

**Embracing Disruption:
Equipping the Church to Embrace Disruption
as a Catalyst for Spiritual Transformation**

Steven Robert Magneson

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Author: STEVEN ROBERT MAGNESON

Project Committee: _____ _____

 Chuck DeGroat Date

Internal Reader: Jon Brown

External Reader: Brett Vander Berg

Abstract

In my early years as a minister, I noticed a connection between disruption and spiritual transformation. “Disruption” describes those events and circumstances that force individuals to move outside of their comfort zones, routines, or habits. These situations often lead to new perspectives that help them ask new questions about the world around them. For me, three specific instances of disruption had particular importance when I served as a young minister. These disruptions included a woman with a mental illness, a church member with a cancer diagnosis, and a friend struggling with depression. These three experiences helped me understand how to approach *other* disruptive circumstances and be attentive to the ways God was at work. Disruption can lead to life-changing spiritual transformations. However, not *all* people who experience disruption also experience transformation in a positive way. Why is this so? What is the connection between disruptive moments and an individual’s capacity for profound spiritual transformation and renewal? These questions have guided my research and my effort to determine how church leaders can equip their communities to embrace disruption as a catalyst for spiritual transformation. I began by researching how various scholars and theologians have addressed the topic of disruption. I also looked at how God often worked through disruptive moments in scripture to bring about God’s purposes in the world. This led me to start a project to help church members intentionally move towards disruptive places as a means of spiritual transformation. What I discovered, however, was that *my* plans would be disrupted in an unprecedented way. This project and the global pandemic of 2020 forced me to embrace my own disruptive journey. This journey would challenge me in significant ways but would lead to profound personal spiritual transformation.

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Chapter 1: The Power of Embracing Disruption

This past Sunday, I once again administered communion to Jennifer on her front porch in a small town in Westchester County, New York. This has become our new routine, and we both eagerly look forward to this practice every week. This particular Sunday was calm and crisp. The morning sun was gently warming our faces as we said the Lord's Prayer and received the elements together. We talked about our prayer needs and expressed gratitude for God's many blessings. We gave updates on our lives and once again prayed for each other. These weekly encounters have become cherished moments for both of us. We cherish them because of our friendship, our shared faith community, and because they remind us of this simple truth: God used our disruptive journey as a catalyst for profound spiritual transformation. We have both gone through a three-year long, disruptive journey together, and we have both been profoundly changed.

This "journey of disruption" is not unique to my story with Jennifer. This theme permeated many other pastoral encounters during my time serving our church in Westchester County. Many years ago, as a young pastor, I was intimidated by disruptive experiences in the lives of our church members. I didn't always know how to respond to a cancer diagnosis, marriage difficulties, mental illness, financial troubles, or other struggles that caused places of uncertainty and doubt. Rather than moving *towards* those experiencing pain, suffering, anxiety, and instability, I often approached them with fear, resistance, and intimidation. I felt inadequate as a young minister. I wasn't sure if I would say the right thing, encourage them in the right way, or to offer hope in the midst of their darkness. As I have grown in ministry, I have learned to see these disruptive moments instead as moments where God is alive and at work. I now

embrace disruption as a catalyst for spiritual transformation. This experience of moving towards disruptive moments held true in cases of mental illness, a life-threatening cancer diagnosis, overwhelming depression, a global pandemic, and other areas of uncertainty. God can use disruption as a tool for profound spiritual transformation.

What Do I Mean by “Disruption?”

Before I continue further, I want to clarify the meaning of the word “disruption.” The Merriam-Webster definition of disruption is “the act or process of disrupting something: a break or interruption in the normal course or continuation of some activity, process, etc.”¹ Disruption in our lives can take many different forms and can impact our routines on different levels. Sometimes, disruption happens primarily on an individual level through circumstances like job loss or illness. Other times, disruption impacts entire communities at once in the wake of events like earthquakes, an economic recession, a terrorist attack, or a global pandemic. Most of the time, disruption happens *to* us. However, it can also be something that we enter into intentionally, through activities such as practicing sabbath, fasting, or silent prayer retreats.

Disruption in any of these forms does not always lead to spiritual transformation. Sometimes we return to the same routines unaffected, or even apathetic or ambivalent. Disruptions may cause resentment and bitterness. Some may actually result in a rejection of God altogether. This project reflects on how the church community can embrace moments of disruption. If we do so, God can use our

¹“Disruption,” *Merriam-Webster.com*, accessed April 23, 2021, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/disruption>.

circumstances to encourage spiritual transformation and an increased awareness of our dependence on God.

An Autoethnographic Reflection

It was not just my experience of disruption with Jennifer and her struggle with mental illness that taught me the importance of embracing disruption. I also had the experiences of ministering to Anthony through his cancer diagnosis and Paul through his struggle with depression. Eventually, I also underwent my own personal transformation through a year of ministering during a global pandemic. These four stories, along with a developed curriculum to encourage members of our church to embrace disruption, became the framework for this autoethnographic reflection. In equipping the church to embrace disruptive moments in our lives, we can witness God's use of disruption as a powerful catalyst for spiritual transformation.

Our Context

Westchester County is a wealthy suburb just north of New York City. The county has a history of great wealth and privilege, boasting of luxurious estates from the Rockefellers to the Roosevelts. There are hundreds of golf courses, country clubs, high-end retail shops, and car dealerships. This area provides secluded space for people of fame and fortune to hide behind their fortress walls and automatic gates. It is home to the likes of Mariano Rivera, Bill and Hillary Clinton, Martha Stewart, David Letterman, Michael Bloomberg, Roger Goodell, George Soros, Ralph Lauren, and more. It is often where PGA Golf Tournaments are held, such as the Buick Classic and the U.S. Open.

People come here to hide with their money and cherish their privacy and seclusion, all a short distance from the bustling New York City metropolitan center. From where I live, it is a 35-minute train ride to Grand Central Station.

A 2018 study ranked the 50 states according to income inequality from 2010 to 2016. New York was ranked as the state with the greatest wealth inequality, followed by Connecticut. The study used the “Gini Coefficient,” which compares the wealth and income distribution among a given population. The findings showed not only that New York and Connecticut were the states with the greatest inequality, but that the gap had widened significantly over that six-year period.² Westchester County resides on the peninsula that intersects those two states, and our church property is located less than two miles from the New York-Connecticut border. As a result, we have church members who reside in both New York and Connecticut. Most of our members, however, reside in Westchester County.

In addition to New York ranking number one in the United States, Westchester County has the greatest income inequality of all the counties in New York. The 2018 study showed that “households that made \$75,000 or more earned \$6.30 for every dollar that households under \$75,000 made.”³ The report also showed that this divide was widening within Westchester County, following a similar trend seen in the rest of New York State. While our church is culturally and racially diverse, it is not

² Chris Kolmar, "These are the States with the Highest (and Lowest) Income Inequality," Zippia, March 5, 2018, <https://www.zippia.com/advice/states-highest-lowest-income-inequality/>.

³ Dave Zucker, "Westchester Had the Greatest Income Disparity in New York in 2017," *Westchester Magazine*, December 7, 2018, <https://westchestermagazine.com/life-style/business/westchester-had-the-greatest-income-disparity-in-new-york-in-2017/>.

socioeconomically diverse. A vast majority of our congregants have household incomes above the \$75,000 threshold, which places us on the high end of the economic divide.

For the wealthier residents of Westchester County, disruption is often viewed in an entirely negative light. Life, health, and disability insurance policies protect us from unforeseen health disruptions. Car and house insurance policies protect us from accidents and weather. Even air conditioning and heating systems allow the wealthy to enjoy the four seasons from the comfort of our own homes. “Summering in Maine” or spending the winter in Florida is commonplace for those of us who have vacation homes elsewhere. There are many job opportunities available for all who live here, and there is a constant influx of new residents who come to this area to make their fortunes—and leave when it suits them. As a result, it can be a very transient community. This is especially true in Westchester, where families migrate from the city when the New York City apartments become too small to raise children. Families then often move away after the last child graduates from high school since the cost of living is too high.

Yet, within these wealthy towns in Westchester County, there is much poverty as well. Due to property taxes, zoning laws, and housing costs, many of the poor in this county are relegated to the few towns that they can afford. These towns are where the retail workers, service industry workers, housemaids, childcare workers, landscapers, and day laborers live who support the lifestyles of their wealthy neighbors. Many families struggle to put food on the table while many of their neighbors in the same county have more money than they know how to spend. Such a wide socioeconomic divide makes it challenging for a church to live out the gospel.

