone agreed. Finally, I asked, "What would you like most to hear from Jim?" The general reply from the group was to hear Jim say that all was ok. We ended by singing a song, praying, and hugging.

In subsequent elder meetings, the conversations turned to the creation of an agreement with Jim that would recognize his years of ministry. The agreement would clarify appropriate boundaries regarding his involvement in the congregation. They

viewed the existing pastoral role and expectations that centered on preaching and care of the congregation as critical. The group identified other important tasks for a pastor: new believer instruction, and leading special events such as communion, baptism, funerals, etc. The elder's also created a process to recognize Jim for his years of service to the congregation. They clarified how Jim would be asked to assist in the future. The new process involved bestowing upon Jim the title "*Pastor Emeritus.*" This was the congregation's way of expressing affection and gratitude for his many years of service.

Jim was recognized on a Sunday morning when the congregation gathered and his family was present. In addition, a verbal agreement was established acknowledging Jim's ongoing presence in the congregation. The agreement stated 1) Jim could, at any time, bring questions, or concerns to the elders; 2) the elders and/or future pastor assumed leadership for all decisions affecting the congregation's faith and life; 3) Jim would support leaders and abstain from conversations critical of MRMC or its leadership; and 4) if the need for pastoral ministry arose, elders would ask Jim to assist.

The theme of avoiding conflict emerged throughout the congregation's stories. They acknowledged their pattern of avoidance, but accepted it as normal. Consequently, avoiding conflict became embedded into the MRMC culture. Over the years, this avoidance behavior was built-into the congregation's relationships with each other, other churches, and neighbors. It is reflected in the common phrases spoken by the people such as, "it is what it is," "time will tell," and "give it time and it will go away."

As we worked on the collective memory timeline and began to recount painful incidents, one person asked, "What do we do about past conflicts?" As the conversation unfolded, the group concluded that past conflicts could not be un-lived/unwritten from the

congregation's story. Instead, past conflicts should be acknowledged to foster understanding and develop healthy future relationships. This was significant breakthrough and poignant reflection.

The congregation spoke of their hopes and fears. The diminishing number of people in the congregation was a point of grave concern. Over the past forty years, most of the congregation's children moved away, or were not active in the church. People spoke of their hope that young families would join the church, but expressed doubt. For decades, MRMC had an annual week-long Vacation Bible School (VBS). One Summer they decided not to continue offering VBS. Neighborhood children responded until the church relented and continued the program. One person reflected, "We have been doing VBS for 60 years, and we have always had a lot of children attend, but never have those children or their parents come to church."

The family-like congregational community was also a narrative theme for MRMC. While some of the congregation were related, there was a broad expression of intimate relationships throughout the congregation. Worship services were largely informal with a "down-home" warmth and strong participation. Church organizational meetings were conducted around the dinner-table after worship and opened with the question, "What is our agenda?" I was impressed by how the life of the congregation centered around events such as the fall hayride and hot dog roast; the fund-raising auction that filled the fellowship hall with hand-made wooden toys, apple pies, and excited bidders (most of whom were the congregation's fringe connections); ten people snow-shoeing in the woods on a Sunday afternoon; weekend church retreats at a camp in Michigan's Upper Peninsula; ice cream socials; and an annual Easter morning pancake

breakfast provided by the men of the congregation. It was evident that the congregation valued fellowship, eating together, and being family together.

Healthy learning and a sense of shared calling emerged as the congregation reflected on its missional identity. Discovery groups evaluated congregational resources and considered how they might be used to fulfill this mission. This led to passionate and delightful brainstorming around creative mission possibilities. Ideas considered were a reading club for children, a weekly distribution of bread, and a neighborhood garden.

Because they were an aging congregation, sobering questions arose regarding the church's future. The practical working order of the congregation was fading as some roles were becoming obsolete (children's Sunday School teachers, and youth group volunteers). Yet, other roles had been adequately filled by the same people for many years. When reflecting on sustainability, the congregation considered the meaning of church membership and an outdated constitution.

As the elders considered the practical questions related to roles and responsibilities, we reviewed the official structure. The MRMC constitution and by-laws, written in the 1980's and revised in the 1990's, was a daunting tome and specified ministries and offices that had long been extinct. As a result of this review, the elders began to develop a simple organizational document that was more consistent with the present family-like way of life. Elders also began to explore ways to invite members to affirm a shared commitment to Christ and to the church.

Near the end of my time with MRMC the elders gathered for a retreat with the primary purpose of crafting a statement of the congregation's identity and purpose. They revisited the stories of MRMC that had emerged and talked about how God was shaping

their future story. The group considered the questions: Who is God forming MRMC to be? What is the reason for MRMC to exist? and What will MRMC do now? As a result, the elders developed this simple statement of identity:

“MRMC is a family of Christ’s followers.

The purpose of MRMC is to show and tell of God’s reign in our world. God’s reign is displayed as love, peace, healing, forgiveness, reconciliation and hope in the daily lives of people.

We will be engaged in the lives of our neighbors as witnesses of God’s reign. Our engagement in the community will be vocal and outspoken; visibly demonstrated; openly embracing everyone; joining God in attending to people’s needs.

We will pursue God’s vision for us by these practices: a monthly community meal for our neighbors; sharing bread with our neighbors; and providing a community garden to share with our neighbors.”

It was remarkable to hear the group claim a purpose that included the words *healing*, *forgiveness*, and *reconciliation*, when the story of their past did not address these areas. Yet, these words were a part of MRMC’s discovery through conversations with Jim and their discernment of God’s calling. The challenge for the congregation is to act and put these words into practice.

After the statement was affirmed by the congregation, the elders continued to explore inviting the congregation to share commitment to Christ and the church. While no decision had been made prior to the completion of my work with them, they were considering developing a MRMC member covenant based on the aforementioned statement of identity.

A number of months after my service with MRMC I asked the elders about their ongoing experience. They told me that they had renewed their search for a pastor, but did not know if the search would be successful. There were a number of individuals from

outside the congregation, and a couple from within, that preached on Sundays and the elders were attending to the other pastoral tasks. The community garden experiment seemed successful and the congregation enjoyed the interaction with a participating neighbors. Monthly community meals were attended by members of the congregation, as well as people with already established relationships, such as relatives that lived in the area. They had not yet found a way to involve neighbors in the meals.

Valparaiso Mennonite Church

Valparaiso Mennonite Church (VMC) members worked very hard to “get it all right.” This led to waning energy and emotional exhaustion. As with the other congregations, I invited leaders and discovery group participants to ask themselves: “*Who* are we?” and “*Why* do we exist?” The first question was designed to encourage the group to inquire about their identity. The second question was intended to open exploration of the congregation’s sense of purpose. The “who?” was certainly challenging, but it was the “why?” that gathered the most interest with VMC. Their responses to “why do we exist?” were broad yet comprehensive: to worship and praise God; to care for each other; to grow as disciples (spiritual formation); to save the lost; and to serve the Valparaiso community. The answers to “why do we exist?” was troubling for them, as it highlighted the struggle for a primary purpose, while attempting to meet all their imagined expectations.

The congregation’s origin narrative began in the Fall of 1966, when 87 people from the Mennonite Church in nearby Kouts, Indiana, met in Valparaiso for worship. Some said that VMC began when Mennonites who lived in the Valparaiso area didn’t want to drive to Kouts for church. The official history states that this was a move

intended to alleviate overcrowding and expand the church's community outreach efforts. Differentiating between the purpose of convenience and outreach seems vast. Furthermore, the lack of clarity about VMC's origin story contributed to the congregation's ongoing confusion about why they existed.

In preparation for the 1966 church start, the Kouts congregation purchased the old Reformed Mennonite Church building, which was a Valparaiso historic landmark. VMC's founding members recall that the newly purchased building was deemed too small for the group. Nonetheless, the building was officially dedicated in the spring of 1968. The congregation's first summer Bible school was held in June, followed by the first baptism in July.

Eight years later, on August 18, 1974, the church broke ground on the construction of a new building which they moved into four months later. The congregation attributed the rapid completion of the building (18 weeks) to God's blessing and answer to prayer. With seating for 225 people, a kitchen, fellowship hall which doubled as Sunday school classrooms, a library, and pastor's study, the eighty member congregation was optimistic about their future. The program for the dedication service stated that the new building would enable the congregation to better serve the Valparaiso community. Older members of the congregation recalled the anticipation surrounding this building and the desire to grow by community outreach. The hope for ministry in the community was clear as the congregation moved into the new building. However, direction and focus regarding a plan for community engagement was not. Rather than drawing in new people from the community, the larger building attracted existing

Mennonites from the local area, or those who were moving to Valparaiso for work or education.

From the start, VMC members had not lived near the building. When new, the building stood on four acres at the edge of an open field just outside of town, lending to the congregation's rural cultural ethos. Over time, the city of Valparaiso expanded and the church property was surrounded by suburban housing developments. In spite of ongoing efforts, the congregation was unable to translate their dream of community outreach into an active ministry.

VMC's narrative included multiple stories about four former pastors. For the first two years, VMC was led by the pastor from the Mennonite Church in Kouts. VMC welcomed their first pastor, Etril Leinbach, in 1968. Etril and his family came to Valparaiso from Three Rivers, Michigan, after serving for twenty years at the Morepark Mennonite Church. He is remembered as an effective and involved pastor: "he was a good preacher;" "he visited people in their homes;" "he did everything before there were committees;" "he even organized the construction of the new building." With Etril as their pastor, they gained a sense of independence from the church in Kouts.. Three men were selected in 1969 to form VMC's first Board of Elders, furthering the congregation's self-governance model.

In 1976, Etril announced his decision to retire and asked the congregation to begin looking for a new pastor. He preached his last sermon and said farewell to VMC in September of that same year. The following week Alvin Beachy, a pastor from Iowa, was installed at VMC. The congregation did not recall much about Alvin or his ministry. He resigned three years later. When I asked about the resignation, I was told that he had an

inappropriate relationship with a member of the congregation. No one seemed to know if there were any attempts to address the situation, or reach out to the involved church member.

Jim Armstrong, from Pennsylvania, accepted the call to serve as the congregation's pastor in 1982. During Jim's ministry, the congregation's membership grew. These were formative years in the congregation for children, youth, and families. Members recalled with nostalgia, times of Christmas caroling, singing acapella hymns in four part harmony in worship, mission trips, and community interaction. During Jim's time with VMC, the congregation became involved in a homeless men's ministry (New Creation) of Valparaiso community churches. New Creation ministry began with churches alternating overnight hospitality for homeless men.

The congregation's involvement with New Creation was significant. Jim served as a member of New Creation's Board of Directors, and over the years many VMC members were actively involved in the New Creation ministry. They acted as over-night hosts, helped with fundraising events, volunteered in the ministry's Thrift Store, as board members, and one person held the post of Executive Director. When asked "How would you describe VMC's relationship to its surrounding community?" almost everyone proudly noted, with satisfaction, VMC's involvement in New Creation and the contributions in the community. With a tone of disappointment, members went on to say they still had not connected to people in the immediate neighborhood. In reflection, while the congregation was invested in New Creation, they didn't feel it was their primary purpose. They continued to long for an answer to the elusive "why?"

In 1988, Pastor Jim was asked to resign from the New Creation Ministry Board due to his “lack of leadership gifts.” Soon after, VMC elders, asked him to resign his position as pastor. The elders’ decision to ask for Jim’s resignation may have been related in some way to his departure from the New Creation Board. A couple of people reported that “Jim was not a strong leader” and that “he was quiet and permissive at times when he should have been more forthright with people.” This was a common memory for congregation when asked, “When have you been disappointed with Valparaiso Mennonite Church?” Many members were surprised and hurt by the decision to let Jim go. They were fond of him, yet felt he was not a good fit the role of pastor in the view of the church’s elders. One person commented that “Jim was no Etril.”

After his resignation from VMC, Jim and his wife remained in Valparaiso and joined a non-denominational church. Years later, they began to worship again with VMC. Nothing was said publicly about any past conflicts. Jim also began volunteering with New Creation Ministry again. Then Jim received a call to serve a small congregation in Gary, Indiana. In 2016, after seven years of serving in Gary, the church Closed. Jim and his wife returned again to VMC. When I met Jim I was impressed by his quiet, generous, and humble attitude.

In 1990, the congregation called pastor Mario Bustos. Mario was the son of a minister in a Hispanic Mennonite church. Mario had pastored a small Mennonite congregation also in northwestern Indiana. During Mario’s first ten years of ministry with VMC, the congregation experienced growth in community outreach as Bible school attendance soared, computer class were offered to the community, and connections were made with International Students at Valparaiso University. In spite of these efforts, the

congregation felt they had failed to bring people into the church. I asked about this and members quickly confirmed their commitment to *Willow Creek* type church growth models used by churches that had sprung up around Valparaiso. The congregation felt they either had to grow by attracting more members, or cease to exist.

Mario was highly regarded by the congregation for his preaching, teaching an elevated view of the Bible. His theological foundations and his pastoral manner were solidly American evangelical. It is unclear whether Mario introduced the congregation to evangelical *biblicism*,⁵⁰ or his ministry simply deepened their evangelical spirituality, but in 2016 the people of VMC were almost uniform in theological understanding. VMC's theological mind-frame involved believing that the Bible was the sourcebook of God's truth. During a lunch after worship, a member stated, "the problem with the 'liberal Mennonite church' is that they *interpret* the bible instead of accepting its truth." I responded, "Don't we all interpret the Bible when we seek to understand it?" "No," she replied, "the Bible is God's word spoken to us and it means exactly what it says." One adult Sunday school class that studied an Apologetics curriculum, intended to teach members how to argue biblical truths with unbelievers. After I had been with the congregation a few months, a member approached me to say he preferred exegetical preaching. "What do you mean by exegetical?" I asked. "Exegetical means going verse by verse to let God's words speak to people," he said. Author Brian Zahnd writes, "The

50. Christian Smith, *The Bible Made Impossible: Why Biblicism Is Not a Truly Evangelical Reading of Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2011), xi. Smith defines biblicism as "a theory about the Bible that emphasizes together its exclusive authority, infallibility, perspicuity, self-sufficiency, internal consistency, self-evident meaning, and universal applicability."

irony of Biblicism is that for all its claims about giving final authority to the Bible, in reality Biblicism enables the individual reader to remain their own private authority.”⁵¹

Evangelical biblicism shaped the congregation’s worldview to delineate between the world full of evil and immorality and God’s call to moral holiness. They defined salvation as personal forgiveness of sin through the atonement of Jesus and subsequent separation from the world. God’s call to the Church was to purity as the “bride of Christ.” The mission of the Church was to proclaim the truth to the lost, and discipleship was teaching biblical morality.

From the start of Mario’s leadership, there was growing discontent in the congregation’s perception of the Mennonite Church’s (MCUSA) direction. Some churches were accepting gay and lesbian members. In the late 1990’s, Mario expressed concern to the congregation that MCUSA and the Indiana Michigan Mennonite Conference were reluctant to classify same-sex physical intimacy as sin. VMC’s leaders indicated Mario shared news articles from publications that reported on Lesbian, Bisexual, Gay, Transgender, and Queer (LBGTQ) inclusion in Mennonite churches. Mario regularly voiced his opposition to LBGTQ inclusion at IN-MI Mennonite Conference gatherings. In his last few years with VMC, Mario personally withdrew from participating in MCUSA and the IN-MI Conference.