I serve in Trinity Presbyterian Church, located in Purchase, New York. The congregation was founded in 1995 as one of the first church plants from Redeemer Presbyterian Church, Tim Keller's church in Manhattan. As mentioned above, while our congregation is racially diverse, it is not representative of the socioeconomic diversity that is present in our community. We are a community of entrepreneurs, lawyers, doctors, famous musicians, Wall Street analysts, CEOs, and business owners. The wealth and privilege in our congregation makes us less susceptible to life's disruptive moments. As a result, when actual moments of disruption happen, they can cause surprise, shame, and confusion.

In short, while we are a community faithful to the gospel and to Jesus Christ, we are also conditioned to resist experiencing disruption in our lives. Members who experience sudden unemployment are usually equipped with a personal financial reserve or are given a suitable severance to find gainful employment. During the job search, the worst conceivable prospect is not bankruptcy, homelessness, or poverty. Instead, the worst scenario for many is being forced to relocate to a different area for employment—usually with the added benefit of a lower cost of living.

Ministry in this context rarely needs to embrace disruption because we are so insulated from it. However, if the church is to live out the gospel, we need to realign our perspective on disruption. Our instinct is to avoid it, but we can transform this into an eagerness to move *towards* the disruptive elements of the life in our community. Embracing Jennifer, Anthony, and Paul might not seem unusual to some communities that are used to seeing hardship and suffering. Here in Westchester, however, it was profound on many levels.

A Case of Mental Illness

The story of 60-year-old Jennifer began on Palm Sunday three years ago. I was helping lead the Sunday morning worship service from the stage in the front of the sanctuary. I first noticed the “disruption” as one of our deacons tried to keep her from entering the worship space. This deacon, however, was ignored by Jennifer. She made her way to the front row; hair disheveled; clothes falling off her body; talking loudly with foam and drool forming at the corners of her mouth. This was our dear friend Jennifer, and she was having a manic, mental breakdown in the middle of our Palm Sunday service. This was a disruption like I had never encountered before in ministry.

We all knew Jennifer well. She had come to our church through our ministry with a local nonprofit organization that helped individuals who were recovering from behavior and mental health issues. Jennifer was always a joy to meet. She had energy, she beamed with love, and she cared for others immensely. Our church began to offer her rides to church every Sunday, and she soon became an integral part of our church community. She attended a community group Bible study in her area, she helped care for the needs of others, and she even became an assistant Sunday school teacher in our children’s ministry on Sunday mornings. She helped teach my youngest daughter with her Bible study lessons and would bring candy to my kids every Sunday. My kids all adored Jennifer, and she loved them as well. While she had a history of mental illness, she was doing really well and beginning to thrive and grow. We were so glad to have her in our fellowship and church community.

Things became challenging, however, when she began to show signs of erratic behavior. She told stories of men in her apartment building who were out to get her. She stopped taking care of herself physically; she wasn’t sleeping; she wasn't eating

properly; and her apartment disintegrated into an unmanageable mess with rodents and roaches. On several occasions, her erratic behavior led her to be checked into a clinic for psychiatric evaluation. What was once dismissed as an anomaly soon became a monthly routine. She began to overstep boundaries and burn one relational bridge after another. Eventually, she stopped taking her medicine and entered into a constant state of anxiety and fear. Our church community struggled with how to respond appropriately to this case of tremendous need and emotional and mental instability. How does a church show Christ's love to someone who has so many needs beyond our abilities and expertise? Our efforts to help Jennifer, however, came to a breaking point on that fateful Palm Sunday in 2017.

On that Palm Sunday, she walked down the main aisle of the sanctuary. She arrived late, right in the middle of the senior pastor's sermon. She yelled up to him, "Pastor, I'm back! God is good!" He was forced to respond and welcome her back. She sat in the front row.

Every eye was now fixed on Jennifer. Her mental illness was not just a disruption for her personally or even relationally. This had become a disruption for the entire church. It was difficult to know how to respond in a way that showed her the care and love she needed, while also protecting others from her hurtful and erratic behavior. I remember feeling dread and hopelessness wash over me. It was no longer something that we could ignore and avoid. The disruption was right there in the front row. How was I supposed to respond?

For the remainder of the service, Jennifer yelled out comments, questions, and jokes that made all of us feel extremely uneasy. What does one do in this situation? How do you address mental illness in a public setting? Isn't the church supposed to be

for people who have physical, emotional, and mental needs? All of us froze but tried to proceed as best we could. This was a woman we had all loved for nearly 10 years. She was an integral part of our congregation but was having a manic episode, and we didn't know what to do.

I got up from the front of the church, walked over to her, and sat next to her. I embraced the disruption and physically embraced Jennifer. She cried on my shoulder for the next half an hour. This was the beginning of a long and disruptive journey for the two of us that would eventually lead us to both grow spiritually. In my efforts to embrace Jennifer and the disruption, we both experienced a deep and lasting spiritual transformation over the next few years. The end result was our regular front-porch communion that now happens every Sunday in a simple, yet profound way.

This embracing of disruption was a catalyst for transformation for not just Jennifer and me, but also for Anthony and his cancer, and Paul and his depression.

A Cancer Diagnosis

Anthony was a member of our church whom I first met in 2004. He and I grew our friendship and attended a regular men's breakfast together as well as Bible studies. Shortly after I began to work full-time at our church as the student ministries director, the financial crisis hit. Anthony was caught in the middle of the Great Recession in 2008 and eventually found himself out of work, foreclosing on his home, and asking the church for help. During that time, he reached out to our leadership to ask for financial assistance. The associate pastor at the time, leaders from our "Mercy Team," and other trustees met with Anthony to assess his needs and offer assistance.

When helping a church member with financial assistance, it is our policy to look at their income, expenditures, and debt to see the best way to help. We have no problem with providing assistance, but our most effective way of assisting is to offer sound financial advice. This helps sustain individuals and families not just in the short term, but for many years to come. As we sought to help Anthony, however, he became uncooperative and deceptive in disclosing his financial situation. He also began exploiting the sympathy of other individuals in the church. Anthony started asking other church members for financial assistance privately and started sowing lies about the church. He claimed that the church was not willing to help him in his time of need. When pressed on the matter, he got very upset. He stopped speaking with the care team, elders, and deacons and eventually stopped attending our church altogether.

As a result, I lost contact with Anthony for the next six years.

One Sunday in June 2014, Anthony returned. I was pleased to see him and wanted to meet for lunch later that week to catch up on things. He informed me that he had recently been diagnosed with jaw cancer—a very rare and dire diagnosis. It was discovered during a routine dental visit, and his entire lower jawbone would have to be removed and replaced. The surgery would require reconstructive surgery with bone harvested from his leg and formed into a jaw. It was a long and painful path he would need to take, and it did not have a hopeful outcome. Anthony understood his need was now more than just financial. It was physical, emotional, and spiritual. In coming to me for assistance, he had a new sense of helplessness and humility. This new disruption would be a catalyst for profound transformation for Anthony in many ways.

As a pastor, this became an opportunity for me to embrace disruption. I didn't have the words to say, nor did I have any assurance that the journey would have a

happy ending. All I knew was that I wanted to be there for my dear friend and walk with him as best I could. His past disagreements with our church and his rejection of our help paled in comparison to the challenges that lay ahead. He asked for forgiveness for his previous ungrateful and manipulative behavior. Anthony sought to reconcile with those he had hurt. He experienced profound change in every aspect of his life.

I helped him network with other doctors in the area to receive the best care. We sought a way for him to receive medical coverage since he didn't have health insurance at the time. I also gave him rides to his surgeries in the city and visited as many times as I could. We prayed earnestly and sought God's comfort, wisdom, and power to heal him of his cancer and restore his physical, spiritual, and emotional health.

This journey was long and difficult, but the result was an amazing spiritual transformation. Anthony eventually was restored to full health—and even managed to emerge from the surgery with minimal physical deformation. Anthony became humbler, more caring, and more deeply connected to our church community through this process of disruption. He is no longer the “arrogant” Anthony who refused to allow the church to help him with his finances. He is now a servant to the church, connected again to our Bible studies and fellowship. He even serves as a trustee and accountant. His disruption was a catalyst for spiritual transformation.

Unrepentant Sin and Depression

Not all stories end the same, however, and not all stories have the endings we want. Such was the story of embracing the disruption of my friend Paul. Paul was a troubled soul. He came to me with his marital, spiritual, and vocational struggles. I

tried to help him as best as I could. Paul, however, became a personified “disruption” that did not result in his personal spiritual transformation. He entered into deep despair. He entered into chronic depression. He entered into self-medication that resulted in infidelity, deception, and suicide. This was not a mutually beneficial disruption. I seemed to benefit more than Paul. I thought I could help him. My journey showed me that I, indeed, could not.

This rocked me to my core and caused me to question everything I presumed to know about my calling, my abilities, God’s sovereignty, and how to interpret God’s work in the world through the power of disruption. This disruption left me empty and despairing. I did not feel exonerated in my call or satisfied in my pastoral capabilities. I was transformed, but in a very different way. I was now presiding over the funeral of a friend who succumbed to the dark valley that blocked any light of hope.

How does one emerge from such a valley? How is the church to properly respond to disruptions like these? As followers of Jesus, how are we to follow in his footsteps by caring for others when it makes us uncomfortable? How can we position our covenant communities to “embrace disruption” as a means of transformation?

The Project, a Global Pandemic, and this Autoethnography

The three stories above inspired me to seek to bring others in our congregation to places of intentional disruption. The hope was that, rather than waiting for disruption to happen *to us*, we could purposefully *embrace* disruption so we might experience spiritual transformation. I designed a nine-month program to encourage a "cohort" of church members to grow in their understanding of how God works through disruption

and to provide opportunities for us to willingly go into spaces that would challenge our comfort levels and security. This first cohort was a group of five men, including myself. We committed to participating in readings, Bible study, and personal and community projects to challenge us in various aspects of our lives. We began meeting in the fall of 2019 and worked through the materials and assignments designed to help us uncover areas of spiritual stagnation. We sought out areas where we wanted to see God at work and provide the spiritual renewal that we felt we were missing. I share some of the findings of this cohort in this project and some of the experiences of disruption that we shared.

This project, however, would also be disrupted. In middle of our nine-month curriculum, COVID-19 spread rapidly in the New York metro area and affected every aspect of our lives. Schools, restaurants, churches, and parks were completely shut down. My wife, who was a physician in the local hospital, soon became a frontline worker in the battle against the coronavirus. This crisis forced all of us to rethink every aspect of our routines, our resources, and the way we operated our church. My studies for my Doctor of Ministry degree had been focusing on understanding a theology of disruption. It was in the middle of these studies that God brought about the biggest disruptive crisis that I had ever faced. In hindsight, I believe the preparation of learning to embrace disruption led to one of the most profound spiritual transformations that I have ever experienced.

The pandemic forced a redirection of the focus of this project, which eventually led this to be an autoethnographic reflection. Similar to that of an ethnography, an autoethnography focuses on a personal reflection of a lived pastoral experience. As a research expert explains:

Ethnography and its less intense sociological bedfellow, 'participant observation,' both attempt to get at the 'truth' of a situation by living in that situation and gaining deep understandings from within. The researcher becomes part of the setting and in so doing begins to understand that setting, sometimes in ways that challenge and confront those who are 'natural' to the settings with new insights, knowledge and truths.⁴

Unlike the ethnography, the autoethnography seeks to depict an observation and reflection of a *personal* lived experience. The author of an autoethnography can have a difficult time, however, being an objective critic because the one being observed is one's own self. This project created a framework for a successful, objective autoethnography because the work was done within a covenant community that helped me process my own disruptive experience. As I will detail, I had the help of the participants in the nine-month cohort as well as other pastor's groups. They all worked with me, critiquing the challenges and disruptions that I faced. I was in deep reflection at the start of this project as the events around me unfolded. Through this autoethnographic reflection, I learned that my own preparedness to fully embrace disruption became a catalyst that God was able to use for profound spiritual transformation.

Embracing Disruption in Pastoral Ministry

This paper will take you through these stories of disruption: a manic episode, a cancer diagnosis, an unrepentant affair that ended in suicide, and a project disrupted by a global pandemic. What do these situations have in common? The common thread is this: Disruption can be a powerful tool for God and is often used by God to transform his covenant people.

⁴ John Swinton and Harriet Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research* (SCM Press, 2006), 157.

This then connects us to passages in scripture where God's disruptive work brings about spiritual transformation; both in the Old Testament and the New. We have Moses and the Israelites, the Babylonian Exile, the Disciples and their Betrayal. Most importantly, we see the most disruptive act in all of human history: The Incarnation. Philip Yancey, in *The Jesus I Never Knew*, takes this view of the Incarnation as the central disruptive act of God's redeeming work in the world:

Sorting through the stack of cards that arrived at our house last Christmas, I note that all kinds of symbols have edged their way into the celebration. Overwhelmingly, the landscape scenes render New England towns buried in snow, usually with the added touch of a horse-drawn sleigh. Angels have made a huge comeback in recent years, and Hallmark and American Greetings now feature them prominently, though as demure, cuddly-looking creatures, not the type who would ever need to announce, "Fear not!"

The explicitly religious cards (a distinct minority) focus on the holy family, and you can tell at a glance these folks are different. They seem unruffled and serene. Bright gold halos, like crowns from another world, hover just above their heads. Inside, the cards stress sunny words like love, goodwill, cheer, happiness, and warmth. It is a fine thing, I suppose, that we honor a sacred holiday with such homey sentiments. And yet when I turn to the gospel accounts of the first Christmas, I hear a very different tone and sense mainly disruption at work.⁵

God's purpose and plan for the world was to use disruption to *transform* it. The question is: How can a congregation be prepared to embrace disruption as a place where God is at work? How can we change our view of the Incarnation as a central disruptive act, not as a means of encouraging serenity, predictability, or maintaining the status quo? How can we position ourselves spiritually to move towards disruptive moments in our lives and in the lives of others to see how God will bring about transformation in our hearts and minds?

In the next chapter, I will take you through several literary works connected with this project. My study focused on three main categories: the importance of being rooted

⁵ Philip Yancey, *The Jesus I Never Knew* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995), 29.

in covenant community, the value of embracing crisis and disruption, and our call for sanctification in becoming more like Christ.

Chapter three will then provide a theological reflection on how disruption is often intertwined with the mission of God. It will explore the way God often uses disruption as a means of profound spiritual transformation. I will look at the stories of Joseph, Moses, and Daniel in the Old Testament. Then, we will see how the New Testament continues those themes with the Apostle Paul and, most profoundly, in the description of the incarnation of Jesus Christ. These themes from scripture then provide the theological framework in which we can interpret our experiences of disruption in the church and in ministry.

Chapter four will take you through a nine-month curriculum designed to help guide congregations into a posture of *embracing* disruption as a means of transformation. This project, however, was eventually disrupted by an unprecedented global pandemic. The experience of living in the epicenter of a COVID-19 outbreak in the New York metro area, and the complete disruption of every aspect of my life, led to an even greater spiritual transformation which will be presented in this chapter. This, for me, would become an even more significant personal change than any that had happened in the previous disruptive moments in ministry.

Chapter five will conclude with the results of the project and the surprising ways that God brought personal spiritual renewal to me during this journey. I will also describe the experiences of the members of the nine-month cohort and what was learned from the project. In addition, I will look at the aspects of the curriculum that were successful and areas that could change. Finally, I will suggest ways that the church

can provide a proper theological framework to allow our communities to embrace disruption and bring about positive spiritual transformation.

Chapter 2: A Review of Embracing Disruption

Embracing disruption is an important tool that God uses in scripture to elicit spiritual transformation. It can also be used as a tool in ministry. I have become more aware of the importance of embracing moments of disruption in our church community, as it provides a means of seeing where God is at work in the church and how God might bring about his call for transformation through these disruptions. This led me to research literature that explores the connection between disruption, sin, repentance, and the covenant church community.

The first theme I recognized in my study was that disruption must be processed within the context of rooted covenant community. These “deep roots” of connection to the church community are important foundations for processing and understanding where God is present, alive, and engaged in our lives. Without the context of the church, the disruptions may lack a proper theological context or the necessary spiritual wisdom to process how God is at work within them. The second theme was that the church is called to walk with those who are experiencing crisis and disruption. There is a correlation between our commitment to church community and our willingness to embrace disruption in our lives, in our community, and in our world. The third theme I noticed was our call towards sanctification. We are not called to be complacent but called to become more like Christ. These aspects of the Christian faith are essential as we recognize that we are righteous in the eyes of God because we are united with Christ’s righteousness by faith. However, we also recognize that we are moving towards God’s holiness. Our impetus for embracing disruption is that we want to

reflect the glory, love, and character of Christ. Following Christ means desiring sanctification.

These three aspects are present in the literature I surveyed: 1) rootedness in covenant community, 2) embracing crisis and disruption, and 3) being and becoming like Christ. These themes also inform how my work might contribute to this topic of ministry in the church.