In early 2000, some members expressed dissatisfaction with VMC’s theological direction and chose to leave. The congregation grieved the losses, but took solace knowing that those who left did not theologically agree with them. About the same time, many of the congregation’s youth left to attend college, find work, or get married. Few

51. Brian Zahnd, "Christianity Vs. Biblicism," July 12, 2018, accessed December 15, 2019, <https://brianzahnd.com/2018/07/christianity-vs-biblicism/>.

young people returned to VMC and consequently, fewer families with children remained in the congregation. Existing members recognized the congregation was smaller and older. Eventually, Mario's pastoral position was reduced to half-time.

A number of congregational stories centered on the role of women in positions of church leadership. From the beginning, VMC's leadership structure was comprised of three men chosen by the congregation to be elders. Around 2005, there was interest in adding women and forming a shared governance leadership team. Two female deaconesses were asked to join the male elders, forming a lead team. In a decision that belied gender inclusion, the nomination process for selecting elders supported the "biblical model" where men led, and women functioned in a support role. I expressed confusion about this arrangement, however members defended what they deemed to be the *biblical tradition* of male elder leadership.

In early 2000, Wilma Cender, a gentle and soft-spoken member of the congregation, sensed a call to pursue spiritual formation ministry. With the encouragement of Mario and the congregation, she began taking classes at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary in Elkhart, Indiana. Wilma completed a master's degree, began doing spiritual direction, and helped Mario with pastoral care at VMC. Wilma was licensed for ministry by IN-MI Mennonite Conference in preparation for future ordination. She told me the congregation supported her, yet she was never fully considered to be a pastor because of her gender. Nevertheless, she blazed a new path with the congregation. After my time with VMC, a member told me they found a new pastor, a young man who would share a full-time pastoral position with his wife. In June 2019, Wilma Cender died of cancer after a long and arduous journey.

The congregation exhibited its preference for fundamental evangelicalism again in 2014. Seventy-five miles East of Valparaiso, an event caught the attention of Mario and some VMC members. Dennis Miller, an Amish man from Millersburg, Indiana, was praying for revival in the local community. He contacted evangelist Kyle Martin, who had relocated from Indiana to Texas a few years earlier. Martin went to Elkhart County and led a broad-sweeping revival effort. *Revive Indiana* sought “to encourage the local church to embrace Jesus and when that happens, the love of Jesus will naturally spill over into the community.”⁵² With broad support among more conservative evangelical congregations in the region, Revive Indiana focused on sending daily prayer teams out into the community and then gathering for large revival style worship services. Prayer teams were trained to share the message of salvation and pray with people in the community. Thousands of people were involved in praying and proclaiming salvation over the course of many months. There was significant cooperation among dozens of churches in that region, in spite of the growing theological gap between other churches with less evangelical commitments. Among Mennonite congregations in Elkhart County, one of the most involved in Revive Indiana was Clinton Frame Mennonite, a large influential congregation that had left MCUSA and IN-MI Mennonite Conference just months earlier.

When Revive Indiana ended in Elkhart County, Martin was invited to North-West Indiana to lead a similar revival effort. Revive Indiana yielded more modest results in the Valparaiso region. Still, its spiritual and theological foundations were embraced by many,

52. Sheila Sellman, "Revive Indiana Seeks to Unite Christians," *The Goshen News*, January 2, 2015, accessed October 12, 2019, https://www.goshennews.com/news/revive-indiana-seeks-to-unite-christians/article_b3d3fa38-9aa6-11e4-9d93-bb41a7ef0536.html.

including a number of VMC members. A handful of members participated in the Revive prayer teams and worship gatherings. They were passionate about inviting others of the congregation to explore evangelistic practices. The growing embrace of conservative evangelicalism through Mario's teaching, apologetics training, and Revive experiences, led many in the congregation to believe their prime purpose was to "save the lost."

In 2015, as the congregation was preparing for Mario's retirement, the Evangelical Anabaptist Network (Evana) was formed. Its purpose was to provide connections between churches that were leaving MCUSA. Evana was founded and led by John Troyer, a pastor from Clinton Frame Mennonite Church in Goshen, Indiana. The Evana website stated "Evana provides a home for men and women seeking to covenant together around the primacy of Jesus, obedience to Scripture, and bold evangelism. Our covenant is based on the Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective, 1995."⁵³ Many people from VMC followed the formation of Evana with interest. VMC's leadership team chairperson was a founding member of Evana.

Evana's reference to the *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* reflected its strong support for doctrinal confession. Mennonites traditionally supported congregational discernment and biblical interpretation in order to avoid a rigid adherence to doctrinal confession. Authors of the *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*, wrote in the book's introduction, that a confession of faith provides not doctrine, but guidance for interpretation of scripture, faith, and practice. The authors stated, "confessions give an updated interpretation of belief and practice in the midst of

53. Accessed October 30, 2019, <https://evananetwork.org/about/vision>.

changing times.”⁵⁴ This faith confession, created over two decades ago, was not based on dogmatic certitude. It was intended instead to be a fluid and faithful conversation among congregations and conferences of MCUSA. Even so, more evangelically conservative Mennonites used the confession to maintain traditional doctrine. VMC leaders reported they recently studied and reaffirmed all twenty-four articles of the confession. Based on this, Evana seemed like the appropriate organization for VMC’s affiliation. As I finished my transition agreement with the congregation, they decided to withdraw from MCUSA and the IN-MI Mennonite Conference and join Evana.

The question of the congregation’s Mennonite identity continued to surface as they embraced mainstream evangelicalism. For years, they had considered dropping the Mennonite name. For some, the congregation’s Mennonite identity was the reason they originally came to VMC. Most of the congregation believed the name was confusing to outsiders. They were questioning if it actually fit anymore. Some said it was embarrassing to be known as “Mennonite” when that name was associated with “gay marriage and lesbian pastors,” in reference to recent newspaper articles.

Playing a prominent role in VMC’s narrative is the fact that in their fifty year history, the congregation had only four pastors. Mario retired in September 2016, after 26 years with VMC (more than half of VMC’s existence). Ten months prior to his departure, Mario created a team to provide pastoral ministry assistance and guide the congregation through the coming transition. He selected five individuals to form the new ministry team: Wilma Cender who was already assisting him; John Klumpe, an entrepreneur in his 50’s; John’s son, Nathan Klumpe, a young man interested in young adult ministry; Jean

54. General Conference Mennonite Church and Mennonite Church, *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1995), 8.

Martin, the congregation's Administrative Assistant, who was deeply concerned about the moral purity of the church; and Jean's son Nathan Martin, a farmer and the apologetics Sunday school teacher.

Under Mario's supervision, the ministry team met weekly for bible study, prayer, and collaboration. The team parsed out pastoral responsibilities based on their strengths. John, Nate Klumpe, and Nate Martin helped Mario with preaching/teaching. Wilma assisted with pastoral care and Jean handled the day-to-day operations. They all shared in the vision and support of the church's ministry.

One of the most challenging aspects for the congregation had been the declining involvement of young adults. Nate Klumpe grew up in the congregation, but was involved in other churches when Mario approached him about joining the ministry team. Nate was the only paid member of the team. He took on his role with enthusiasm, and within a few months, formed a group consisting of ten to fifteen young adults. They met in his home one night each week to play games. As participation increased to over twenty people, the group began using the VMC fellowship hall. Initially, some of the young adults were reluctant to meet in a church building. Nate's persistence was rewarded with more than thirty young adults participating every Thursday night in the fellowship hall.

The development of the game night was met with skepticism by some members of the congregation. There was no presentation of the good news, formal prayer, or organized spiritual input. Nate noted the relationship building, and the informal spiritual conversations occurring in coffee shops and his living room. In his preaching, he called the congregation to practice the sort of relational ministry displayed in the life of Jesus. Nate invited VMC members to attend the game night, join in, observe, or bring food.

Some of the congregation accepted Nate's invitation. They brought pizza and mingled with the young adults for a number of weeks. Game night began to unravel when a leader made critical comments to the young adults about fantasy role play game that was being played. Participation numbers dropped as the young adults grew defensive. Nate found a new location for game night, but this was a devastating blow for his ministry connection with VMC.

Another outreach idea the ministry team discussed when I first arrived at VMC was called Life Groups. They proposed Life Groups be more than small groups primarily consisting of congregational fellowship. The intent was to develop a way to reach unbelievers in the community. Each Life Group consisted of three to four congregation members. Members invited a few "non-believers" to join them. John and Nate Klumpe, on behalf of the ministry team, provided leadership training and formed four life groups. The response was mixed. Two of the groups struggled to engage the evangelistic invitation and functioned like typical church fellowship groups. The other groups did not have much success either, although new friendships evolved with a few people outside the congregation.

The reflection process with VMC was challenging. First, the congregation's theological investment in biblicism, a narrative approach to preaching that opens scripture to be heard as God's story was, for many, meaningless. I continued the practice I used with the Maple River Mennonite congregation of inviting reflections after the sermon on Sunday morning. I asked for reactions, learnings and invitations of the biblical texts. This didn't produce much reflection. Still, the congregation enjoyed the interaction

as it gave people and opportunity to share personal views. At times, members offered gentle correction to the sermon.

Another challenge to the reflection process was the congregation's philosophical expectations of the transition time my role as transition pastor. The congregation realized they needed some kind of a reset before bringing in the next pastor. Mario's retirement was hard on the congregation. It was more than just grief. They wanted me to accompany them throughout the process. "Help us get from here to there. This shouldn't take more than a year, right?" They were facing an unknown future in a *dangerous world*. They were doctrinally scrupulous, anxious about future prospects, and emotionally weary. This was evident in individual reluctance to teach Sunday School, help with Bible School, or serve in leadership. Most troubling was the sense of joylessness within the congregational community.

While working on a collective memory timeline, members began sharing stories of their past which began in 1966. It occurred to me that it was their fiftieth year as a congregation, which I voiced out loud. No one had realized it was their corporate anniversary. They were working so hard at the transition that they overlooked the opportunity to celebrate this event. I encouraged the leadership team to think of ways to engage the congregation in celebration the church's history. The team acknowledged my suggestion, but chose not to plan any celebratory events.

Due to the atmosphere of tired seriousness among the congregation, I attempted to offer encouragement and humor while preaching, when interacting with leadership, and during discovery groups. I focused on the themes related to God's generosity and abundant grace. I affirmed the hopes and faithfulness of the congregation and told

humorous stories while poking fun at my own foibles. I suggested the congregation meet regularly to eat and socialize. The general mood of the congregation seemed to lighten.

Nine months into the transition agreement, VMC's leaders and I met to review the congregation's stories and create identity and purpose statements. We began with dwelling in the story of Samuel's calling (1 Samuel 3). We used each of the three reflection questions (reaction, learning, invitation) and read the story three times. The group reflected on their own experience of hearing and uncertainty about whether they were hearing God's call. The interaction between old Eli and young Samuel resonated with the group. They affirmed that God's call must be heard by youth and not just handed down from the older generation. Eli's openness to God's leading was recognized as an invitation to the group of leaders. The story of Samuel impressed upon VMC's leaders that God was forging a new path for them and inviting them to embrace it.

As previously stated, reviewing congregational stories was challenging for leaders. I stated that missional formation begins with listening to the surrounding community in conjunction with the Holy Spirit's guidance. However, discussion quickly centered on ideal congregational expressions of doctrinal faithfulness. In redirecting the conversation, I realized leaders were earnestly reaching for what they understood to be most important for the church.

This statement of identity was created based on the questions: Who is God forming VMC to be and What is the reason for VMC to exist?

“VMC is a generous community of followers of Jesus, who love God and His written word to us. We are being made into the likeness of Christ and are engaging in teaching, sharing and walking with others in His ways. We are stewards of God's word who are passionate followers of Christ. We are built on the foundation of God's revelation – His word and his son.

God's intention for VMC is to extend healing and hope through Christ with one another and to a broken world. Extending healing and hope with one another in gathering for worship, eating together, and becoming a transformed community. Extending healing and hope to a broken world in disciple making and sending, sharing the Word, loving, serving and providing for others."

It was hard to miss the import and weightiness of "the word" and the lack of reference to the *Holy Spirit* in these statements. The group also deliberately chose not to include any reference to Mennonite or Anabaptist identity. As much as I wanted to challenge the narrow theological foundations of these statements, I had to acknowledge the honest integrity of the participants. When the identity and purpose statements were offered to the congregation for review, they were well received. The congregation began to imagine ways to express their purpose *with each other* and *to a broken world*. Their ideas for attending to one another included sharing home and small group communion, worshipping together in addition to Sunday morning, and praying together. Ideas for extending hope and healing to others included hosting music and drama performances on the lawn for neighbors, forming mentor relationships, using VMC property for sporting events, building a pavilion, finding ways to share meals with neighbors, providing help with addiction and recovery, and creating a community garden.

Leaders asked me to extend my time with them for six-months to initiate the pastor search process and explore their affiliation with MCUSA and the IN-MI Mennonite Conference. Mennonite churches typically seek out assistance from a regional conference pastor when beginning to look for a pastor. The fact that they asked me to help indicated they were considering severing their affiliation with MCUSA. Affiliation was their primary concern, so we first addressed this issue. I am firmly committed to MCUSA, and hope that congregations do not withdraw from conferences. I was

concerned how to objectively assist the congregation in this matter. I contacted Dan Miller, the IN-MI Conference Minister, to let him know the congregation was discussing their affiliation and that I was asked to assist. Dan was understanding, encouraging, and offered to speak to the congregation. I suggested this to VMC's leaders, but they declined the offer and felt the congregation would not be interested.

The process I created to address the affiliation issue was straight-forward. The congregation met for prayer and three distinct conversations. The first conversation centered on their experiences as part of MCUSA and the IN-MI Mennonite Conference. I asked members to share stories of the congregation's early years and its Mennonite relationships. I invited members to share personal stories as well, on topics such as youth conventions, annual gatherings, missions, and service projects. Finally, I urged the congregation to express their expectations related to affiliation any denomination, network, or other larger group.

The second conversation was led by church leaders who previously explored other affiliations and presented the ideas to the congregation. Having no affiliation (an independent congregation) was not considered a viable option. Affiliation possibilities included Evana, the Conservative Mennonite Conference,⁵⁵ and the Missionary Church.⁵⁶ The congregation asked leaders to open an initial conversation with Evana.

55. Conservative Mennonite Conference (now called just CMC) is an association of congregations which began in 1910 with the purpose to, "stand more closely together in the work of the Lord, to maintain peace and unity in the so-called Conservative Amish Mennonite churches." In the 1950's they dropped the word "Amish" from their name and today includes over 100 churches in the US, a Bible college, and mission agency. <https://cmcrosedale.org/>.

56. The Missionary Church USA is an evangelical denomination with Anabaptist origins holiness movement and German Pietist influences. <https://www.mcusa.org/history/>.

I was intentionally uninvolved in the final affiliation conversation when a decision was made. Leaders invited the congregation to choose between remaining affiliated with MCUSA and IMMC, or joining Evana. The congregation overwhelmingly selected the second option (with the exception of three people who chose the first option). In their assimilation toward mainstream American evangelicalism over the previous decades, the congregation had been moving toward this decision.

VMC answered the question “*Who* are we?” by holding up their theological framework of biblicism, seen clearly in their emphasis on “the word” in the statement of identity. They answered the question “*Why* do we exist?” with a two part broad view of God’s project of healing and hope: within the congregation and also evangelism and service to the world. Identifying as a people of the word supports their narrative of conservative evangelical theology, particularly since the 1990’s. It would have been disingenuous for them to claim a robust Anabaptist-Mennonite identity. When I presented early Anabaptist Ecclesiology, the congregation and leaders expressed uninterested indifference, as if looking at relics on a 5th grade field trip to an archeological site. When I offered glimpses of missional ecclesiology, some voiced impatience saying that the word missional was useless.