I: Rootedness in Covenant Community

Lesslie Newbigin, in *the Good Shepherd*, writes about how ministers can serve as priests for others. Leaders of the church are called to walk with others because Christ walks with us. We can sit where others sit because Christ first did that for us. Newbigin writes:

When Jesus, who is the eternal Son of God, came and sat where we sit and bore all our sorrows, he opened up a way to God from the place where we are. Our burdens can no longer crush us. Our temptations and trials can no longer hide God from us, because he—God—is beside us in them. And that is eternally so. That is what this letter [Hebrews 14:14-16] means by its teaching about the eternal priesthood and intercession of Jesus. Because we are upheld by the power of that priesthood, we can ourselves be priests for others. But the condition is always the same: We have to sit where they sit.⁶

The covenant community can dwell with those who suffer because we are sustained by the priesthood and intercession of Jesus. The church is not to simply be a place for “righteous” and “spiritual” people who are immune to suffering. On the contrary, the example of Christ shows us that the priesthood of all believers gives us the power to willingly go *into* places of suffering.

⁶ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Good Shepherd, Meditations on Christian Ministry in Today's World*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 45.

When I encounter people who are suffering, it is tempting to try to provide encouragement prematurely. I have often caught myself trying to assure them that “God has a purpose and will use this for his glory.” The truth, however, is not always so clear. I cannot honestly say what God’s purposes are because I do not know what the end result will be. I have also learned that this effort to provide premature comfort and assurance is not actually what is needed. When I sit beside someone who just received a cancer diagnosis, as was seen in my story with Anthony, I need to admit that I do not know all the answers. If we try to explain the suffering, we miss the opportunity to listen and to be attentive to where God might be at work. The covenant community becomes the place where we can be attentive together.

We know that the God of scripture is not afraid of suffering since he was willing to enter into suffering. Therefore, the church does not always need to explain away all suffering as if it can only be a negative thing. As Lesslie Newbigin writes, this Christian view of suffering provides a stark contrast to the pagan idea of religion:

We are easily led astray by a pagan idea of religion. This deludes us into thinking of ourselves as wise and holy men who know the answer to the world’s sorrow—or who at least have to pretend to know them—and can therefore hand out advice and strength to all in need. In truth our role is a much humbler one. It is to be priests of the priestly people, following the example of our great High Priest who, though he was Son, yet learned obedience by what he suffered. And this is in order that our people in their turn may be priests to their neighbours, so that the whole world may be brought at last within the grace and power of the eternal High Priesthood of Jesus.⁷

I have learned that we are not called to have all the answers as followers of Christ. The value of our covenant community can be found in our rootedness in Christ regardless of our circumstance. This rootedness becomes the basis for experiencing *koinonia*, or

⁷ Newbigin, *Good Shepherd*, 45.

fellowship, in our common faith in Christ. I have begun approaching people in need with my eyes wide open, in preparation for when conflict and crisis comes our way.

These moments provide an opportunity to present the truth of the gospel and the peace and reconciliation that we have in Christ. The covenant community should be a place where we seek to make peace with God and with one another:

And yet—there is a beatitude for the peacemakers! Perhaps we should be ready to accept this part of our work more fully and frankly, to see how it can be made a vital part of our ministry, to find in it ways by which we can build up the people entrusted to our care to the fullness of the stature of Christ.

But peace is not our sole objective. The very next beatitude is for those who are persecuted for ‘righteousness’ sake—which opens up a picture which is not at all peaceful. When a pastor tells me that everything in his parish is going along smoothly, I wonder whether the devil is having an easy time.⁸

Peace, as Newbigin states, is not our only objective. We also desire righteousness and transformation. When we are living in rooted covenant community, our idols can be revealed in times of conflict. Our new identity that we find in Christ is where we encounter the place where righteousness and peace come together:

Where is the place where righteousness and peace will kiss each other? Where can we find the righteousness which does not become self-righteousness, and the peace which does not become appeasement? That place is the cross of Jesus Christ. There alone I find a righteousness which is God’s righteousness and not my righteousness. There alone I find peace, which is not appeasement of evil, but God’s peace in the midst of the conflict with evil.⁹

Newbigin shows that the church can provide a unique opportunity to embrace disruption for the sake of righteous transformation. In our church context, we encounter the picture of righteousness and peace each week as we take Holy Communion. The table represents Christ’s peace and righteousness that becomes *our* peace and righteousness. We come to this place with humility, acknowledging our dependence on

⁸ Newbigin, *Good Shepherd*, 46-47.

⁹ Newbigin, *Good Shepherd*, 47.

Christ. We become reconciled to God and therefore are called to extend that reconciliation to others.

There are times where communion itself can become a place of disruption in the covenant community. Suspension from the communion ought to be a tool—in extreme cases—that the church community uses to bring about repentance and change. The Apostle Paul offers this warning in his letter to the church in Corinth:

Everyone ought to examine themselves before they eat of the bread and drink from the cup. For those who eat and drink without discerning the body of Christ eat and drink judgment on themselves. (1 Corinthians 11:28-29)

Paul is warning the church about the hypocrisy of celebrating communion while practicing blatant disunity. The Corinthian church had allowed a hierarchy at the Lord's supper where "one goes hungry while another gets drunk" (1 Cor 11:21). The table, therefore, must be a place of regular and serious self-examination. This provides a moment of reflection so that we correctly align our faith with the way we are living our lives. Otherwise, there are consequences to consider. It is important that we treat St. Paul's warning of "drinking judgment" with seriousness. Newbigin has great insight into this:

It is in the body of Christ and in the blood of Christ that we are reconciled. The reference of this to our meeting together at the Lord's Table cannot be missed. When we come together to break the bread and share the cup by which we are made participants in his broken body and his shed blood, we are proclaiming the Cross as the one source of our unity. To come together and do this, while cherishing hatred against one another in our hearts, is the most horrible blasphemy.¹⁰

For the church communities that practice communion on a regular basis, suspension from the table can be a visible tool that might provide an opportunity for transformation. This tool ought to be used sparingly and with great discretion, but still

¹⁰ Newbigin, *Good Shepherd*, 48-49.

used nonetheless. In my experience, however, this tool will fail if it is not used in the context of a rooted covenant community where membership, commitment, service, and community are the central heartbeat of the church. Newbigin highlights the way Holy Communion can be a powerful means of spiritual transformation, if communion participants encounter the love of the risen LORD in this space:

If we took the service of Holy Communion more seriously than we do, perhaps our ministry of peace-making could be the means whereby men and women are really brought into the presence of the crucified Lord, in whom alone righteousness and peace have kissed each other.¹¹

The church can use important elements of our covenant community for the benefit of its members. When participation in these elements, like communion, is seen as essential to the faith, one is more likely to take confrontation of sin seriously. There is always a cost-benefit analysis before repentance and transformation can occur. If losing the affair, the idol, or the false identity is seen as more painful than losing the covenant community, there may be no incentive to repent. The sin will then continue unchecked.

Newbigin offers some important guidelines for church discipline that are worth noting:

The object of all Church discipline is that the person concerned may be saved, may be forgiven, healed and restored to the Church's fellowship. Never for a moment must that be forgotten. Therefore, while we have sometimes the painful duty of publicly excluding people from the Church's fellowship, it must always be our prayer and our endeavour to bring them to the point when they can be publicly restored and welcomed back to the family.¹²

I have learned that church discipline varies depending on the church community's view of church membership and the Lord's Supper. If one is to be temporarily suspended from the church community because of unrepentant sin, then the boundaries of that community must be clear. Casting a member outside of those

¹¹ Newbigin, *Good Shepherd*, 48-49.

¹² Newbigin, *Good Shepherd*, 52-53.

boundaries can then become a visible sign of disruption. For churches that don't have clear membership requirements and commitments, or churches that don't regularly celebrate the Lord's Supper, this can be difficult. Often this is where the individualism in our current Westchester County cultural context is antithetical to the rootedness in covenant community that is an important foundation for spiritual transformation.

John S. Hammer addresses this in his book *Those Who Must Give an Account*. He discusses the problem of individualism and consumerism in the church:

The values associated with individualism are antithetical to the type of strong commitment to a group inherent in meaningful church membership and genuine, redemptive church discipline and are contrary to the much more communal or collectivist mind-set of the culture in which the church was born.

In addition to individualism, the church in North America faces the challenge of consumerism, in which individuals "view religion as a commodity that we consume, rather than one in which we invest ourselves." In a consumer society, consumers are more committed to getting their needs met than they are to a community of people. "If their needs go unmet, they are quick to switch to another church, just as they would doctors, grocery stores or airlines to find better service." To consumers, church membership involves little loyalty, and church discipline would have little impact, as those who exercise discipline mean little to those receiving discipline.¹³

Individualism and consumerism create free-flowing boundaries that are hard to distinguish. With the fragmentation of denominations, church plants, and disconnected churches, Christians can easily start attending a church, create havoc, and then leave when they face challenges or criticism. As a result, Christians will often avoid the disruption needed for spiritual transformation and continue sinning without reconciliation or repentance.

In the case of trying to help Paul, the church member mentioned in Chapter 1, I found it difficult to confront the sin in our community. He responded with defensiveness, denial, and eventually by moving on to another congregation. Because

¹³ John S. Hammer, *Those Who Must Give an Account, A Study of Church Membership and Church Discipline*, (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2012), 7-8.

this other congregation didn't have clear membership requirements, Paul was able to participate in their church community and continue his destructive habits. Even when we addressed this with the other church's pastor, there was little to no recourse because of their church structures. Rarely did this other church celebrate communion, and there was no formal church membership process. The church did not have any disciplinary tools to utilize because there was no formal covenant between members and the church. This eventually became one of the contributing factors to why Paul's problems were not properly addressed. Paul needed a disruption of his covenant community to provide a "wake-up call" towards repentance.

John Hammer expresses the importance of prioritizing this importance in the a formal church membership structure:

Churches thus mark themselves in a variety of ways. Having a church membership roll is an obvious one... The missional-incarnational church, though, is a centered set. This means that rather than drawing a border to determine who belongs and who doesn't, a centered set is defined by its core values, and people are not seen as in or out, but as closer or further from the center. In that sense everyone is in and no one is out.¹⁴

Having formal membership requirements, commitments, and covenants can help a church community confront individuals when they have unrepentant sin. One cannot be as easily put outside of the church community, as Jesus addresses in Matthew 18:15-18, if there is no boundary around who is in that community in the first place. This is why our desire to be inclusive cannot negate our ability to maintain clear guidelines for church membership and discipline:

While it must be noted that this understanding of centered-set thinking is not found in all who use the terminology and is certainly not true of all elements of the emerging church, the strong desire to be inclusive can weaken the type of

¹⁴ Hammer, *Those Who Must Give an Account*, 8-9. They are quoting from Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, *The Shaping of things to Come* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2003), 47.

“robust boundaries” necessary for integrity in membership and courage in church discipline.¹⁵

That being said, our community in Westchester County is no longer a place where exclusion from the church community has significant ramifications. The fear of being excommunicated from church, even a century ago, had many more social and economic implications. This fear was even a greater threat in the fifth century when Christianity became intertwined with the power of the Empire:

In the fifth century, the church was no longer on the margins of society but at the centre. Not long ago it had been dangerous to join this illegal organization, but now not belonging was disadvantageous. Previously pagans had sporadically persecuted Christians, but now Christians were persecuting pagans and, more frequently, those regarded as heretics within their own ranks (though theologians insisted the term ‘persecution’ was inappropriate!). Once, being a Christian and joining the army had seemed incompatible, but now a Christian army was being assembled to defend an Empire that was becoming Christian; soon, *only* Christians would be allowed to enlist. These remarkable changes requiring theological dexterity to explain how the church now at the centre was in continuity with the church on the margins of the first three centuries.¹⁶

As the church in North America continues to move outside of the “center” of society, the importance of formal church membership has diminished in many ways. The church no longer holds the keys to power where our righteous living is motivated by social and economic fear. What the church *does* have, however, is the power of rootedness in covenant community. The deeper the roots, the more significant the threat of excommunication from that community. This becomes a powerful motivation for individuals to regularly examine their own hearts and their own sin. We do so not just to obey the commands of God, but also for the health and the benefit of our beloved church community.

¹⁵ Hammer, *Those Who Must Give an Account*, 9.

¹⁶ Stuart Murray, *Post-Christendom: Church and Mission in a Strange New World* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2004), 48.

II. Embracing Crisis and Disruption in Ministry

Sam Van Eman's practice of *Disruptive Discipleship* uses disruption as a way to help bring those who feel "stuck" in their journeys towards spiritual growth and renewal. His work uses wilderness experiences and complete cultural, physical, and social disruption to open the eyes of the blind to the sins and idols that they were previously unable to see. These disruptions can provide opportunities for change:

If this book is broadly about going somewhere when we feel stuck, it's more specifically about growing up when we've been acting like children. How might this happen outside of persistent prayer or life's unwelcomed challenges that *force* growth upon us? One way is by adding intentional, out-of-the-ordinary disruptions to our daily routine. Disrupting *every* day's routine would lead to chaos, but an occasional shift in the schedule can offer a world of good.¹⁷

Van Eman sees how Jesus uses these shifts as a means of transformation for his people. The idea of "designed experiences" can be a way for us to shake up our routines and bring us into a place of spiritual renewal:

We believe Jesus can use any shift to transform his people. So designed experiences include signing up for a marathon, donating all but a week's worth of clothing (and committing not to replace what you give away), agreeing to mentor a young professional or newly married couple, or unplugging a favorite streaming service. The list is endless, really, as long as it causes a bit of anxiety in anticipation of being shooed from the nest, we see results.¹⁸

This becomes the platform for breaking routines, for disrupting habits, and for bringing people into a place of awakening transformation. Van Eman carefully tailors the experience to make sure that the motive is correct, that the method is correct, and that the goal is properly aligned with increasing faith, hope, and love:

Each evaluation clarified my understanding of what can happen when we break routine for the right reasons and in the right ways: we grow in faith, hope, and love.¹⁹

¹⁷ Sam Van Eman, *Disruptive Discipleship: The Power of Breaking Routine to Kickstart Your Faith* (Downers Grove: IVP Books, 2017), 5.

¹⁸ Van Eman, *Disruptive Discipleship*, 5.

¹⁹ Van Eman, *Disruptive Discipleship*, 6.

The ultimate goal is maturity, patience, and overall health:

Mature people make good decisions about their physical lives. They also make good decisions about mental health, relationships, and spirituality. They stay calm; they know how to delay pleasure; they foster trust in their communities. Simply put, they lead healthier, fuller, more peaceful lives. And they do it because they have greater amounts of faith, hope, and love.²⁰

Then, he shows how our “stuck” faith often manifests because we are searching for the place where we can find a cross to pick up—a place where discipleship will cost us something:

In addition to addressing those who feel stuck in their faith and want to get unstuck, I’ll speak to those who wonder how to take Jesus more seriously. If this is you, Luke 9:23 probably poses a problem, because you want to take up your cross, but there’s no obvious cross to take up. You’re *already* living, giving, and loving faithfully. There is no real *cost* to your discipleship right now. You aren’t stuck, per se—just feeling underutilized.²¹

Disruption is not just a theme throughout scripture, but a major way that Jesus challenged the faith of everyone around him:

Throughout the Gospels, [Jesus] behaved and spoke in a way that disrupted his listener’s routine. *Leave your nets, heal the sick, come down immediately, go make disciples. Who do you say I am? Whose portrait is this? YOU give them something to eat.* Over and over, he pushed people into the open, where their blindness could be exposed.²²

Van Eman creates experiences that are focused on the individual, not the individual within a rooted covenant community. This can be effective, however, for offering new personal reflection and perspective that initiates personal transformation:

The alternative is to design an experience—an out-of-the-ordinary activity that gets us unstuck and promotes lasting growth. Mark Schandrette writes, “Rock-bottom, near-death and Damascus-road experiences are gifts, some of the many ways that God initiates transformation in our lives. But we’ve also been given the ability to imagine, plan and set direction, choose our objectives, and order our activities according to the vision, values, and goals.”²³

²⁰ Van Eman, *Disruptive Discipleship*, 7.

²¹ Van Eman, *Disruptive Discipleship*, 9.

²² Van Eman, *Disruptive Discipleship*, 19.

²³ Van Eman, *Disruptive Discipleship*, 30. Mark Scandrette, *Practicing the Ways of Jesus: Life Together in the Kingdom of Love* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2011), 59.