Hopedale Mennonite Church

About thirty miles South of Peoria, and thirty miles West of Bloomington, the village of Hopedale, Illinois, was just emerging when the Amish immigrants arrived in 1840. The first white settler, Aaron Orendorff (1784-1846), arrived twenty-five years earlier. He hitched his wagon to a few trees along the trail and named the place “Oceola,”

until discovering that another Illinois town by that name already existed. Without further explanation, the village was named “Hopedale.”

While doing interviews, I sat down in Elmo’s retirement home apartment and readied myself to begin. Elmo, a man in his nineties with a wry smile, handed me a photo and said, “You can have it.” It was a four by six inch vintage photograph of a long open sided shed with a dozen Model T cars parked facing the inside wall. “Hopedale Mennonite Church 1915” was written in cursive blue ink above the shed roofline in the upper left corner. “What am I looking at?” I asked. “Well,” Elmo responded, “those are cars parked at the church. That building was one of the horse and buggy sheds, but in 1915 pretty much everyone had a car, so we all parked in the sheds. The sheds are all gone now and the cars don’t look anything like those Model Ts.” He sat back and smiled.

Many older members of Hopedale Mennonite Church (HMC), like Elmo, are in disbelief of the changes in their church and community. Elmo and most of his contemporaries were born, raised, and lived their entire lives around the village of Hopedale. “Most of us didn’t go away to college. After high school we worked on the farm, got married, and raised a family,” Elmo reflected.

Hopedale Mennonite Church’s founding story was formed in circumstances of migration and cultural change. During the 1830’s, and into the 1840’s, a wave of Amish Mennonite (Anabaptist) families bought ship passage on the French coast and immigrated to America where they sought religious toleration. Just two generations earlier, they had made their way to France to escape the persecution they had experienced in Switzerland and Germany.

After two months at sea these families arrived in New York and New Orleans, then continued by wagon to Illinois. They chose to settle in the prairies of central Illinois where the land was inexpensive. Previous settlers in the region found it easier to clear and till woods than to deal with the swampy wet land. The Amish immigrants had been tenant farmers along the West bank of the Rhine River in Germany. They knew how to turn wet land into productive farm fields. Stories are told of Amish families purchasing land for \$2.50 an acre and converting it into some of the richest farmland in North America. Today, many members of the congregation still live on farms settled by their great-grandparents.

Stories of migration are about identity, both individual and community identity. Forced migration is no exception. Anabaptist migration in search of religious freedom and faith practice as a separate community, exemplifies an ongoing discovery of identity. Their previous identity as Amish in Europe was only a part of who they were becoming after arriving in central Illinois.

It is worth noting that these immigrant settlers, like other settlers during the western expansion of the United States, were beneficiaries of the forced migration of native peoples. The state of Illinois is named after the *Illinois* or *Illiniwek* Indians, a very large and powerful nation of twelve tribes that once occupied the Mississippi River valley. European colonization and immigration forced native people to adapt, change, and eventually required the Illinois tribes to leave their traditional lands and move West.

By the time Amish families immigrated to central Illinois, Native Americans had effectively been removed, making the land available to settlers. Even the removal of the Potawatomi from Indiana, called the “Trail of Death,” which crossed through the central

prairies of the state of Illinois, had taken place a few years before anyone with a name like Nafziger, Springer, or Litwiller settled in the Hopedale area.

The Indian removal story is significant to HMC's immigration narrative, but it was not mentioned by anyone in the congregation. It could be that the mid-1800's, German-speaking Amish settlers in the Hopedale area were naively unaware of Indian displacement. Or, maybe the colonizing doctrine of discovery seemed so devoid of controversy to white-skinned Europeans that it seemed insignificant. It is difficult to believe people fleeing persecution would not notice the suffering of Native Americans in their time and place which leads me to conclude that this "unawareness" comes from the Amish settlers' attempts to be the unobtrusive and mild "quiet in the land." If it were not for a member of the congregation showing me arrowheads he found in his fields, I would never have given this part of the narrative much thought.

A lot changed in the lives of the Amish community as they immigrated. They were diligent in maintaining many of their community cultural norms and practices. Once settled, and as more Amish families came to join them in central Illinois, they became very adept at conserving their Germanic Amish-Anabaptist traditions.

In 1854, the Hopedale Amish Mennonite Church was officially formed. For many years, families gathered for "services" in each other's homes about every two weeks. Many people added *lean-to* structures to their homes in order to provide meeting space. In typical Amish fashion, benches were made and then transported from one place of worship to the next. People visited with each other as they arrived for the service. The men who were ordained as ministers, met in a separate room to discuss any pertinent issues and prepare for worship. Worshippers carried their own songbooks, the *Ausbund*.

It included songs composed by persecuted Anabaptists in castle dungeons where they lay imprisoned between 1535 and 1540. After everyone was gathered, a member would announce a hymn number and lead the singing. After the sermon, each ordained man would offer testimony to the message. At one time there were twelve ordained men which meant that worship services often lasted until early afternoon. At the conclusion of the service, a meal was served and families would sometimes visit together until early evening. The German language was spoken exclusively throughout worship services, as well as in homes, during children's education, and when interacting socially.

In 1875, the congregation built a plain white-sided meetinghouse with permanent benches and a pulpit on two acres of land donated by a member. The building had two entry doors, one for men and the other for women and children, a sign of patriarchal tradition that would continue for years. Gender segregation was maintained inside the building where men and women sat on opposite sides of the room.

Sunday school was introduced without much opposition in 1885, and took place between the weeks when there was worship. Initially, the Sunday School Superintendent would assign a passage from the New Testament and a discussion question for the next Sunday school gathering. After 1900, lesson quarterlies were used, the English language was spoken in some classes, and children's classes were added. Soon afterwards, Sunday school was offered on a weekly basis. According to the official history of the church, more attention was given to recording attendance at Sunday school than during the worship service indicating the congregation's enthusiasm for the program.

In 1903, as English speaking was introduced in Sunday school, it was also being used occasionally in worship. In 1905, the congregation began using the *Church and*

Sunday School Hymnal, which was in English. By the mid 1940's there was still one Sunday school class resisting the English language, but in 1947 the class was discontinued because most of its members had died. In worship, while some members advocated for speaking German only, the congregation switched to English rather abruptly. This change was most likely driven by the reality that many members could not read German.

There was growing tension between two groups of Anabaptist American immigrants at the turn of the century. Hessian Mennonites were different than Amish Mennonites and came from a different cultural region in Germany. The Hessian group's more progressive practices included the use of musical instruments and modern clothing. "Because of their cultural differences, Hessians in the [Hopedale] community found it difficult to worship with their Amish Mennonite neighbors."⁵⁷ There were Hopedale Amish Mennonite Church members who wanted to be part of a less conservative congregation. The Hessians and discontented Hopedale Amish Mennonites joined to form the Boynton Mennonite Church in 1901.

The 1920's brought forward great national change, including the right of women to vote, the beginning of prohibition, and the Scopes Trial. In 1921, the Hopedale Amish Mennonite Church joined the Illinois Mennonite Conference (IMC) and dropped the word "Amish" from their name, thereafter identifying themselves as "Hopedale Mennonite Church." In 1926, they constructed a new, larger and updated building on the same lot as the former building. The new building did not have gender segregated

57. Willard H. Smith, *Mennonites in Illinois: Studies in Anabaptist and Mennonite History* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1983), 99.

entrances, but the congregation continued with separate seating for women and men during worship.

All of HMC's history prior to the early 1930's was passed down to the present congregation through written and oral stories.⁵⁸ World War II was the first significant event in the living memory of the congregation. The word "significant" is contextually understated. When the United States entered the war, the Mennonite congregations in America saw nearly 40 percent of the young men who were drafted enter regular military service. Another 15 percent accept noncombatant roles in the Army and chose to enter alternative service as Conscientious Objectors (COs).⁵⁹ From Hopedale Mennonite Church, twenty men accepted military service while eight served in Civilian Public Service as COs. Sending seventy percent of their drafted men into military service challenged HMC's identity as a peace church.

A watershed conflict etched in the congregation's memory related to their standing as a historic peace church during WWII. Some of HMC's neighbors attacked them for their non-resistance teachings. Older members of the congregation recall neighbors throwing yellow paint on the front of the HMC building as an expression of resentment. The conflict with the community was never resolved and would periodically re-manifest itself during the Vietnam Conflict. Additional events such as HMC's reluctance to participate in town events including July Fourth community picnics, perpetuated the situation.

58. Much of the congregation's inherited history came from a self-published anniversary history: *100 Years at Hopedale: 1854-1954*, ed. Ivan Kauffmann (Hopedale, IL: HMC, 1954).

59. Howard Charles, "A presentation and evaluation of MCC Draft Status Census," in *Proceedings of the Fourth Annual Conference on Mennonite Cultural Problems* (1945), 87.

The peace-versus-patriotism tension felt within the congregation continued following the war. Many members became more resolute towards traditional Anabaptist peace teaching. Others questioned the relevance of non-resistance in response to the evil represented by Hitler. Following the war, some Mennonite congregations took direct disciplinary action against those who served in the military, calling for the men to repent in order to be restored to fellowship. Other Mennonite congregations quietly relaxed their emphasis on non-resistance, choosing instead to emphasize harmony of relationships within the church and the community. Unsure of what course to follow, HMC chose a middle path which proved to frustrate everyone. The congregation's minister and bishop wrote a statement that they believed those who had fought in the war would affirm. The essential points of the statement read,

1. It is my sincere desire to fellowship with the church and I humbly beg the forgiveness of any I have offended. 2. It is my desire to live daily by the guidance of the Holy Spirit according to the Word of God. 3. I also want to exercise a Christlike forgiving spirit toward all the brethren [sic] and sisters.⁶⁰

When the statement was presented to the congregation, the bishop invited all members, including veterans, to read it together as an affirmation of unity. The desired outcome of the statement was reaffirmation of the principle of nonresistance and reconciliation, however, members remembered it differently. Some considered it a forced confession thrust upon young men who simply wanted to avoid being excommunicated from their church. Others thought the statement achieved nothing more than shrouding the church's teachings in vagary. The experience of being a war-time peace church required broad sweeping negotiations among HMC members and their neighbors.

60. Ibid., 366.

In the United States, efforts to provide support for the war bolstered industrialization and the appeal of urban cultural centers. The American Mennonite churches of the 1940's were almost exclusively rooted in rural locations. Society's shift from an agrarian way of life was perceived as a threat to congregational faith. Respected Mennonite theologian and historian, Guy F. Hershberger, offered encouragement to the "besieged Mennonite rural community" saying "the Mennonite way of life can best be maintained in a rural environment."⁶¹ Nevertheless, the 1940's urbanizing movement swept into rural agrarian Mennonite communities transforming their practices, theology, and ecclesiological identities.

The effects of cultural urbanization were clear. People began to understand the advantages to living in Peoria, Bloomington, or Chicago. Describing the trends of the Illinois Mennonite church membership in the decades since 1940, historian Willard Smith writes that more growth had occurred in "Urban-Mission congregations; while at the same time the Rural-Original congregations have shown a decrease."⁶² In 1940, the Mennonite Church conducted an employment survey of working men (18-65). In Illinois, 60 percent of the men were employed as farmers, and the remaining 40 percent were working in other occupations. A similar poll was conducted by the Mennonite Research Foundation in 1965. Findings were vastly different with only 43.5 percent of the employed men farming. The more recent survey also reported that only 45.8 percent of

61. Perry Bush, *Two Kingdoms, Two Loyalties: Mennonite Pacifism in Modern America* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 132-133.

62. Smith, *Mennonites in Illinois*, 436.

Illinois Mennonites were living on farms.⁶³ These trends challenged HMC's corporate self-identity.

In 1949, HMC called Ivan Kauffmann to serve as their minister. He was the first minister from outside the congregation, and the first minister to be paid for his services. This introduced the professionalization of the ministry and was the beginning of HMC's embrace of modern American Protestant practices. The congregation viewed Ivan as a hard-working and efficient leader who preached, visited members, taught Sunday school, and managed the church's affairs. As HMC accepted the role of professional clergy, they also began to develop lay-ministry leadership. In keeping with the Protestant commercial-enterprise model of the church, a Council, which functioned like an organizational board of directors, was formed in 1956.

Arguably the most significant change of the 1950's was in the congregation's self-understood purpose. At the beginning, HMC was largely an immigrant colony focused on maintaining Anabaptist ecclesial values and the practices of a Christian community. HMC's shift to the more prevalent ecclesiology of the time, American Protestantism, involved the acceptance of a twofold purpose: to nurture the spirituality of HMC members, and to attract people into the life of the congregation through programs, particularly youth programs. A ministry for high school age youth, called Mennonite Youth Fellowship (MYF) began between 1947 and 1951. Initially, the MYF, led by adult volunteers, was a group that met regularly for spiritual nurture, social activities, and service projects. They also socialized with MYF groups from other churches. At its peak during the 1980's and 1990's, the HMC MYF included as many as fifty youth and was a

63. *Ibid.*, 436.

source of energy and pride for the congregation. In addition, Vacation Bible School (VBS) had crowds of children participating from the congregation's young families and from the Hopedale area.

HMC's influence among their neighbors grew steadily starting in the 1950's. Many people shared memories of the old Hopedale school where the congregation's youth populated the student body, and excelled in athletics. Adults from the congregation were teachers, administrators, and board members. The resourcefulness that enabled the Amish settlers to create fields of crops from prairie swamps, matured into economic success and agricultural influence. HMC members made significant contributions to the civic life of Hopedale and many other small town communities in the region.

In 1955, HMC members helped to start Hopedale Hospital, a twenty-bed facility in the village. Hard working farmers raised funds, young women served as nurses, and the hospital's founder, Dr. Lawrence Rossi, Sr., expressed interest in joining the promising Mennonite health care movement that included a hospital in nearby Bloomington. One HMC leader told me, "It is no exaggeration to say that without the support of HMC's members, there is no way the hospital could have begun."

Unfortunately, soon after the hospital was operational, there was no more discussion of associating with the Mennonite Health movement and it became clear to the congregation that Dr. Rossi, like a campaigning politician, had misled them to gain their support. This realization was a significant source of pain to many in the congregation, yet they remained proud of what they accomplished and were supportive of the hospital's

mission.⁶⁴

Records indicate the average Sunday worship attendance was over 350 at the end of the 1930's. By 1970, it dropped to less than 250. Members speculated about the decline in attendance. It may have been attributed to a 1940's conflict about using musical instruments in worship, the ongoing disagreement regarding peace during the Vietnam War, or the controversy around the first woman chosen to serve as an elder.

By 1980, a few years after pastor Aden Yoder began, Sunday morning attendance was at 300 people. Aden and his family seemed to revive the congregation and appeal to young couples. Some members, now in their sixties, pointed to a young-married group that Aden started as one reason they joined the church. Aden led the congregation in forming cluster groups. Many people indicated being a part of a cluster group was one of their best church experiences.

Families were having fewer children in the 1980's, and as Elmo pointed out, young people went away to college and didn't return to Hopedale. Some members, concerned by the decline in the number of young adults in the church, proposed an expansion project to update the existing building and add a gymnasium. The proposal was rejected.