Our growth is dependent upon a willingness to enter into the unknown. This is the premise for *Disruptive Discipleship* and one that has been effective in Van Eman's ministry:

We develop faith—a strong belief or trust in God—when we move as Henri Nouwen wrote, “from false certainties to true uncertainties, from an easy support system to a risky surrender.” In other words, we grow by entering places where we've never been.”²⁴

Again, from the individual spiritual growth perspective, we can move from false certainty to true uncertainty as a catalyst for transformation. We have to remind ourselves of the fundamental truths of our faith in order to step forward into the disruptive unknown:

Moving from false certainty to true uncertainty means paying attention to the balance between comfort and chaos, between the absence and abundance of risk. It calls for a grounded approach that involves (1) knowing ourselves, (2) recognizing God at work, (3) being prepared for a dangerous period following the signup, called the middle ground.²⁵

Van Eman presents his structure of disruptive discipleship as a valuable tool that Christians of every age and stage of spiritual maturity can use to enter into spaces of the unknown—into places of darkness, so that we can see the light of Christ in new, more illuminating, and more profound ways:

So whether you are forty or eighteen, take an inventory of your fantasies in order to develop a realistic faith. Address your fear of heights to help you grow in relying on Jesus. If you have more years under your belt, take a sabbatical and learn how the office can manage without you. Serve the poor to discover your own poverty or trust your kids to try something without holding their hands. Turn out the light and realize how lost in the dark you are without it.²⁶

²⁴ Van Eman, *Disruptive Discipleship*, 70. Henri J.M. Nouwen, *Reaching Out: The Three Movement of the Spiritual Life* (New York: Image, 1975), 126.

²⁵ Van Eman, *Disruptive Discipleship*, 76.

²⁶ Van Eman, *Disruptive Discipleship*, 77.

Heeding the call from St. Ignatius of Loyola, can we see disruption as a divine intervention into our stuck and callous routine? Can we proclaim, on the basis of our security in Christ, that our circumstance is always an opportunity to see the light of Christ brighter? We ought to follow Christ rather than our brain's natural wiring, which is predisposed to resist the unknown and places of disruption:

I'm not allowed to follow my brain's lead. Instead, maturity looks more like the call of St. Ignatius of Loyola, when he stated daringly, "Thus, as far as we are concerned, we should not want health more than illness, wealth more than poverty, fame more than disgrace, a long life more than a short one, and similarly for all the rest, but we should desire and choose only what helps us more towards the end for which we were created."²⁷

The spaces of illness, poverty, disgrace, and death can often be the places where we see that God is at work in unexpected ways. These disruptions can be God's means for bringing about transformation and spiritual growth. They can become opportunities to realign the core of our hearts and our desires to a deeper understanding of our identity in Christ.

III. Being and Becoming Like Christ

In Peter Holmes' book *Becoming More Human*, he explores the interface of spirituality, discipleship, and the therapeutic faith community. He records his effort to use the power of being rooted in covenant community to both encourage members of his congregation to embrace their identity in Christ through discipleship and to propel them towards transformation. It was not enough to just receive "converts" who accepted Christ. He also wanted to know how to move them towards spiritual growth, personal transformation, and more fully reflecting the person of Jesus Christ. He shares his observations about helping pastors who are addressing this problem:

²⁷ Van Eman, *Disruptive Discipleship*, 113.

During the early 1970's, while seeking to help people in a lay pastoral capacity, I began noticing that many emotionally and mentally ill people often exhibit a reluctance to change, be they Christian or otherwise, even where positive personal change would probably help defeat the sickness in their lives. Often it is only when they are desperate that they will show this willingness. But I also began to realize this applied to most people, not just the sick. The majority of us seem reluctant to change, once we have decided on a matter or a lifestyle, regardless of whether it is good for us. Because of this I began to feel a growing personal despair, not unlike Keith Phillips, who at 25 wanted to quit the Church, because all he could achieve was converts. The ongoing discipleship change necessary for Christlikeness was elusive.²⁸

During Holmes' first 10 years as a Christian, he began to ask these deep questions about our desire and willingness to change:

So, towards my first ten years as a Christian, I began to admit I was unable to reconcile this human reluctance to change with Christ calling His followers to discipleship, transformation, personal maturity, and the learning of a life worth living.²⁹

The question he is asking is this: What good is a church community that is in mission if it is not a place for growth and spiritual change? There is something tragically wrong if the church aligns itself with modern individualism and consumerism and cannot provide a rooted covenant community in a broken and fragmented world. The environment for spiritual growth and transformation is inextricably intertwined with clear boundaries for a covenant community. Holmes addresses our need for spiritual change in his study of sociology and how the church is losing its relevance to contemporary society:

In the field of sociology one can too easily slip into social comment about spirituality, rather than commenting on the place of spirituality in sociology. Numerous social phenomena have contributed to the search for the spiritual, for example, the heartless sterility of technology, the breakdown of larger frames of meaning in people's lives, the loss of long-held values, especially absolutes, and the creating of rootless cultures. The modern failure of materialism and the rise of secularism also play their part.³⁰

²⁸ Peter R. Holmes, *Becoming More Human: Exploring the Interface of Spirituality, Discipleship, and Therapeutic Faith Community* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster Press, 2005), 2.

²⁹ Holmes, *Becoming More Human*, 2.

³⁰ Holmes, *Becoming More Human*, 25-26.

In short, our modern problem is our fragmented community that has suffered from individualism and consumerism. As isolated individuals, we are often unable to experience the disruption needed to reveal our sin and idolatry. As we begin to know and understand more about psychology, sociology, and spirituality, we begin to see our boundaries break down. Peter Holmes dives into this interconnected study and uses insight from modern philosopher and writer Ken Wilber, who seeks to develop a theory about how different academic areas of study are interconnected. Based on this, from a sociological perspective, we can see how our connection with one another is integrated with our “being and becoming”: our desire to understand who we are (being) and who we desire to be (becoming). Without a community to be rooted in, we become aimless individuals. Our isolation keeps us defensive, unaware of our blind spots, and not able to live in true fellowship with others:

One of the biggest factors may be the breakdown of community. Society has been fragmenting socially and relationally for several hundred years or more. This may be why Wilber and others are proposing the development of an integrated spirituality, as a part of a postmodern consciousness. Here one can detect a ‘communal urge’, seen by some as intrinsic to human nature.³¹

This intrinsic “communal urge” is spiritual at its core and is required for our desire to become who we are meant to be. The longing for sanctification is a universal human condition. For us to seek spirituality and to grow and transform within a given framework, there must be profound meaning, value, transcendence, connection, and “becoming.” From the Christian perspective, this means that our justification in Christ (being) is not separable from our desire for sanctification (becoming). Thus, for us to want to have personal transformation, it is helpful to see how growing in our Christian faith is also relevant our universal sociological framework.

³¹ Holmes, *Becoming More Human*, 26.

Holmes uses a secular and sociological view of spirituality and spiritual transformation to position them within a Christian context that is social, communal, and reflects the theological framework of the Godhead: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This secular view of community used by Holmes is also echoed by Amitai Etzioni's work *The Spirit of Community: Rights, Responsibilities, and the Communitarian Agenda*. Etzioni connects the supracommunity needs with the subgroup needs and boundaries in our society. He asks what elements are needed to create a community of shared ideals that interact with our individual rights:

The supracommunity can be well sustained and readily accommodate subgroup differences—as long as these do not threaten a limited set of core values and shared bonds. There can be debate about where exactly the boundaries lie between shared elements and those of subgroupings. Some, for instance, point to Switzerland to suggest that a shared language is not essential. By a commitment to core American ideals—democratic political institutions, the legal concepts of the Constitution and its Bill of Rights, and the notion of social and religious tolerance—are the linchpins that maintain the American society, protect minority members, and undergird individual rights.³²

Thus, our core community ideals are intrinsic to the human reality. Again, Holmes demonstrates the uniqueness of how Christianity draws those desires of community into not just a social and civil structure, but also into a dynamic relationship with God. We establish a communal relationship to God when we see God not simply as an immutable source of wisdom behind the universe, but as a God who knows and responds to us:

What I am suggesting, instead, is that the being of the visible Church should resonate with the *dynamic* of the relations between the three persons, who together constitute Deity, that the sociality of the Trinity should in some way be able to suggest or allow the eternal God—the eternally inter-animating energies of the three—to provide the basis of personal dynamics of human / divine relationship. This would allow the Trinity to be more 'involved' in both Church and contemporary society.³³

³² Amitai Etzioni, *The Spirit of Community: Rights, Responsibilities, and the Communitarian Agenda* (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1993), 160.

³³ Holmes, *Becoming More Human*, 38-39.

This personal relationship to the Godhead then becomes the impetus for spiritual transformation. Sanctification is not simply something that happens after we die. The power of God to create righteousness and holiness is available to us *now* by the power of the Holy Spirit:

Without a pneumatic theology of a *personable* Spirit, the Church will struggle to create a taste *now* of this life to come, suggesting instead that after experience of Christ-centered authentic spirituality is not available until after death. The Church has often blamed sin and the Fall, and our running from God, for this breakdown in relations, rather than its own theology.