Pastor Jim Smith came to HMC after Aden Yoder left in 1984. The congregation appreciated Jim's energy and leadership. In 1995, the congregation hired Mike Knowles to be the associate pastor. Personality conflicts erupted between Jim and Mike in 1997 and Mike left the congregation. Many viewed Jim as a strong pastor, but felt he was not

64. The Hopedale Hospital, now called the Hopedale Medical Complex, has grown to a 200 bed care facility that includes senior healthcare and assisted living apartments, a 34,000 square foot Wellness Center, a vascular institute, and satellite offices in four other towns in the area. "Hopedale Medical Complex," accessed December, 2019. <https://www.hopedalemc.com/about/about-hmc>.

able to lead a team. One person suggested that the conflict was the result of Jim feeling threatened by Mike. Others blamed the conflict on Mike, saying that he was an overly aggressive person and that he was disrespectful of Jim, his supervising pastor. By the time Mike left, the two pastors were no longer speaking to each other. HMC's leaders felt helpless. Less than a year after Mike's departure, the congregation voted to release Jim from his pastoral role. Members believed a no confidence vote on Jim's leadership was a necessary result of his part in the conflict. The vote, however, did not resolve the over-all confusion in pastor to pastor and congregation to pastor relationships.

In 2000, following the difficult ending of Jim's ministry, Aden Yoder was hired back to HMC, this time as the interim pastor for one year. They also welcomed Kurt Walker, a member of the congregation, to test his pastoral calling under Aden's mentorship. When Aden left at the end of the year, Kurt remained as the congregation's pastor. He was ordained in 2002.

In 2008, the congregation welcomed a youth pastor, Kim Litwiller. She was affirmed immediately for her outgoing and energetic attitude, and for her leadership with the congregation's youth. Kim preached on occasion which ignited the controversy over women in leadership from earlier decades. Kim was disheartened that some members refused to attend worship when she preached. She continued to preach, and church leadership chose not to address the issue. One reason for their reluctance was that some members were not satisfied with Kurt's style, and felt Kim displayed a clear aptitude for preaching.

The congregation added another member to the pastoral team in 2010. Roger Springer was a "favorite son" and life-time member of HMC, and like Kurt, felt called to

the ministry. Clearly gifted in public speaking, Roger rapidly became the congregation's preferred preacher. Kurt, who was oldest and most experienced, took the role of lead pastor. Kim continued to serve primarily in the youth ministry. Roger spread his pastoral wings in the pulpit. The congregation was blessed to have these outstanding people as their pastors. In spite of this, the relationships between pastors and their interaction with the congregation remained unclear.

Rumors developed in the church that Kurt was patriarchal and condescending toward Kim. Kim felt Kurt was a bit dismissive, but was not misogynistic. She contributed his manner dismissed to his rural culture and the differences in their age. Kurt was not aware of any issues with Kim. At the time, there was little support or supervision from the board towards the pastors.

Former members of the board felt ill-equipped to provide supervision to the pastors. A few members of the congregation expressed dissatisfaction with Kurt as the lead pastor and wished to see in this role. Neither the congregation, or the board, expressed their concerns to the pastors.

In 2013, following a routine pastor review process, the board announced role changes for the pastors. Roger was assigned as the Pastoral Team Leader and Kurt was moved to an associate role. Kurt felt ambushed. He indicated there was no conversation following the reviews, no affirmation, improvement plan, just the role change. Roger acknowledged Kurt's frustration, and was concerned the board's decision put their relationship in jeopardy. When the role change was communicated to the congregation, Kurt considered resigning, but was not ready to retire. HMC was his family's church. They lived on a farm in the community. Roger, a compassionate person, quietly assumed

the role of lead pastor. Kurt continued on as a pastoral team member, and the board considered the matter closed. For Kurt, however, the forced change lingered as an informal show of no confidence.

Kim left HMC in 2014 for other pastoral responsibilities in the Illinois Mennonite Conference. The congregation hired Jessica Litwiller as the youth minister. Jessica, a young woman with a degree in youth ministry, had become a part of HMC following her marriage to Adam, who had grown up in the congregation. Different from Kim, Jessica's personality was introverted and unassuming. Like Kim, Jessica was brimming with gifts for pastoral ministry. Jessica was very creative not only in her youth ministry role, but also in the pulpit, once she reluctantly agreed to preach. As with Kim, there were a few members who chose not to attend worship when Jessica preached. The church board continued to avoid the gender protests. Consequently, some of the protesters left the church. A few continued to boycott Jessica's preaching, while others compromised when they realized Jessica was a sincere and gifted pastor. In the Spring of 2019, I had the privilege of returning to HMC to lead Jessica's service of ordination on behalf of the Illinois Mennonite Conference (IMC).

In 2017, Roger resigned from his pastoral role at HMC and accepted a call at Boynton Mennonite Church (BMC had left MCUSA a few years earlier). The resignation announcement sent shock, disbelief, and grief through the congregation. Roger's reasons for leaving HMC were vague and brief. The congregation was unsure of what had transpired. They assumed Roger resigned because of his theologically traditional views on LBGTQ inclusion, and that the church was choosing not to break away from MCUSA. I asked Roger directly why he resigned. Confirming the congregation's hunch, he stated

he was no longer comfortable with the lack of clarity on same-sex issues within the conference and the denomination. He also told me he was concerned the issue would divide the congregation. He felt it would be better to go to BMC than to press the issue at HMC.

The story of the Boynton congregation is a puzzling journey across the theological spectrum. BMC began as a less conservative Mennonite church. They were part of the conference of churches under the leadership of a liberal Illinois Amish bishop, named Joseph Stuckey. Although Stuckey had broken from the Amish Mennonite churches on issues such as clothing and hair-styles, it was the issue of *universalism* that made him a polarizing figure. The universalism doctrine articulated the belief in an afterlife without the threat of eternal punishment in hell. It is debatable whether Stuckey endorsed universalism, or chose not to discipline a member of one of his churches who advocated for it. History depicts Stuckey as a lenient leader, forming the “Stuckey Church” which was liberal in comparison to traditional Amish-Mennonite congregations.

Prior to the 1960’s, the primary difference between HMC and Boynton was the way people dressed. Clothing for HMC was simple and plain. Women wore plain fabric long dresses and head-coverings (although the coverings were worn only on Sundays after the 1950’s). The HMC men wore plain-coats (suit coats without lapels). At Boynton, members wore more contemporary style clothes to worship. Women wore dresses with colorful patterns and stylish hats instead of the *covering*, while men wore suits and neck-ties.

In the past twenty to thirty years, Boynton Mennonite Church drastically shifted from liberal Mennonite to mainstream American evangelicalism. This included a

departure from Mennonite affiliation and a new name, Living Hope Community Church (LHCC). HMC and LHCC have a long history of cooperation and shared frustration. The Boynton church began with disaffected members of the Hopedale Amish Mennonite congregation. Throughout the years, even with some members passing occasionally from one church to the other, the congregations shared mission and community projects, pastor's sermons, and a combined youth group. LHCC was always the smaller congregation, which kept HMC members from feeling threatened. But in the last decade, LHCC increased in size, while HMC has experienced a steep decline in membership. Furthermore, the hearts of HMC members were broken when Roger left for LHCC.

Since the 1980's, when HMC's worship attendance was 300, the congregation began experiencing a slow decline. In 2018, worship attendance averaged slightly more than 100 people. The decline in attendance was the result of a slow but steady stream of people leaving, and a large generational shift. Commitment to Sunday morning worship attendance remains of central importance to older generations of church members. Generations X, Y, and Z, however, are more interested in defining their involvement in a congregation by relationships and experiences.⁶⁵ This means churches can no longer base their relevance on quantifiable statistics such as worship attendance numbers, or even membership rolls. Nevertheless, sparsely filled pews on Sunday mornings were distressing to the congregation. In nearly every interview, and in almost all conversations, HMC members spoke about the pain they feel from people leaving.

Recent stories of HMC were woven with the threads of loss and communal doubt. Members believed the testimonies of church growth models over the years. Yet the

65. Kara Eckmann Powell, *Growing Young: Six Essential Strategies to Help Young People Discover and Love Your Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2016).

congregation was largely made up of people who either were brought into the church as infants, or married someone who was.⁶⁶ The previous ten years of church growth aspirations, yielded about four new members. The congregation convinced themselves that the “distance between the church building and the Hopedale village was the world’s longest two miles.”⁶⁷ Members believed they were respected in the community, but were viewed them as being insular, exclusive, and unwelcoming. As they observed the numeric growth of other churches in their region, they questioned the relevance, and validity of their Anabaptist Mennonite values, particularly non-violence and social justice.

Many HMC members felt their decreasing numbers were a sign of becoming insignificant. Other rural churches in the area were experiencing a similar decline. There were stories of rural Mennonite church closings, all of which led HMC to believe their problem was the geographic location. In 2017, *God’s Country: Faith, Hope, and the Future of the Rural Church* was published, offering a renewed vision for rural congregations.⁶⁸ The book’s author, Brad Roth, was the pastor of a rural Mennonite Church in Kansas, and to the delight of the HMC congregation had grown up in nearby Morton, Illinois. *God’s Country* provided new hope for HMC. Copies of the book were purchased, circulated, and a book study group was formed. Kurt and I preached themes from the book. The congregation hosted Brad Roth to lead a weekend workshop and

66. More than half of the people listed in the 2016 HMC directory have the last names of Litwiller, Springer, and Nafziger. These were three of the names of the founding families of the church.

67. This phrase was commonly spoken in interviews indicating that it had become a frame of reference for HMC members.

68. Brad Roth, *God's Country: Faith, Hope, and the Future of the Rural Church* (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 2017).

invited area churches to attend. *God's Country* provided HMC with encouragement. They began to look for new opportunities to be the church in their community.

While serving HMC as a transition pastor, I enjoyed meeting every month with Kurt and Jessica. I came to understand that these two delightful and sincere pastors had borne the congregation's ongoing struggles of conflict, misunderstanding, lack of communication, and grief. Kurt had given nearly two decades to a congregation that had diminished his pastoral role and been slow to offer him affirmation. When Roger left, Jessica and Kurt remained. Kurt had previously been deemed unsuited to the lead role, and Jessica was the female youth pastor. Jessica had been placed in the impossible position of being a pastor in a congregation that had not clarified their openness to women pastors.

When we first met, Kurt agreed to coordinate the preaching schedule. In addition, he preached about twice each month. Jessica was reluctant to preach more than once or twice per year. She agreed to preach every two months during the transition. Kurt and Jessica shared day-to-day administrative responsibilities, and turned their attention to the many HMC committees and commissions.

In the monthly conversations with Kurt and Jessica, I encouraged them to discuss their call stories. We agreed to share struggles and joys, and support the pastoral/spiritual growth of each other. Both were re-energized by taking a mini-sabbatical that year, and began to look forward to the future as pastors with HMC.

It was during one of our monthly pastor conversations that Kurt shared, through tears, the painful experience of being "demoted" from pastor team leader. I asked if he had expressed this hurt to the church board, and he said he had not shared it with anyone

but his family. The three of us discussed the lack of clarity in the congregation's relationship to pastors, including the absence of regular pastoral ministry reviews and role definition.

The church board at the time had an incredible group of leaders (especially Marge, the board chair), who expressed deep love for the church. Still, they were very busy with the details of leading a church at a time of transition. There was no precedent or structure for the care and supervision of the congregation's pastors. Over the course of a few months, I raised the concern for clarifying the relationship between the pastors and the congregation. As a result, the board created a Pastor-Congregation Relations Team (PCRT). They designed the PCRT to regularly check in with each pastor to offer affirmation, encourage growth, and serve as a link to the board. The board invited Kurt and Jessica to suggest names of people from the congregation to serve as their advocates on the PCRT. The board was just entering a trial year with the PCRT when I left.

In my first meeting with HMC's board, I shared information about the narrative process. I explained the centrality of God's narrative as the foundation of the Christian Church's identity. HMC leaders asked how a narrative process might be different than what they were currently doing. I suggested one narrative approach would be to enact God's Story in worship. I introduced the three concepts of Robert E. Webber's *Ancient-Future Worship*: 1) worship does God's story by acting it out, 2) worship remembers the past through retelling and re-enactment, 3) worship anticipates the future as it holds up God's vision of re-creation.⁶⁹ Worship practices would then be shaped by such a narrative approach. Biblical stories would be retold, rather than studied for propositional truth.

69. Robert E. Webber, *Ancient-Future Worship: Proclaiming and Enacting God's Narrative, Ancient-Future Series* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2008).

Stories would initiate conversations among the congregation in worship and through the following week.

Enthusiastic about narrative worship practices, worship planners created an attractive sign and placed it in the front of the sanctuary for the year that read, “God’s Story, Our Story.” We began by retelling stories from Genesis, stories of Jesus eating with others, and the various images of the church we were using in discovery groups. Finally, we retold the stories of the church from Acts. Within a few weeks, the congregation embraced offering reflection to the biblical story and sermon. The reflection time soon became a highlight of worship as people entered into dialogue with the biblical story and each other.

After nine months with HMC, I met with the leaders and pastors to reflect on the congregation’s narrative discoveries. They filled newsprint pages with highlights from household interviews, discovery group gatherings, and worship experiences. They then drew observations from the highlights and began forming the following statement of identity and purpose. It was tested and modified with participation from the congregation over the final four months of our time together:⁷⁰

Who we have been...

We have had deep family and Anabaptist values that were not always clear to those in the larger community and outside our family networks. We must now define family differently and work to more clearly articulate our values and beliefs.

Who we are...

We have experienced loss and are still grieving and lamenting who we once were. But we are also joyful in the midst of uncertainty and we are learning to know each other better and to be more honest in naming things that are less than perfect. We have the opportunity to continue to strengthen the relationships within

70. Summary of HMC Leadership Retreat, September 8, 2018.

our church community and to reach out to others as we serve. We continue to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ.

Who God is calling us to be...

We are called to accept and embody salvation, to glorify God through our fellowship and service. We are called to remember our past, but not to let it burden our mobility into the future. We are called to be forward-looking in our search for God's will and to celebrate His goodness!

Why we exist...

We exist to glorify God, to be an Anabaptist presence, to love our neighbors, and to serve. "We exist to be a sign, a foretaste, and [an agent] of God's reign."⁷¹

These statements were created with a full measure of confidence in God's leading, and a measure of uncertainty about the implications of such a congregational identity. Some of the group's leading questions were:

- What is one concrete way that we can form better relationships with people in the Hopedale and surrounding communities? Who can we call family?
- How can we work at supportive honesty in our relationships with one another?
- What is one thing we need to let go of in order to move forward?

HMC's statements of identity and purpose represent intense narrative engagement and maturity. Still, as their leading questions suggest, the journey forward will be determined by their next steps. So much had transpired in the story of Hopedale Mennonite Church from a desperate little colony of Amish settlers draining the Hopedale prairie swamps, to lines of Model Ts parked in horse sheds, to a congregation of weary but hopeful souls.

71. I spoke this Newbigin phrase frequently in my preaching, and was pleased that they claimed it in their own purpose. Unsure of clinical sound of the word "instrument" they substituted the word "agent" in its place.

Chapter 4

Toward the Discovery of Congregational Identity and Purpose

Chapter one defined the scope and purpose of this research project. Highlighting observations drawn from personal and pastoral experience, I claimed Christendom, and the transition into Post-Christendom marked Mennonite congregations in North America by loss and uncertainty, thereby causing them to lose focus on their God-given identity and purpose. The heart of this project was to explore congregational discernment of identity and purpose within the local congregation, and the degree to which a clarified understanding enables a congregation to move into the future with hope.

Chapter two examined three ecclesiological themes and their impact on the discovery of identity and purpose: *Anabaptist ecclesiology*, *missional ecclesiology*, and *narrative theology*. I then investigated congregational origin stories and highlighted thematic insights for potential relevance to the ministry context.

In Chapter three, ethnographic research methods were merged into a narrative process and used with the congregations. I shared each congregation's narrative ethnography and various points of my engagement with them as a transition pastor.

This chapter revisits the three ecclesiological themes and their respective contributions to this project. A general evaluation of outcomes and my competencies in narrative ecclesiological process, and proposals for a narrative approach to discovering congregational identity and purpose will be summarized.

Contributions of Anabaptist Ecclesiology

As was shown in chapter two, the sixteenth-century Anabaptist movement sought to appropriate the ecclesiological narrative of the New Testament church against the

competing narrative of the experience with the state church. The reform they desired was considered radical. Anything short of the biblical description of the “true church” was deemed insufficient. In this regard, the early Anabaptists’ identity was distinct from Catholic and Protestant contemporaries.

My initial question centered on the story of Anabaptist ecclesiology and whether North American Mennonite congregations find it compelling and transformational in their own context. American Mennonite churches are remarkably similar in their ecclesiological identity to most other western church traditions. Furthermore, most Christian congregations in the West accommodate, rather than resist, the dominant societal and cultural narratives.

John Driver’s six characteristics of the early Anabaptist movement provided a compelling view of Anabaptist ecclesiology.¹ In North American Mennonite churches today, Driver’s six points offer opportunity for developing identity and purpose. First, the importance of the guiding and sustaining work of the Spirit in the Anabaptist community invites Mennonite congregations to develop deep practices of shared spirituality. Second, the early Anabaptist emphasis on community biblical interpretation challenges the commonplace and divisive patterns of individual-propositional interpretive debate in the church today. Third, the Anabaptist community’s devotion to the “rule of Christ” models loving communication and caring relationships in the present climate of impersonal disconnection. Fourth, the early Anabaptists show that salvation is more than a personal, inner experience, rather it involves the whole community living in loving ways toward others. Fifth, the sixteenth-century Anabaptists’ witness to justice and peace in daily

1. Driver, *Life Together in the Spirit*, 66-74.

practice, even in the face of violent persecution, is an inspiring correction for Mennonite congregations who maintain a theology but not a living testimony of peace. Sixth, the early Anabaptist mission impulse, based on their interpretation of the Great Commission, invites today's Mennonite congregations to see themselves as missionally called.

Contributions of Missional Ecclesiology

Across the North American Mennonite church, there has been a renaissance in the language of mission spurred by interest in missional ecclesiology. Unfortunately, many Mennonites don't understand the missional language, leaving them unable to make corresponding changes in ecclesiological identity.

As stated previously, missional ecclesiology declares the story of the missionary God who is calling the church to be a distinct people of witness against the competing stories of individualism, consumerism, and tribalism. George Hunsberger, reflecting on Newbigin's views of the missionary congregation, writes,

There is a crisis touching the character of evangelism in a pluralist, secularist setting. But that crisis is first one of the identity of the church itself that renders its witness in such a setting.²

Meanwhile, Craig Van Gelder claims that any attempt to develop missional ecclesiology "must identify the principles and processes required for rethinking churches' identities and renewing their lives."³ In the fullest understanding, missional ecclesiology for North American Mennonite congregations requires a redefinition of congregational identity.

2. George R. Hunsberger, *The Story That Chooses Us: A Tapestry of Missional Vision* (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2015), 19.

3. Craig Van Gelder, "Missional Challenge: Understanding the Church in North America," in *Missional Church*, 46.

In order for Mennonite congregations to embrace the contributions of missional ecclesiology, they must make three shifts. The first shift is from dominant society's embrace of individualism to understanding the church as a community of God's people with a vocation in the world as an alternative or contrast community.⁴ The second shift is from consumerism that sees the church as a vendor of religious goods and services to a people sent on a mission.⁵ The third shift is from parochial tribalism to a broader view of what God is doing in the world.⁶

All three of these changes significantly affect Mennonite congregations distressed by attendance decline and neighborhood disinterest. Congregations continue to live in cultures of excessive political polarization, and tribalistic alignment related to race, religion, sex, economic class. In spite of this, the possibilities for missional ecclesiology's contributions to Mennonite congregations are rich in transformational hope.

Contributions of Narrative Theology

The historiography of narrative theology in chapter two describes a return to pre-critical hermeneutics. Narrative reading and interpretation of scripture, therefore, is not a new contributor to congregational identity and purpose. Anabaptists and Protestants in the sixteenth-century practiced a literal-historical interpretation. They used scripture to interpret scripture, and believed words contained plain meaning in every historical context. Still, there were significant hermeneutical differences between Protestants and

4. Gerhard Lohfink, *Jesus and Community: The Social Dimension of Christian Faith* (Philadelphia, PA: Paulist Press, 1984), 67.; Lois Barrett, "Missional Witness: The Church as Apostle to the World," in *Missional Church*, 124.

5. Hunsberger, *Story that Chooses*, 37.

6. David E. Fitch and Geoff Holsclaw, *Prodigal Christianity: Ten Signposts into the Missional Frontier* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, A Wiley Imprint, 2013), 150.

Anabaptists. While Martin Luther's interpretation was focused on salvation by faith, and John Calvin's the doctrine of God's sovereignty and elective purpose, Anabaptists stressed following the way of Jesus. Anabaptists considered the trajectory of scripture to culminate in the gospel story of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. Albeit limited, this is a narrative theological approach which contributed to distinctives of Anabaptist ecclesiology seen most clearly in community ethical expectations of obedience based on the teachings of Jesus.⁷

Narrative theology's influence can also be seen in missional ecclesiology. Lesslie Newbigin, concerned about the accommodation of the Western church to a secular scientific worldview, focused on the recovery of the church's missionary identity. This recovery, he believed, involved attention to the biblical narrative.⁸ The church's identity can only be discovered by reading the Bible as the story of God's mission to restore creation, particularly in the gospel story of Jesus' life, resurrection, ascension, and giving of the Spirit. The church, then, "finds its identity by participating in what [God] is doing in redemptive history according to his command and invitation."⁹ The biblical narrative is "essentially a story that claims to be the true story of both the cosmos and of human life within the cosmos."¹⁰ This true story is the central thread of God forming a people to be a

7. Ben C. Ollenburger, "The Hermeneutics of Obedience," in *Essays on Biblical Interpretation: Anabaptist-Mennonite Perspectives*, ed. Willard M. Swartley (Elkhart, IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1984), 48.

8. Michael W. Goheen, *The Church and Its Vocation: Lesslie Newbigin's Missionary Ecclesiology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018), 3.

9. *Ibid.*, 7.

10. Lesslie Newbigin, *Truth and Authority in Modernity: Christian Mission and Modern Culture* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1996), 38.

sign and foretaste of God's culminating redemption. For Lesslie Newbigin, the biblical narrative and ecclesiological identity are united.

The most fundamental contribution of narrative theology for North American Mennonite congregations is the capacity to shape ecclesiological identity. The congregations get unexpectedly tangled in the tensions between liberal textual deconstruction and conservative biblicism, which is symptomatic of the polarizing narrative of our culture. Can North American Mennonite congregations become attentive to the Bible as their defining narrative?

Contrast Ecclesiologies

Anabaptist ecclesiology, missional ecclesiology, and narrative theology, include a call for an alternative or contrast community identity.¹¹ Sixteenth-century Anabaptists called for the Church to be reformed to the standards of the "true church" of the New Testament. When forced out of the state-church because of dissidence, their identity was marked by radical obedience to Christ which they viewed as incompatible with the church authorized by society. "They were revolutionary, but not in the sense of destroying and tearing down without offering an alternative."¹² Instead, they established a new and different alternative community. Anabaptist ecclesiology, like that of the early church, was essentially distinct in faith and life from prevailing society.

In *Missional Church*, Lois Barrett presents the Church's life in the world as an alternative community.¹³ Missional ecclesiology holds that the church is called to

11. Terms of community distinction from society in the literature of these three movements included "counter-cultural," "alternative," and "contrast," the latter two being most common and prominent.

12. Walter Klaassen, *Anabaptism: Neither Catholic nor Protestant* (Waterloo, Ontario: Conrad Press, 1973), 10.

13. Lois Barrett, "The Church as Apostle to the World," in *Missional Church*, 110-141.

nonconformity in relationship to the world based on Paul's words in Romans 12:2: "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect." Barrett writes, "In every cultural context, no matter how benevolent or hostile the governments and societies around it may be, the church is called to demonstrate an alternative culture."¹⁴ The demonstrative characteristics of the Church's alternative culture include: 1) a distinctive vocabulary that expresses the community's life in Christ; 2) alternative economics based on need rather than merit; and 3) an alternative understanding of power founded in the example of Jesus' actions and teachings. The church's contrast identity should have the result in broader society, of presenting an authentic witness to a different way of life. This call to formation and witness was central to Newbigin's statement that the church exists "for the sake of those who are not members, as a sign, instrument, and foretaste of God's redeeming grace for the whole life of society."¹⁵

In narrative theology, the church becomes an alternative community as it embodies the normative narrative of God in contrast to the dominant narrative of society. According to Brueggemann, the church is an *alternative community* formed by God's *alternative narrative* to live in an *alternative reality*. The "gospel narrative," he says, "is a subversion of the dominant narrative and it tells the story of a reality that does not yet exist."¹⁶ In proverbial form, Brueggemann writes, "Blessed is the church that does not

14. Ibid., 119.

15. Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 233.

16. Walter Brueggemann, *Amnesia and Dominant Culture, Gospel of Hope* (Central UMC, Traverse City, MI: 2018).

easily come to terms with the present, that keeps loose and open enough, restless enough to know that the present arrangements of reality are not good enough, and they are not the way God intends them.”¹⁷

Anabaptist ecclesiology, missional ecclesiology, and narrative theology all include a call for alternative congregational identity which is an affirmation of what Douglas John Hall calls “an open invitation” to the church.¹⁸ Hall writes,

When we discover that the church wasn’t intended to be what we have been led all along to think it ought to be, we are in an excellent position to learn what it *is*... The search for the true essence of the church is the most exciting task that has come to us in this generation...At the end of the Constantinian era we know that without the most rigorous search for understanding of what is believed, belief is doomed.¹⁹

In order to discover who they really are, the invitation to the church that Hall describes, requires congregations to recognize what God is doing, and to let go of their identity steeped in Christendom. He concludes with encouragement writing, “there is a new openness to radical change, especially in the churches most seriously affected by the inroads of secularism, pluralism, and hedonistic apathy.”²⁰ Throughout this project, I learned that openness exists in the church. Among the three congregations of my ministry context, the sign of hope was often paired with a sense of urgency and desire for a new direction. I discovered that hopeful openness was often a minority voice in a chorus of grief and anxiety. Overall, each congregation experienced post-Christendom

17. Walter Brueggemann, *A Gospel of Hope* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018), 77.

18. Douglas John Hall, *Has the Church a Future?* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1980), 161.

19. *Ibid.*, 184-185.

20. *Ibid.*, 191.

disestablishment, and were disinclined to embody a contrast identity. When asked to articulate hopes, most members pointed to a return to the past, when they were numerically strong and socially influential in their communities.

Evaluation of a Narrative Ecclesiological Approach

The two-fold purpose of this project, was to help congregations explore their identity and purpose, enabling them to move into a hopeful future. The assessment of theological practice is about more than just asking the question, “Did it work?” An evaluation must evaluate the research and engagement of this project. The evaluation will consider the evidence that supports ecclesiological development in each congregation , and the assessment of competencies in the narrative ecclesiological process.

Evidence

In chapter one, four congregational outcomes were identified which confirmed the assumptions of this project. Each desired result is rooted in the exploration of identity/purpose and a hopeful future for each congregation. To summarize, the identified outcomes were:

1. Beginning recognition and understanding of *identity and purpose*.
2. Interaction with the *biblical narrative*.
3. Engagement of congregational *narrative practices*.
4. Initial steps toward a *hopeful future*.

What can be observed about how MRMC, VMC, and HMC realized these objectives?

The following observations are drawn from my experience with each congregation’s statement of identity and purpose.²¹

Identity and Purpose

21. Each congregation’s identity and purpose statement is included at the end of their narrative ethnography in chapter three.

Initiation into ecclesiological awareness is the most basic of the four objectives for the congregations involved in this project. It was my hope that congregations would begin to unearth answers to the questions “who are we?” and “why do we exist?”

All three congregations worked diligently to create a simple statement that reflected their emerging identity and purpose. All statements included both self-understanding and an appreciative view of God’s desire.

MRMC’s identity statement for example, combined family-like relationships with the knowledge that God called them to relate to their neighbors. Interview summaries and early discovery group conversations revealed that the congregation was concerned that they had very little connection with the people who lived in the village of Brutus. This was addressed through teaching and conversation, during worship, discovery groups, and studying missional ecclesiology, therefore, leading the congregation towards renewed passion for their neighbors.²²

MRMC also identified global connections with other Anabaptists, strengthening their values, and a broadening of relationships. As members retold stories through a collective memory timeline, they became more resolute that a disconnection from MCUSA and the Anabaptist movement would diminish the authentication of their story. A comment that summarized the congregation’s identity was, “being a part of Mennonites around the world is being a part of something that’s bigger than us.”²³

Reflecting on embodying reconciling relationships, the Elders hoped the congregation would foster relationships that supported a) gender, age, and economics

22. Taken from discovery group summaries, December 20 and January 10, 2015.

23. From notes of the collective memory discussion, August 30, 2015.

equality; b) safety, acceptance, and non-judgment; and c) loving kindness of God.²⁴ Even as they imagined this type of relational identity, the Elders realized it contrasted with the common experiences of many members, and would require ongoing learning and growth.

HMC's identity and purpose statement acknowledged their rural location, family character, and Anabaptist perspectives. These characteristics were prominent in the summary of common themes drawn from household interviews,²⁵ and were touched on with regularity in discovery group conversations.

Although the congregation had a strong family identity, they also felt their neighbors viewed them as inwardly focused and exclusive. The intersection of Mennonite familial values and the perception of neighbor relationships was discussed in a leadership retreat.²⁶ This led to the need to redefine what it meant to have a family identity beyond biological and ethnic relationships.

In answer to why they existed, members concluded their calling was to love and serve neighbors. The teaching and conversations around missional ecclesiology led HMC to claim for themselves, the words of Lesslie Newbigin, "to be a sign, a foretaste, and [an agent] of God's reign."²⁷

VMC took an honest approach with their statement of identity and purpose fashioning it in terms of their theology of the Bible: "VMC is a generous community of followers of Jesus, who love God and His word to us." One might ask whether "word" meant Jesus, or the Bible, but other phrases in their statement make it clear they meant

24. From notes of a congregational discussion of MRMC's identity statement, January 14, 2017.

25. Hopedale Mennonite Church Household Interview Report, June 10, 2018.

26. From notes of the Hopedale Mennonite Church Leadership Retreat, September 8, 2018.

27. Ibid.

God's written word: "We are Stewards of God's word... built on the foundation of God's revelation – His word and His son..." The statement was written by the leadership team and presented to the congregation without soliciting feedback.²⁸

Based on the first objective, all three congregations expressed an understanding of identity and purpose. Creating a statement, however, was only a first step toward ecclesiological learning. MRMC and HMC each created statements that displayed new insights and understandings. VMC's statement was largely a reiteration of their longstanding reverence for the Bible.

Biblical Narrative

More than just assessing use and knowledge of the Bible, I hoped to invite each congregation to interact with scripture as their normative narrative. In other words, the intent was for each congregation to experience God's story as the narrative that would define their own.

I introduced narrative approaches during worship and preaching. MRMC enjoyed acting out biblical texts in worship rather than simply reading them. All congregations relished reflection time following sermons. HMC planners chose the worship theme "God's Story, Our Story" for the entire year that I was with them (this is where my thesis title originated).