This connects our need for rootedness in covenant community to our participation in the holiness of God in Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. As Saint Peter writes in 2 Peter 1:3-4 [NRSV]:

His divine power has given us everything needed for life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Thus, he has given us, through these things, his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may escape from the corruption that is in the world because of lust and may become participants of the divine nature.

Without this proper framework of participation in the “divine nature” of the Godhead, and the promise that “His divine power has given us everything needed for life and godliness,” salvation can lose its power to transform us in the present. Salvation can become an unreachable, abstract idea that is only offered to us in the afterlife. As Holmes says, we can then lose the urgency to take the difficult journey towards our transformation and sanctification:

Salvation is seen as an experience of a moment of enlightened belief and declared allegiance, not a lifetime journey receiving more wholeness through a relational Trinity that moulds us into Christ. Views of the Trinity colour our expectations of spirituality, transformative change and Christlikeness.³⁴

³⁴ Holmes, *Becoming More Human*, 41.

This leads Holmes into how the church cannot be seen merely as an institution. It must also be viewed as a community that reflects the relationality of the Trinity:

We have already noted that the relationality is important in contemporary spirituality. However, in looking at Augustine of Hippo we are near the beginning of the era when the Church was being conceived as an Institution, mediating grace to the individual, rather than as a community formed on the analogy of the Trinity's *interpersonal* relationships.³⁵

This shows us the beauty of how personal transformation and overcoming sin are related to participation in the divine nature. The relations of the Trinity are embedded in the DNA of all of humanity, which is made in the image of that wonderful sociological community of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Our relationships and existence are directly connected to this human condition. This was embraced by the Cappadocian fathers, who fought for the theological importance of our creed that God is a society of three beings:

When this distinction of being and person is applied to the Trinity, each person is only what they are by virtue of what all three give to and receive from each other. Yet through these mutually constitutive relations, each remains distinctive and particular. Such a Trinitarian theology allows us to develop an ontology of the personal, both for the Trinity and for human nature, with all of its relations. The Cappadocians saw that the way we view God is the way we view everything else, including creation, human nature and redemption. God is a society of three beings, in *perichoretic* relationship.³⁶

Holmes shows that his church sought to include both *being* and *becoming* in its description of ultimate reality. Merging a traditional theology of *being* with a contemporary theology of *becoming* appears more achievable with the help of some Hebrew ideas:

Today the traditional view of sin, 'missing the mark', is 'the lack of conformity to the moral law of God, either in act, disposition, or state'. This definition suggests it is possible to see all actions as either sinful or righteous. But borrowing from Hebrew thought, sin could be seen, by deduction, as our personal stubborn unwillingness to change (Ps 55:19b), to refuse to authentically seek to mirror Him

³⁵ Holmes, *Becoming More Human*, 41.

³⁶ Holmes, *Becoming More Human*, 50.

and His will for us, by conforming both to His moral character and a life of love. In responding to Greek constructs, it is humanity's desire to continue to *be*, to refuse to change, rather than to *become*, e.g., becoming like Christ, who said Himself that we must all change to be like him (Matt 5:1ff).³⁷

If we begin to see sin as the “unwillingness to change,” rather than adhering to a theological ideal, then we can be more willing to enter into places of disruption so that we can experience freedom from sin. As Holmes then moves towards the hope of spiritual transformation in the Christian community, we can see that God is at work through disruption. When we are faced with challenging situations, our eyes are opened to the deceptive habits and idols that are preventing us from participating in the divine nature and moving towards holiness. God's voice becomes clearer as we turn aside and pay attention to life's disruptive moments:

This happens as their hope grows and they begin either to hear the voice of the Lord, or their inner voice speaking to them, about the damage and its baggage in their lives. The shift will begin to happen as they admit they ‘do not want to live this way anymore’ or ‘I have to change; I cannot stay this way’. Implicit in this process is the person's acceptance of their need to deal with their own historical baggage.³⁸

In my research, I also discovered an interesting perspective on “change” that Jung Young Lee discusses in his book *Theology of Change*. In this book, Lee seeks to offer a Christian theological perspective from an Eastern point of view—a view that hasn't been as influenced by the immoveable, immutable *Logos* that permeates Greek Philosophy's influence on the West. This helped me understand how disruption and transformation fit into our understanding of God. As we become participants in the divine nature, is this a static nature or a dynamic nature that is in a process of transformation with us? Or is it more an immovable holy “mark” that we desire to move towards through our transformation and sanctification?

³⁷ Holmes, *Becoming More Human*, 60-61.

³⁸ Holmes, *Becoming More Human*, 133.

Lee outlines a fundamental difference between Eastern and Western worldviews. He explains that Eastern philosophers see the world through the lens of *I-ching*, which is regular and consistent, but also in motion. He writes:

...the word *I*, or “change,” is composed of the sun and moon. The relation of sun and moon symbolizes never-ending change. According to the *I-ching* the sun changes night to day and the moon changes day to night. By the interchanging of days and nights, the four seasons are formed, and by the changing of the seasons all things change. When the sun reaches its zenith, it begins to decline. When the moon is full, it wanes again. When night deepens, the day dawns. Living things are born and grow, decay and die. From solar systems to electrons, everything is in motion; everything changes. The world is transitory.³⁹

This *yin* and *yang* represents a cyclical view of time, whereas the Western view tends to perceive the universe in a linear fashion. This is not just in sociology, theology, and philosophy, but also in geometry and science:

Western science, which was characteristically exclusive and absolute, derived from Aristotelian logic and Euclidean geometry, and even Newtonian physics did not create a radical change in western patterns of thought. Newton, for example, conceived of time and space as absolute, a priori, and exclusive categories. But Einstein’s theory of relativity and Planck’s quantum theory have radically altered the scientific, if not the popular worldview. According to the theory of relativity the universe is constantly in the process of becoming. Time and space are not independent of each other, but dependent and exclusive. Everything is in the process of becoming; nothing is stationary.⁴⁰

And where:

Aristotelian “either-or” logic presupposes an absolutely dualistic worldview, which is contradicted by the idea of mutual dependency.⁴¹

Lee has great insight into how this worldview can affect how we view ourselves as image-bearers of a Trinitarian Godhead that is *both* being and becoming:

The God who transcends the Aristotelian “either-or” is not only the “becoming” God but also the “being” God. He is *both* the process *and* state, *both* organic and inorganic, but creative and destructive, and both generation and degeneration.⁴²

³⁹ Jung Young Lee, *The Theology of Change: A Christian Concept of God in an Eastern Perspective* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1979), 3.

⁴⁰ Lee, *Theology of Change*, 16.

⁴¹ Lee, *Theology of Change*, 16.

⁴² Lee, *Theology of Change*, 18.

Lee seeks to show how *being* and *becoming* do not affect our understanding of God as steadfast, consistent, and reliable. He seeks to reject the path that might lead to an understanding of God as one who both affects and is affected by temporal processes, as Whitehead and Hartstone might suggest in process theology. Instead, he wishes to emphasize how changelessness is not required for trustworthiness and steadfastness:

If God does not have the characteristic of changelessness, his people cannot trust in him. But we must understand that God's changelessness is not the same as stasis. His changelessness refers to the consistency and steadfastness of his will. In other words, the character of changelessness is a part of the changing reality of God: Changelessness is possible because of change. God is changeless because he is primarily change itself.⁴³

This is where Lee contributes to my study in a profound way. In understanding how we are to change and move towards holiness, we must be willing to embrace change—or disruption—as a normal part of the process of moving towards holiness. We don't see God as an entity in *stasis*, who is not working directly through the process of disruption in our lives. Rather, we serve a God who regularly utilizes disruption to loosen the grip of our idols and blind spots. In other words, disruption is what God uses to bring about cleanliness and holiness:

To be good means to be in accord with the way of change, which is equivalent to saying that justification (or righteousness) is to be in accord with the divine. To be evil means to be in disharmony with the process of change.⁴⁴

Eberhard Jungel continues to explore this theme in his book *The Doctrine of the Trinity: God's Being is in Becoming*. He dives deep into the nature of God as one who has a fundamental relational structure and draws us into that relationship. Drawing on Barth, he explains that God himself is not proceeding towards his creation as one who is

⁴³ Lee, *Theology of Change*, 43.