Discovery groups also provided a format for congregations to interact with the Bible as narrative, specifically in conversations about New Testament images of the church. Groups were invited to read together an assigned scripture passage and discuss

28. VMC's leaders wrote the identity and purpose statement on April 22, and it was given to the congregation on April 23, 2017.

questions such as “how might the early church have understood these words?” and “what do these verses say about who the church was, or what it should become?” Groups were then asked to write a letter to the rest of their congregation regarding what they felt was needed for them to embody that image. One of the VMC groups read Hebrews 3:1-6, which describes the church as God’s household. This passage speaks of Moses as a faithful servant of God, but Jesus as the builder of the house. The group wrote in their letter to the congregation,

“We have followed a great, humble man of God for the last 26 years. Has Mario become our Moses? Has our focus been moved off the one who deserves it? Think of what we have witnessed: 50 years of scripture, 50 years of service, 50 years of pointing us to Jesus. Together, under Jesus we are God’s household.”²⁹

In this simple exercise, VMC people had an interaction with the Bible as their normative story.

I included dwelling in the word at the beginning of each leadership meeting. Dwelling in the word, described in chapter three, provided a foundational way of listening to the biblical story together. Alan Roxburgh writes, “Dwelling is not guided by the need to get the text right, as if we were putting together a commentary, but by the desire to listen through one another for how God might be addressing us.”³⁰ For six months, the HMC leadership team dwelled in the story of Jesus healing the man who had been blind from birth (John 9). They identified ways in which many people around Jesus and the healed man struggled to see: the disciples who asked the wrong question; the neighbors who could not shift their expectations; the Pharisees who were intent on managing the system; and even the man’s parents who were blinded by fear.

29. Valparaiso Mennonite Church discovery group “God’s Household” letter, February 19, 2017.

30. Roxburgh, *Joining God*, 61.

Encountering each of these groups in the story, leaders saw their own blindness to what God was doing around them. Dwelling in John 9, was an invitation for them to move past their own blind spots in order to fully discern God's actions in their community.

There is enough evidence to suggest that each congregation did interact with the Bible as a defining narrative. Still, the question remains: will this experience of narrative biblical formation continue? There are some reasons to believe that it will. Each congregation was exposed to a narrative hermeneutic that shaped their own story.

Narrative Practices

Cultivating practices is essential for congregations to continue with narrative formation. In addition to the biblical narrative practices in the previous section, through discovery groups, all three congregations engaged in telling, listening, and retelling their own stories. One of the more significant practices was gathering and creating a collective memory timeline.

Collective memory involves the whole congregation and includes, but is not driven by, official written histories. MRMC's official history (1879-1969) was written by former member and historian, Maurice Eby, about six years prior to my arrival.³¹ The first 150 years of HMC's history was documented in two self-published anniversary books.³² VMC, however, had no official written history, just a box of old pictures and hand-written records. An official history can be a helpful beginning to the narrative

31. Eby, *Mennonites in Brutus*. This book includes the history of MRMC, but is focused more broadly, as the title indicates, on the *Mennonites of Brutus, MI*.

32. *100 Years at Hopedale: 1854-1954*; Carolyn Nafziger, *Keeping the Faith: The Third Fifty Years Hopedale Mennonite Church 1954-2004* (Hopedale, IL: HMC, 2004).

practice of collective memory. The congregation's memory stories can also be impeded by fact checking the details.

The collective memory practice in all three congregations was a project highlight. Even though MRMC had Eby's books for sale in their library, the collective memory practice afforded opportunity for people to interact with the stories. As a result, many new stories emerged. Like a family, members shared stories and reflected on the impact. There were some conflicting accounts which evolved into wonderful honest conversations. More than once, someone asked, "What do you remember about..." and then named a person or event in the story from the past.

Prior to the collective memory practice with VMC, I examined their provisional archives and prepared a rough historical outline. Since the congregation had been established within the last 50 years, there were some members who provided oral histories. However, most of the congregation knew very little about the history of the church prior to 1980, when Mario Bustos was the pastor. As groups were sharing stories, I heard comments such as: "Really? I never knew that." Especially rewarding, was seeing the joy on the faces of some of the older members as they listened to stories that were new or they had forgotten. The leadership team noted afterward, that they couldn't remember a time when the congregation had engaged in such storytelling.

HMC, proud of their past as a large and influential congregation in their community, also enjoyed the collective memory practice. The popular quote, "History is written by victors," suggests that the story told by those who are successful is the story that prevails. For HMC, however, their collective memory of the "glory days" is only one segment of the larger story which also includes declining numbers of members and

diminishing community influence. The collective memory practice came easy for HMC as their past has been spoken of often. For many members, the congregation's history is woven into their own family genealogy. The congregation valued the past, but a clear theme in their story-telling was to begin living into the future.³³

Another practice employed in all three congregations was narrative interaction with the ecclesiological themes. My time with MRMC was early in the project and I had not yet developed a way to utilize ecclesiological themes in discovery groups. Still, these themes were significant in my preaching and leadership conversations. The language of MRMC's identity and purpose statement reflects narrative influence of Anabaptism in its emphasis on peace and reconciliation in the everyday life of the congregation. Likewise, their statement displays the influence of missional ecclesiology in its attention to witnessing to God's reign among their neighbors. At the conclusion of my time with MRMC, their leaders were also exploring the possibilities of a membership covenant and were inspired by the missional community model described by Alan Roxburgh in *Missional Church*.³⁴

During discovery group gatherings with VMC and HMC, I shared a summary of each theme (see appendices F and G) and invited narrative reflection. VMC's reflection on Anabaptism included a mixture of appreciation and weariness. Many were impressed by the early Anabaptists' commitment and perseverance in the face of persecution. Others did not see applicable significance in the Anabaptist story and preferred to be "relevant" to those outside the church. Many members also reacted strongly to the

33. Summary of Hopedale Mennonite Church Leadership Retreat, September 8, 2018.

34. Alan J. Roxburgh, "Missional Leadership: Equipping God's People for Mission," in *Missional Church*, 183-220.

missional church theme. It is my impression that they associated the word “missional” with MCUSA and IN-MI Mennonite Conference, both of which have adopted the use of missional language in their publications and organizational structures. I invited discovery group participants to complete the sentence: “Becoming a missional congregation...” with one of the following responses: a)...is what we must do; b) ...seems right for us, but I have some questions; c) ...is not necessarily the right direction for us; and d) ...is just another buzz phrase; we don't need it. All but three people responded with the last two options indicating disinterest in the language and general concepts of missional ecclesiology.

HMC's reflections on the themes of early Anabaptism and missional ecclesiology were enthusiastic. In reflecting on Anabaptism, they expressed deep appreciation for how it shaped their past. They also realized the struggle to truly embody an Anabaptist identity. Consequently, they had not connected to neighbors regarding Anabaptist values of justice and peace. Narrative reflection renewed their commitment to live their identity as an Anabaptist congregation. Reflecting on the theme of missional church, members expressed a desire to learn more. It encouraged them to be more aware of what God was doing around them and be prepared to join in.

The narrative practices in this project were effective in engaging congregations to reflect on the *who* and *why* questions of identity and purpose. The contributions of narrative practices varied by congregation. Engaging narrative practices often involves attending to one narrative that clashes with another narrative, thus requiring a congregation to make a choice. For example, the missional church narrative, for VMC, was in conflict with other defining narratives such as the attractional church and their

evangelical concern with MCUSA. In spite of this, I am confident that narrative practices were effective in clarifying identity and purpose in each congregation. I hope that all three congregations will continue, and cultivate more narrative practices as they seek a hopeful future.

Hopeful Future

What can be said about how congregations are moving into a hopeful future? I use the words “hopeful future” in the mode of the biblical prophets. In the midst of ancient Israel’s displacement in exile, when it seemed that all blessing had been taken from them, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel declared “hope for a buoyant future that [was] securely in the purview of God.”³⁵ For congregations familiar with disestablishment and the accompanying anxiety and despair, hope is a fresh articulation of God’s promised future. A critical assumption of this project was as congregations began to discover their God-given identity and purpose, such a hopeful future would emerge.

VMC began their pastoral transition with two goals: to prepare for and welcome a new pastor, and to step away from MCUSA. The attainment of these two priorities were the congregation’s definition of future hope. I was not aware that these were their primary objectives until beginning household interviews. Officially, I had agreed to work at strengthening interpersonal relationships among members, as well as foster deeper connections with neighbors. In addition, I agreed to work toward a new understanding of their identity. I now realize that in my interest to include them in this project, I did not truly understand their goals. They seemed amenable to what I wanted to accomplish, as long as I assisted them with their goals as well. I do believe they developed an

35. Walter Brueggemann, *Reality, Grief, Hope: Three Urgent Prophetic Tasks* (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2014), 101.

understanding of identity and purpose, which in turn directed them towards the future they hoped for.

MRMC's discoveries of identity and purpose led them to explore a future where they would witness God's *healing, forgiveness, hope, and reconciliation* in their community. They identified three mission initiatives as their initial steps of engagement with neighbors. All centered around their family-like experience of building relationships while sharing food.³⁶ First, they would invite friends and neighbors to eat supper with them on the first Wednesday of every month. Second, they would distribute day-old bread given to them by a local bakery to their neighbors. Third, they planned to turn a large plot of unused land into a neighborhood garden. MRMC hoped their future would include a pastor. As they became more aware of their God-given identity and purpose, they began to realize that a hopeful future involved more than finding a pastor.

As HMC took steps toward understanding their identity and purpose, they shifted attention from decreased membership to developing relationships with neighbors. During a discovery group session, I invited members to identify a fear and a hope they had for the church. The fears were written on one poster board and the hopes on another. Then, I invited groups to decide which fears and which hopes enabled them to embrace the future God desired for them. They realized none of the fears were helpful and, surprisingly, that God's hopes for their future were more important than their own hopes for a future. During reflection, one person stood and said, "We must decide what to let go of in order to move forward as a congregation."³⁷ From that point onward, the congregation's leaders

36. Summary of Maple River Mennonite Church Initiatives, March 13, 2016.

37. Summary of Hopedale Mennonite Church Leadership Retreat, September 8, 2018.

began to pray that God 's hope would become their hope. HMC took a couple of small, clear, steps toward a hopeful future. Recognizing their abundant resources (financial, agricultural gifts, desire to serve others) they determined that they would look and listen to understand how they could build relationships through serving along-side their neighbors. One way they could do this would be through a cooperative farming effort providing a harvest for *Growing Hope Globally*, formerly known as the Foods Resource Bank.³⁸ This project enabled HMC farmers to build relationships in cooperation with neighboring farmers. Growing Hope Globally also involved an annual harvest celebration including a picnic and hayride for the greater Hopedale community.

HMC took a second step toward a hopeful future by welcoming and sponsoring a refugee family. The idea was introduced by a couple from the church who spend winters volunteering at a sanctuary church in Texas. It is a powerful statement of grace for a congregation that has a refugee-immigrant origin story of their own. It has been transformational for the non-Spanish speaking rural Mennonite Christians.

Evidence derived from all four of the desired congregational outcomes support the assumptions outlined in this project. Now, I review personal reflections on what I learned.

Learning and Competency

Using a narrative approach, I experienced deep hope and a determined anticipation of what God can and will do in the lives of congregations. This hope grew stronger as I learned more about the narrative congregational process. Competencies that I now believe to be critical to narrative ecclesiology, the development of correlating skills

38. "Growing Hope Globally," accessed February 3, 2020. <https://www.growinghopeglobally.org/about-us/>.

and practices, are based in building an understanding of *organizational theories, research methods, and narrative theology*. In this section I will review my learning progress and growth related to the three competency areas.

Organizational Leadership Theories

The field of organizational theory is expanding with new and innovative concepts related to business, civic, social organizations, and faith communities. I was particularly drawn to the theory of *adaptive leadership* developed by Ron Heifetz,³⁹ and the *community* theory of Peter Block.⁴⁰ The knowledge of adaptive leadership and community theories, and the development of skills and practices grounded in these theories, expands leadership competency in the congregational narrative process.

Adaptive leadership theory is based in distinguishing between technical problems, which have “known solutions” and adaptive challenges, which “can only addressed through changes in people’s priorities, beliefs, habits, and loyalties.”⁴¹ Adaptive leadership is the practice of helping people navigate through disequilibrium while working toward needed change. As an organizational change theory, adaptive leadership presents a correction to the common thought that people fear change. What people resist is not change, but the real, or potential loss involved in change. Therefore, helping people and congregations recognize and move through losses to healthy change is crucial to the work of adaptive leadership.

39. Ronald A. Heifetz and Martin Linsky, *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive through the Dangers of Leading* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business Press, 2002).; Ronald A. Heifetz, Alexander Grashow, and Martin Linsky, *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership: Tools and Tactics for Changing Your Organization and the World* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business Press, 2009).

40. Block, *Community*.

41. Heifetz, Grashow, and Linsky, *The Practice*, 19.

The practices I explored to implement adaptive leadership theory, involved working with leaders to test the theory with perceived congregational challenges. The primary challenge MRMC leaders identified was the lack of neighborhood relationships. They considered how the challenge might be solved by inviting neighbors to MRMC events, designing specific events for neighbors, or changing the worship service to attract new attenders. All of these ideas represented technical solutions. Leaders agreed that relating to their neighbors was not an easily solvable challenge. It would require adaptive changes to their culture and habits. They would need to move the congregation away from their normalized comfort level. This led to the creation of new experiments or mission initiatives: a monthly drop-in meal, bread distribution, and a community garden. My goal in all three churches, was to provide leaders with a framework for leading needed change. All though I grew in my capacity to present a brief overview of adaptive theory and teach the simple steps of identifying and testing challenges, I was not able to facilitate the congregations' capacity to make adaptive changes. I had a strong understanding of the theory, but lacked the experience and skill to teach comprehensive adaptive leadership practices.

Peter Block's community theory starts with the assumption that western culture's narrative of individualism has produced communities marked by isolation and fragmentation. The keys to transformation into connectedness and caring involves fundamental community shifts from focusing on *deficiencies, interests, and entitlement*, to *possibilities, generosity, and gifts*. Leadership practices which engage community theory include: 1) convening gatherings for community engagement; 2) asking evocative questions; 3) inviting people to be together; 4) encouraging expressions of hope,

ownership, commitment, and gifts; and 5) fostering hospitality.⁴² Competency in community theory and these practices provides a strong set of tools for leading the congregational narrative process.

I employed Block's community theory and practices in discovery groups. This involved inviting and facilitating group conversations where people could collaborate in storytelling, grapple with challenges, and cultivate hope. All three congregations willingly embraced gathering in discovery groups. Their recent experience had been marked by growing distance between people amid the routine of "going to church." There was very little sense that they were a part of a social movement. The most obvious practice of community theory, therefore, was gathering with intentionality. Each discovery group was planned to provide a context and opportunity for full participation/ownership in the congregation's movement into the future.

Beyond creating collective memory timelines and network maps, discovery groups became laboratories where practices could be tested, developed, and learned in order to be continued into the future. Each of these congregations wanted to *do* something. Introducing community formation practices provided actions that fostered belonging and imagination. My competence grew in community theory largely because discovery groups provided such an ideal setting for engagement.

Research Methods

Two research methods were particularly important to this project: *ethnography* and *narrative inquiry*. Ethnography and narrative inquiry both involve competencies

42. Block, *Community*, 85-151.

related to the methodological principles and the utilization of skills and practices that fully engage congregations in self-discovery.

In review, ethnographic research is “a way of immersing yourself in the life of a people in order to learn something about and from them.”⁴³ This involves listening to member’s stories, observing interactions, recording reflections, and creating a narrative account of the congregation’s life. Ethnography and narrative tools are intertwined as both acknowledge the meaning of human experience.

Narrative research recognizes the role of stories in shaping people’s lives and giving it meaning and coherence. The foundations of the narrative process is an exploration of stories lived, told, and retold. As with ethnography, the goal of a narrative approach is deeper understanding of identity and meaning.

Due to reading assignments in the Doctor of Ministry seminars,⁴⁴ I began this project with an understanding of ethnographic research. My knowledge of the narrative process was minimal. I began learning about it following my third year of study. Prior to that, my competence with narrative was only as a function of ethnography, and not as a uniquely robust research method. Coming to narrative research late in this project significantly delayed my comprehension and development of narrative skills and practices.

Based in ethnographic method, I listened to the congregations’ stories through household interviews and group interaction which included creating collective memory timelines. These ethnographic practices were invaluable and led me to pursue a narrative

43. Moschella, *Ethnography*, 4.

44. Ward, *Perspectives.*; Moschella, *Ethnography*.

process. As my competence with narrative research grew, I included practices to build on its potential by introducing reflection (reaction, learning, invitation) during group storytelling and sermon reflection.

In order to increase competence in narrative methods with congregations, clear communication and congregational participation is needed. Without plainly describing the objectives and practices involved, and inviting voluntary participation in the narrative process, the congregation and its story easily become “an object to be observed, dissected, analyzed, critiqued, and used...”⁴⁵

Another narrative practice that evolved throughout the project was documenting the congregations’ stories. Documenting involved taking notes and writing summaries. Written summaries can be used to reflect on what holds particular meaning in a story. They can catalyze the formative power of the story to be retold into a congregation’s shared narrative. I used the practice of documenting later in my work with VMC, and then prominently with HMC. If the practice of narrative documenting was used with regularity in discovery groups, it would greatly increase competency in leading a congregational narrative process.

Narrative Theology

The development of narrative theology is historically rooted in the study of divine revelation, particularly through the biblical text. “Scholars like H. Richard Niebuhr, Hans Frei, and George Lindbeck stressed the narrative nature of biblical stories against a tendency to reduce the text to general and rational propositions.”⁴⁶ Thus, narrative theology in its most basic form is narrative hermeneutics.

45. Dietterich, in *The Church between Gospel and Culture*, 360.

46. Ganzevoort, in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology*, 215.

Narrative theology, when embedded in congregational practices of biblical reading and embodiment, contributes significantly to the narrative ecclesiological process. Narrative hermeneutic practices open congregations to a view of the full-orbed story of scripture and enables their lived story to be shaped by the normative story. The narrative hermeneutic practices engaged in this project included, dwelling in the word, narrative oriented preaching, applying narrative to worship, and narrative reflection on biblical texts (each described in chapter three).

When I started at MRMC, I began to explore a narrative approach to preaching which allowed the congregation an opportunity to offer reflections. By the time I transitioned to VMC, I was inviting narrative reflection in worship every week. As I began coaching VMC's Ministry and Leadership Teams, I introduced dwelling in the word, and the practice became an integral part of my work. My competence in preparing and leading narrative hermeneutic practices with the congregations progressively increased, becoming a primary strength in my work with HMC.

I hope to increase competency in narrative hermeneutic practices. First, would be to develop, an assessment tool to measure the congregation's willingness and capacity to engage in narrative prior to forming a working agreement. Such a tool would be useful in determining if a narrative approach is fitting for the congregation. The assessment tool would identify what teaching objectives would be required for full participation in a narrative ecclesiological process. This would have been valuable in my initial conversations with VMC, who were generally dismissive of narrative theology.

Second, it would be helpful to develop pathways to present narrative theology. This focus of education would be tailored to fit the congregation's theological context so

that narrative hermeneutic practices could be integrated with their over-all faith and life together. The settings for introducing narrative theology in a congregation might include Sunday school classes, Bible studies, the discovery groups, or even planned group conversations.

Third, a stronger and more overt connection should be made between the narrative practices engaged in worship and full participation in the narrative ecclesiological process. The congregation's experience in a narrative ecclesiological process would be more comprehensive if shared in weekly worship. For example, as interviews are being conducted and discovery groups are interacting, people could be invited to share a formative story in worship. Conversely, the practices in worship could be linked directly to the larger narrative process, such as offering worship previews during discovery group gatherings.

Proposals for Future Exploration

Based on my experience with this project and the evaluative reflection above, I now offer a few proposals for further exploration: 1) extended engagement with a congregation; 2) reflection on formative narratives; 3) training for pastors and church leaders; and 4) cohorts of congregations.

Extended Engagement with a Congregation

I bought lunch for Walter Brueggemann at a local deli in exchange for his thoughts on this project's narrative approach with congregations. After presenting the project's outline and my work as a transition pastor with congregations, I asked if he had any advice for me. "Just keep doing it," he replied. "Continue to bring the church's

attention to narratives. Open people's consciousness to the reality that we are always living out narratives and are called to live out God's alternative narrative."⁴⁷

I have found that transition ministry opens the opportunity to introduce a congregation to narrative ecclesiological development. The one to two year timeframe of a typical transition agreement does not lend itself to cultivating ongoing narrative practices within a congregation. While I witnessed the beginning of congregational understanding of narrative ecclesiology, it is worth considering the possibilities of coaching/facilitating of narrative ecclesiology over a three or four year period. A longer timeframe would likely require a reassessment of the methods and process which I used in this project. Forming a four to five year agreement with a congregation would also require a different role than transition ministry. It would be worth exploring the possibilities of serving a congregation as a support pastor, or leadership coach, following a transition ministry.

Normative Narratives

Central to all of narrative theology is the understanding that the Bible, the story of God, is the norm-setting narrative of the Christian Church's faith and life. It would be beneficial to explore the correlation of biblical narrative and ecclesiological identity in a congregation over a number of years. This might involve further ethnographic research to summarize the congregation's ways of engaging with scripture in the past and their present interpretive practices.

Narrative biblical engagement opens the church to "God's Grand Drama unfolding in time and history...It is the one true story we are invited to discern and enter

47. Walter Brueggemann, interview by Steve Slagel, Traverse City, MI, October 5, 2018.

into, to participate in, via his presence and power in our lives.”⁴⁸ However, such engagement is difficult for congregations who are mired in interpretive argument and disagreement. Interpretive views of deconstruction and biblicism that have led congregations into polarization and division are the result of training over multiple generations. In order to allow a fresh relationship with God’s story, congregations need to openly hold their critical and/or propositional Bible agendas with a measure of humility. Exploring the Bible as the normative narrative with a congregation provides an alternative to the interpretive divisive polarization so prevalent in congregations. This exploration has the potential of inviting the congregation to understand the Bible as a “story to be told, participated in, and witnessed to.”⁴⁹

With a longer period of time, a robust practice for engaging the biblical narrative might potentially be explored and developed. This could involve inviting congregations to experiment with different ways to hear biblical narrative in worship, such as replacing or augmenting reading with storytelling. Another practice to explore is organizing yearly worship themes into a narrative outline.

This project explored three themes as formative and foundational: *Anabaptist ecclesiology*, *missional ecclesiology*, and *narrative theology*. There are other themes that might potentially provide additional opportunities for narrative consideration such as, the

48. David E. Fitch, *The Church of Us Vs. Them: Freedom from a Faith That Feeds on Making Enemies* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2019), 56-57.

49. *Ibid.*, 67.

story of the people of God,⁵⁰ the story of salvation,⁵¹ and the story of the early church.⁵² Each of these narrative themes have potential ecclesiological implications for North American Mennonite congregations. If these themes are to shape congregational narratives, they will require significant reflection and practice. Practices for engagement with these narrative themes might include congregational/group conversations, Sunday morning worship, Sunday school themes, catechism/instruction classes, or leadership conversations.

Pastor / Church Leader Training

Pastoral transitions have provided the opportunity to introduce congregations to narrative methods for discerning their identity and purpose. Time constraints prevented a full narrative transformation to occur. This may be a result of a lack of knowledge by pastors and church leaders about narrative disciplines and ecclesiology. After thirty years of pastoral experience and education, it was a blessing to develop an understanding of narrative theology through this project. The lack of familiarity with narrative disciplines and ecclesiology presents an opportunity to provide guidance for congregational leaders.

Future exploration for providing pastors and church leaders with an understanding of narrative ecclesiology could include: 1) opening conversations with leaders from

50. Gerhard Lohfink, *Does God Need the Church?: Toward a Theology of the People of God* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999).; Lohfink, *Jesus and Community: The Social Dimension of Christian Faith* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1989).

51. Howard A. Snyder and Joel Scandrett, *Salvation Means Creation Healed: The Ecology of Sin and Grace: Overcoming the Divorce between Earth and Heaven* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011).; Marion G. Bontrager, Michelle Hershberger, and John E. Sharp, *The Bible as Story: An Introduction to Biblical Literature* (Newton, KS: Workplay Publishing, 2016).

52. Alan Kreider, *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church: The Improbable Rise of Christianity in the Roman Empire* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2016); Alan Kreider, *The Change of Conversion and the Origin of Christendom, Christian Mission and Modern Culture* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1999).

MCUSA and Mennonite conferences; 2) creating a field guide of congregational narrative ecclesiology for leaders; and 3) creating training events for pastors and congregational leaders in cohort groups.

Congregation Cohorts

In 2017, I became aware of Fuller Youth Institute's *Growing Young Cohort* for congregations.⁵³ The Growing Young Cohort is a training initiative for researching and developing congregational relationships with young adults. Participation involves a year of interaction within a small group of congregations, two gatherings for training, monthly webinars, assessment resources, and coaching. An exploration of a similar model could be helpful in providing training and support for congregations as they begin the journey of narrative identity formation.

Regardless of whether these proposals for future research and exploration are carried out, through this project I have become passionate about narrative ecclesiology. The people of MRMC, VMC, and HMC, have become dear and important to me and I have witnessed the Spirit at work in each of these congregations. I am thrilled to imagine the ways in which God's story will continue to shape them in their journeys forward toward their God-given identity and purpose. I am convinced that every local congregation would benefit from learning and exercising narrative disciplines. It is my prayer that the Church everywhere be formed by God's alternative narrative into an alternative community as they live into God's alternative reality.

53. "What Is a Cohort?," Fuller Youth Institute, accessed December 2, 2019. <https://fulleryouthinstitute.org/growingyoung/cohort>.

Appendix A

Transition Schedule Example

Maple River Mennonite Church
July 2015 – June 2016

<i>Month</i>	<i>Focus/Activity</i>
July	Introductions and Overview of Transition Time
Heritage	
August	Household Interviews Congregation Gathering: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create a Collective Memory Timeline with the congregation
September	Household Interviews Congregation Gathering: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collective Memory Timeline Report
October	Focus Groups: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discuss who we have been (the story of MRMC’s past) • Attend to conflicts and hurts raised in past story
Mission and Connections	
November	Focus Groups: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engage N.T. images of the Church (the N.T. Church story) • Introduce congregational practices of discernment
December	Focus Groups: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Share the story of early Anabaptists • Identify MRMC’s gifts and resources, and discuss how God is preparing MRMC for mission
January	Focus Groups: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Share the Missional Ecclesiology story • Listen to our neighbors (Gather prayer concerns in neighborhood) • Explore networks (Each person creates a map of their own relationship network. <i>Studying Congregations</i>, 50-54.)

Leadership and Future	
February	<p>Elder Team:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create a statement of MRMC identity and purpose (the story of MRMC moving forward) <p>Congregation Gathering:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discuss identity and purpose statement, improve and affirm it.
March	<p>Elder Team:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explore leadership practices of discernment (Ruth Haley Barton, <i>Pursuing God's Will Together</i>) • Discuss ongoing challenges and opportunities
April	<p>Elder Team:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create a pastor search process <p>Congregation Gathering:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify primary pastor tasks
May	<p>Focus Groups:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Imagine new mission initiatives
June	Wrap up transition work

Appendix B

Household Interviews

*Interviews will be incorporated into a summary for the congregation. Names will not be included and sensitive information may be reworded or not included in the summary.
Thank you for participating! –Steve Slagel*

1. How long have you been a part of _____ Church?
2. What brought you to this church? What keeps you here?
3. How are you involved in the church? Is this what you would like it to be?
4. How would you describe the churches relationship to its surrounding neighborhood?
5. When was this church at its very best?
6. On the current course, what will this church be like in 5-10 years?
7. What is your hope for this church?
8. How united are the people of the congregation?
9. When have you been disappointed with this church?
10. Are there unresolved conflicts or hurts in the congregation?
11. What do you think the Spirit of God is asking the church to do in the next year?

Appendix C

Interview Consent Forms

Thank you for your participation in this interview. This interview is part of a study conducted by Steve Slagel as part of his Doctor of Ministry research through Western Theological Seminary. The expectation of this study is to explore congregational capacity to discern their God-given identity and purpose. These interviews are an important way of capturing key insights of the church.

The information from this interview will be collected in two forms: the interviewer will record reflections on the interview, and a combined summary of all the congregation's interviews will be written. Names of the interviewees will not be used in reporting any of the data.

Upon completion of this research, the combined summary will be shared with the congregation's leadership, and a summary report will be presented to the congregation. The written reflections of all interviews will be archived by Steve Slagel for future reference.

By signing this consent form you agree to be a willing and contributing party in this study, as well as agree to the terms listed above.

If you have any questions about this research or wish to report a research related concern, please email or call Steve Slagel at pastor.slagel@gmail.com (574) 536-1461.

Signature(s) _____ Date _____

Signature of Interviewer _____ Date _____

Interview Permission Statement

Interviewee: Dr. Walter Brueggemann

Interview Dates: October 5, 2018, and October 18, 2019

Interviewer: Steve Slagel

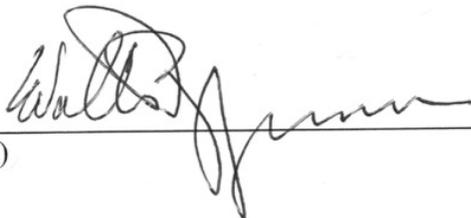
These interviews are part of a study conducted by Steve Slagel as part of his D.Min. research through Western Theological Seminary. The expectation of this study is to explore congregational capacity to discern their God-given identity and purpose.

The information from these interviews are recorded in written notes and archived by Steve Slagel for future reference.

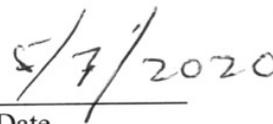
By signing this document, you grant to Steve Slagel the right to use the statements made in the interviews for all purposes related to this study.

If you have any questions about this research or wish to report a research related concern, please email or call Steve Slagel at pastor.slagel@gmail.com (574) 536-1461.

Signature(s)



Date



Appendix D

Collective Memory Timeline Example

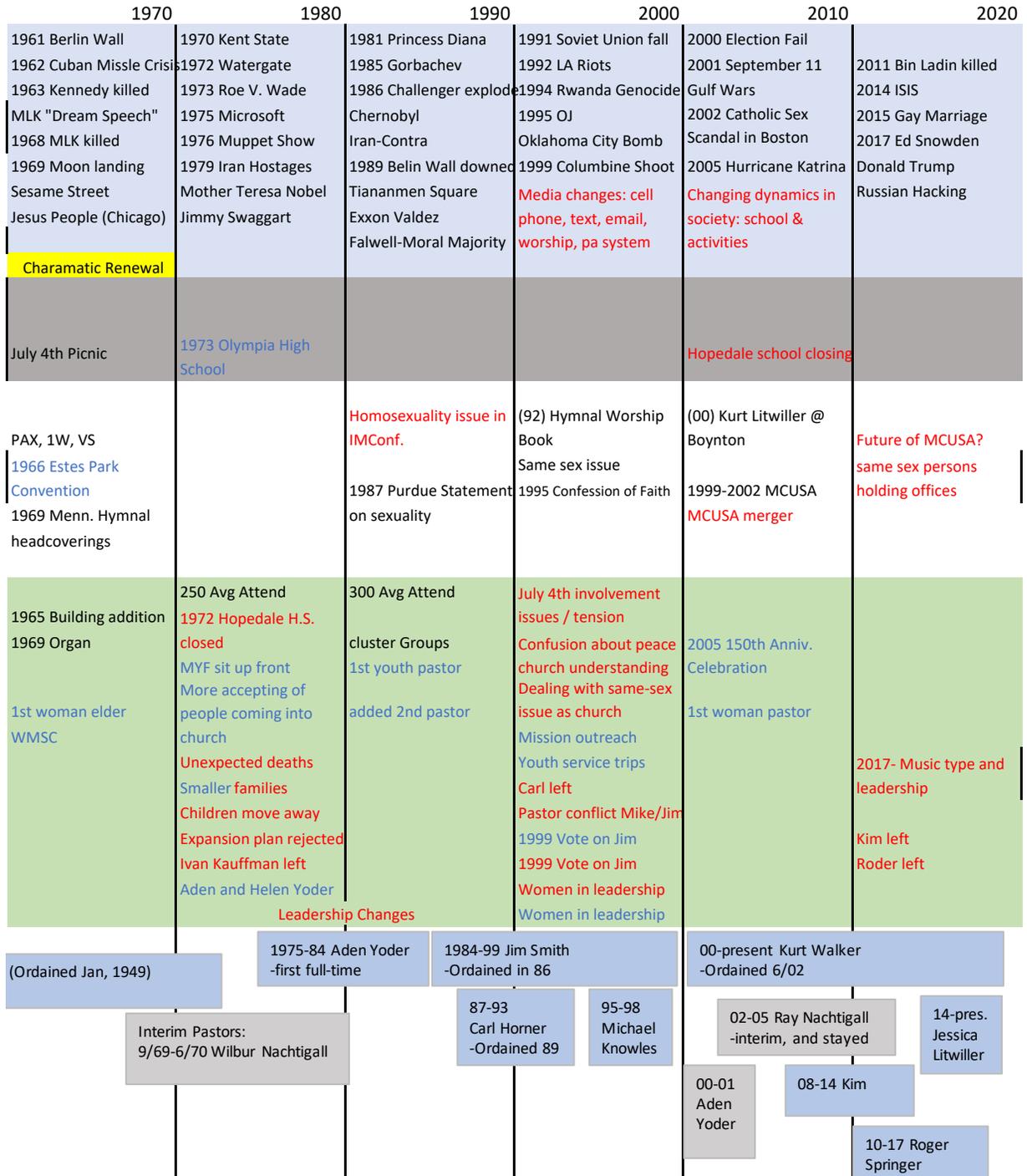
Hopedale Mennonite Church Timeline (1 of 3)

	1850	1860	1870	1880	1890	1900	
Nation / World	1730-40's Great Awakening 1800's 2nd Great Awakening 1843 "Oregon Fever" 1844 the Telegram 1845 Frederick Douglass 1846 US Mexico War Enlightenment	1851 NY Times 1852 Uncle Tom's Cabin 1854 Crimean War 1856 John Brown Kansas 1857 Dred Scott Decision 1859 Harper's Ferry Darwin's Origins	1860 Lincoln Elected 1861 Civil War Begins 1863 Emanc Proclam Gettysburg 1865 Civil War Ends 13th Ammend Abolition Lincoln shot 1869 Black Friday	1870 Black Vote Franco-Prussian War 1871 Chicago Fire 1873 Stock Mkt Crash 1876 Telephone inventd Custer's Last Stand Sitting Bull, Crazy Horse 1879 Phonograph	1880 Electric Lights 1882 Labor Day 1883 Red Cross 1884 Huckelberry Finn 1886 Haymarket Riot Statue of Liberty	1890 Wound Knee Masa Anti-Trust Act 1893 Edison Movie Studio World Fair Chicago 1895 Nobel Prize fund 1898 War on Spain Biblical Criticism	
Community	1827 Hopedale founded		1863 Hopedale UMC 1868 Railroad through town				
Conf / Denom	1712 Exile from Alsace 1728 Louis XV tolerance Napoleon 1815-60 3000 emigrate to OH, IN, Ontario, IL (3rd Wave) 1833 Church in Metamora		1860-1902 Joseph Stuckey	1875 Menn. Publishing	"conf." groups: Amish, Amish Mennonite	1897 Mennonite General Conference 1895 Elkhart Insitute	
Hopedale Mennonite Church	1830-40's Emigration	1850's Hopedale Amish Menn Church 1854 Cemetery Availability (a ministry)		1875 First building	1885 Sunday School		
Ministers			1861-99 Christian Nafziger Bishop			1885-90 Joseph Springer	1897
			Ministers: Joseph Litwiller, Simon Bechler, William Unzicker, Joseph H John Egli, Joseph Egli and Daniel Nafziger (Ordained Mar, 1921), Ben				

Hopedale Mennonite Church Timeline (2 of 3)

1910	1920	1930	1940	1950	1960
1900 Kodak Camera 1901 Marconi Radio 1905 1st Movie Theater 1906 Corn Flakes Azusa Street Revival 1908 Ford Model T	1911 Titanic 1914-18 WWI 1917 U.S. enters war	1920 Women vote 1920 Prohibition Began 1925 Scopes Trial 1928 Sliced Bread 1929 Stock Mkt crash	1930 Gandhi Salt March 1931 National Anthem 1934 Dust Bowl 1936 Spanish Civil War 1929-39 Drpression 1939-45 WWII	1940 Auschwitz 1941 Pearl Harbor 1945 Atomic Bombs 1947 Jackie Robinson 1948 Apartheid 1949 China communist Billy Graham	1950 Credit Card 1950-53 Korean War 1950 McCarthyism 1954 Brown V. Brd of Ed TV Evangelism begins: Rex Humbard and Oral Roberts
Fundamentalism			Evangelicalism		
		1920 New Hopedale H.S. building Opposition to Conscientious Objection (WWI and WWII) Comm. V. Church			1954 Hopedale Medical Begins Tension lingers for many years
1901 Boynton MC 1906 Mission Board Board of Education	1914 Central Conference Mennonite Church (joined GC)	1920 MCC 1921 IL Menn Conf			1950 MDS 1957 Menno Haven
1903 English added	music	1925 Name change from "Amish Menn. Church" 1926 Current building	1937 359 Avg Attend 1938 VBS Musical instrument controversy Dillon church started	Alt service/some men in military conflict around peace stance Confession from military men 1947-51 MYF and S.S. S.Pekin and Midway churches started Bible Memory Ivan Kauffmann	1956 Church Council
1917-1920 John C. Birky Bishop		20-25 Samuel Gerber	1925-56 Simon Litwiller Bishop		
					1949-72 Ivan Kauffmann -first paid
Schstetler, John Nafziger, Noah Augsburg, Andrew Birky, Joseph Birky, John Birky, Jacob Unzicker, Daniel Grieser, Springer (Ordained Sept, 1921),...					

Hopedale Mennonite Church Timeline (3 of 3)



Appendix E

Descriptions of the Three Congregations

Maple River Mennonite Church, Brutus, MI

Founded: 1879 as Brutus Mennonite Church

Active Members/Participants: 23

Ages:

0-10: 0	51-60: 2
11-20: 0	62-70: 11
21-30: 0	71-80: 4
31-40: 1	81-90: 4
41-50: 0	91+: 1

Total Annual Budget: \$57, 352

Physical Setting:

The Maple River Mennonite Church building is two blocks West of US 31 in the unincorporated village of Brutus. Located about 20 miles south of the Mackinaw Bridge, Brutus is in an environmentally rugged region of hills, forests, lakes and rivers (The Maple River runs through the village). According to the 2010 census, Brutus has 218 residents, 95% of whom are Caucasian (<http://www.city-data.com/city/Brutus-Michigan.html>).

Valparaiso Mennonite Church, Valparaiso, IN

Founded: 1966 as a church plant from Hopedale Mennonite Church, Kouts, MI.

Active Members/Participants: 48

Ages:

0-10: 0	51-60: 2
0-10: 4	51-60: 10
11-20: 1	62-70: 12
21-30: 4	71-80: 5
31-40: 0	81-90: 6
41-50: 2	91+: 4

Total Annual Budget: \$90,476

Physical Setting:

The Valparaiso Mennonite Church meets in a well-appointed facility, built on the edge of the city of Valparaiso in 1974. The church's neighborhood is now a densely populated and growing suburban community. Valparaiso is a city with a nominally diverse population of 33,367 located in the Northwest corner of the state (about 50 miles outside of Chicago, IL). A rather affluent region, Valparaiso has hospitals, a large university (Valparaiso University), a growing retail and restaurant district (<http://www.city-data.com/city/Valparaiso-Indiana.html>).

Hopedale Mennonite Church, Hopedale, IL

Founded: 1854 as Hopedale Amish Mennonite Church. The "Amish" name was dropped in 1922.

Active Members/Participants: 102

Ages:

0-10: 3	51-60: 23
11-20: 7	62-70: 21
21-30: 6	71-80: 12
31-40: 4	81-90: 15
41-50: 5	91+: 6

Total Annual Budget: \$358,144

Physical Setting:

The Hopedale Mennonite Church has met in the same location, on the edge of a cornfield, 2 miles south of the village of Hopedale, since 1875. Their current facility was built in 1926 to accommodate more than 300 people. Most in the surrounding community are connected to agriculture by profession or family. The village of Hopedale has just over 800 people, and is home to a 200 bed medical center that serves most of the rural communities in the region. Hopedale is in central Illinois about 25 miles West of Bloomington and 24 miles South of Peoria (<http://www.city-data.com/city/Hopedale-Illinois.html>).

Appendix F

Presentation: The Story of Anabaptism

- 1517 Martin Luther composed and distributed 95 theses (protest of abuses and urging over-all reformation of the Catholic Church).
- 1520s Peasant leaders advocate for economic and social reforms alongside the reform of the church.
- 1525 Ulrich Zwingli, Conrad Grebel, Felix Manz, and George Blaurock
- Anabaptism emerged as scattered (Switzerland, South Germany, Austria, North Germany, and the Netherlands) groups seeking radical reform.
- 1536 Menno Simons became a leader of the fledgling Dutch Anabaptist group.
- 1648 Swiss Mennonites sought refuge in Alsace, France.
- 1700 Jacob Ammann, a minister among Swiss Mennonite refugees in Alsace, was concerned with the “lack of discipline in the church.”
- 1707 Mennonites to America followed by Amish after 1712

Palmer Becker, *Anabaptist Essentials* (Herald Press, 2017)

- A. **Jesus** Is the Center of Our Faith
- B. **Community** Is the Center of Our Life
- C. **Reconciliation** is Center of Our Work

John Driver, *Life Together in the Spirit* (Plough Publishing, 2015)

The Spirituality of Sixteenth-Century Anabaptists was:

1. inspired by the Spirit of the Living Christ;
2. oriented by the Scriptures, read and interpreted in the faith community;
3. consciously corporate – nourished and shared in the context of the community;
4. Christ-centered spirituality of discipleship in which following Jesus was the calling of the entire community of Christ;
5. characterized by a commitment to justice and peace in every aspect of life; and
6. expressed by participating fully in God’s saving mission in the world, a mission that anticipated, announced, and embodied the reign of God in this world.

Group questions:

- What is your *reaction* to this story?
- What have we *learned* from this story?
- What does this story *invite* us to do?

Appendix G

Presentation: The Story of the Missional Church

1938 *International Missionary Council (IMC) Conference meeting in Tambaram, India*

- Agenda: The role of younger churches in missionary work.
- more than 50% of delegates came from non-Western churches.
- began to consider the West as a mission field.
- “The Church exists to fulfill God’s mission...”

1939-45 *World War II*

1947 *IMC Conference meeting in Whitby, Canada*

- Distinctions were disappearing between young vs. old Churches, and Western vs. non-Western countries.
- There was a new call to partnership.
- The mission field was considered to be the whole world.

1949 *Chairman Mao discouraged formal religion and banned Christian Missionaries*

1952 *IMC Council meeting in Willingen*

- Recognized the end to the traditional way of mission.
- Rediscovered mission Dei: that mission is the purpose and action of the triune God.
- Lesslie Newbigin authored the conference summary statement which included this expression of mission Dei: “the Father sent the Son to reconcile all things; the Son sent the Spirit to gather and empower the Church; and the Church is now sent to continue Jesus’ mission.”

1998 *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America*

- The North American church had been tied to Christendom, focusing on internal needs and maintaining its privilege in society.
- The decline of Christendom provides the opportunity for the church to rediscover its identity as a people sent by God into the world as witnesses.

Group questions:

- What is your *reaction* to this story?
- What have we *learned* from this story?
- What does this story *invite* us to do?

Glossary

Anabaptism	A radical Protestant movement which began in the sixteenth-century. The word “Anabaptist” meant re-baptizer, and was a disdainful label given by the movement’s detractors.
Amish	A distinct group of Anabaptists which began at the end of the seventeenth-century among Swiss-German Mennonites. The name Amish is derived from the group’s founder, Jakob Ammann.
Biblicism	A theory which claims that the Bible is exclusively infallible, inerrant, and universally relevant in communicating authoritative truth for Christian salvation and faith.
Christendom	The term “Christendom” has many meanings. In the context of this project it is defined as the culture and experiences created in the fourth-century’s union of the Church with state authority.
Congregationalism	A system of authority in which local congregations are self-governing.
Diachronic	The reading of a text which centers on the events and circumstances in the text’s history.
Dialogical	Interpreting a text by way of interaction with another text.
Disestablishment	The disorientation and marginalization of the church in the post-Christendom West.
Ecclesiology	The theological identity regarding the nature and purpose of a congregation.
Eschatological	Pertaining to a theological view of last things, or the culmination of the future.
Ethnography	A way of engaging social research to build an understanding of people and cultures.
Habitus	A way of being that is shaped by the community’s stories, and by repetition of specific community practices.
Hermeneutic	A methodology of interpreting scripture.
Historiography	The writing of a history. More precisely for this project, “historiography” is the communication of a history.

Homiletic	A practice of communicating through writing and/or preaching a sermon.
Indulgences	A way of reducing the punishment a person undergoes in judgement for their sins.
<i>Lectio Divina</i>	(Latin for “Divine reading”) A traditional practice of scriptural reading, meditation and prayer the roots of which go back the third-century.
Liminality	A conceptual description of the experience of transition involved in change.
Magisterial	In reference to the Reformation, “magisterial” refers to the way in which reformers ceded authority to secular authorities.
Mennonite	A Christian community of Anabaptists named after Menno Simons of Friesland which began in the late sixteenth-century.
<i>Missio Dei</i>	A theological vision that understands mission or sending to be central to the character and activity of the triune God.
Missiology	A theological study of Christian mission.
Missional	An adjective used in conjunction with terms such as theology, church, etc. to denote a version of that thing seen or practiced missiologically or in light of the <i>missio Dei</i> .
Narrative	A story or an account of experiences that conveys meanings or values.
Post-Christendom	The cultural context that is emerging as historical Christendom has collapsed, resulting in the displacement of the church in Western society.
Reformation	A sixteenth-century European Christian movement that challenged the papal authority and practices of the Roman Catholic Church.
Rule of Christ	The early Anabaptist view of redemptive church discipline based on Matthew 18:15-20.
<i>Sola Scriptura</i>	A Latin phrase meaning “by scripture alone.” A foundational principle of the Protestant Reformation which was employed as a rejection of any authority outside of scripture.

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