⁴⁴ Lee, *Theology of Change*, 63.

influenced by that creation. Instead, God moves towards creation as a fundamental response to his being:

God preceded the far country into which he went, in that he decided to go there. The precedence of God in his primal decision shows that God's being not only 'proceeds' on the way into the far country, but that God's being is *in motion* from eternity. God's being is moved being: 'Being in the act of his revelation.' At the same time, however, God's primal decision teaches us to understand God's *being concretely*. God's primal decision to take the way into the far country is certainly not a decision forced upon him from the far country, no decision which is *strange* to him, but his own *free* decision.⁴⁵

The Trinity then becomes God's mode of differentiation within himself. The Trinity also creates movement of love towards the other. That love then overflows into the act of creation and his redeeming work within that creation. This perichoresis, or rotation, of the three modes of the Godhead gives us an understanding of how God's being is in becoming:

The relational structuring in God's being is the expression of varying 'original-relations' and 'issues' of God's being. God's being as the being of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is thus a *being in becoming*. The doctrine of *perichoresis* and appropriation within the three modes of God's being differentiated from each other and united as 'threehood' defined this knowledge: God's being is in becoming. And God is already 'ours in advance' in that his being is a being in becoming from eternity. Already in advance—therefore Barth speaks of the *being* of God: 'God is not subsumed in the relation and attitude of himself to the world and us as actualized in his revelation', but God is fully subsumed in his relation and attitude to himself as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. God is, however, already in this his being no other than he who is in his revelation. He is thus in this his being already *ours* in advance, and therefore the statement is true: God's being is *in becoming*.⁴⁶

In short, God is active.⁴⁷ God is interacting with us and in motion with us. This becomes our mode of transformation, and it is not linear. When we experience disruption, it is not a departure from our linear path, but an invitation for us to surrender to God and his love in deeper ways:

⁴⁵ Jungel, *The Doctrine of the Trinity: God's Being is in Becoming* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 3.

⁴⁶ Jungel, *Doctrine of the Trinity*, 63-64.

⁴⁷ Jungel, *Doctrine of the Trinity*, 64.

This idea that our transformation, or “sanctification” is a one direction linear trajectory is false, if we are made in the image of God whose being is in becoming. We are to transform to the image of God as a motion of an active subject. We are to be active in surrender and direction to God as love and as active love.

This brings us once again back to the profound truth of the Incarnation. God’s being entered into the temporal reality of creation as a result of God’s atemporal being:

God’s being-in-act becomes manifest in the temporal history of Jesus Christ. The temporal history of Jesus Christ is the temporal fulfilment of God’s eternal resolve. The temporal fulfilment of God’s eternal resolve is the existence of God as man in Jesus Christ. God’s existence as man is not only God’s existence as creature, but at the same time God’s surrender of himself to the opposition to God which characterizes human existence. The consequence of this self-surrender of God is God’s *suffering* of his opposition which is directed against human existence in opposition to God—a suffering even to *death* on the Cross.⁴⁸

Our obedience is an aspect of our becoming fully human and being unified with the nature of a God who suffers. God is able to suffer and die as a man, and therefore we become united with that suffering in faith:

The oneness of being in which God ‘in himself is both One who is obeyed and Another who obeys’ differentiates God’s ‘being-in-act’ from a being to be understood as ‘a divine death’. Just because obedience from eternity is not strange to the being of God and just because this being is everything else but ‘a divine death’, God is *able* to suffer and die as man. This intra-trinitarian *ability* of God must not, however, be thought of as a transcendental condition for the possibility of the passion of God in Jesus Christ. But God’s ability signifies that God is *Lord*.⁴⁹

Our theological understanding, therefore, of the surrender that Jesus Christ faced in his life, death, and resurrection, becomes the pattern that we follow as Christians. We do not abandon those who are suffering—who are experiencing disruption. We do the opposite. We embrace disruption, crisis, and suffering as an act of union with Christ:

In his self-surrender God does not abandon himself. But he surrenders himself because he will not abandon man.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Jungel, *Doctrine of the Trinity*, 83.

⁴⁹ Jungel, *Doctrine of the Trinity*, 86.

⁵⁰ Jungel, *Doctrine of the Trinity*, 87.

The themes of rootedness in covenant community, embracing crisis and disruption, and being and becoming like Christ, provided the foundation for my own theological reflection. In the next chapter, I will look at passages from scripture and connect them to my experience in ministry. This theological reflection formed the foundation where God would eventually provide a significant transformation for me personally as I sought to understand how God can use disruption as a means of significant spiritual transformation.

Chapter 3. The Theological Framework for Embracing Disruption

Disruption is a central theme of God's work in a fallen world. Humanity was made to live and thrive in the light and warmth of God's presence and love. Yet, the world rejected that light and love to choose darkness, sin, and death. The story of scripture follows God's relentless pursuit of reconciliation, redemption, and transformation within his creation. Through God's work in the world, we are brought back into that light, warmth, and love. When God disrupts our lives to get our attention, we are transformed into the creation we were made to be. These disruptions allow the reality and truth of God's nature to break through our false perceptions. Disruption can reveal what is temporal and fleeting and point us towards a God who is steadfast, loving, and dependable.

These are the three themes that were highlighted in Chapter 2: 1) rootedness in covenant community, 2) embracing crisis and disruption, and 3) being and becoming like Christ. These themes are the foundation upon which a theology of disruption can be formed. They provide the framework of this project and the focus of the study. Without a redeemed community of sinners who have been united under the mercy and grace of God, it can be difficult to provide a positive context for disruption. In a similar way, covenant community can be the place where we properly interpret God's work in the midst of disruption. This can help us experience a spiritual transformation, through the power of the Holy Spirit, to propel us into being and becoming like Christ. We accept his love, accept the embrace of his unmerited grace, and move forward in confidence that God is at work in our lives—no matter the circumstance.

So why are we Christians still disappointed when disruption happens in our lives? Why do we wonder why God allows disruptive events like illness or joblessness to affect us, when it seems to be God’s go-to method for getting our attention? How can we equip our church communities to move *towards* these events with excitement to see where God is at work? I will first reflect on this theologically from a scriptural perspective. I will then reflect on my own experience that led me to create a nine-month curriculum to help equip church communities to better embrace disruption as a means of spiritual transformation.

Theology of Disruption in Scripture

Disruptive acts of God permeate the pages of scripture. It is beyond the scope of this project to exhaustively explore all of them. Instead, I will focus on a few particular stories that show how God uses disruption to bring about undeniable spiritual transformation in the lives of God’s people. We can see this clearly in the stories of Joseph, Moses, Daniel, Paul, and most importantly the incarnation of Jesus Christ.

Joseph—Pride to Humility

The story of Joseph shows that God can work through the most hopeless circumstances to bring about spiritual transformation. Joseph is “most loved” by his father, Israel, and most loathed by his brothers. While there isn’t any commentary in the book of Genesis about any intentional wrongdoing by Joseph, it does lead one to believe that Joseph thought pretty highly of himself. I am sure if I was in his shoes (or long and colorful robe), and my father treated me better than any of my brothers, I would have been tempted to feel arrogance, pride, and superiority as well.

³Now Israel loved Joseph more than any other of his children, because he was the son of his old age; and he had made him a long robe with sleeves. ⁴But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him, and could not speak peaceably to him. (Genesis 37:3-4)

This division between Joseph and his brothers is exacerbated further by Joseph's prophetic dream of his brothers "bowing down" to him. They respond with disdain: "Are you indeed to reign over us? Are you indeed to have dominion over us?" (37:8). This brings an even deeper divide of jealousy and hatred between them. The brothers then attempt to solve the problem in their own way—by plotting to have Joseph killed.

Stories like these lead us to question the family dysfunction of ancient times. No wonder the brothers were so infuriated by the way their father showed favorites! These internal conflicts could lead to an "intervention" from other friends and relatives if this took place in modern times. It would no doubt be a story for the likes of Jerry Springer to exploit. Also, an endless amount of therapy and counseling would be required to provide peace and resolution for the family's anger and resentment. But no, in biblical times, the story just gets worse. The brothers devise a horribly evil scheme that leads them further down a path of deception, lies, and betrayal.

Reuben, and later Judah, seek to intervene in the plot to kill Joseph. Reuben initially decides to teach Joseph a lesson but still restore him to his father. Judah, however, decides to eventually sell Joseph into slavery:

¹⁹They said to one another, "Here comes this dreamer. ²⁰Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits; then we shall say that a wild animal has devoured him, and we shall see what will become of his dreams." ²¹But when Reuben heard it, he delivered him out of their hands, saying, "Let us not take his life." ²²Reuben said to them, "Shed no blood; throw him into this pit here in the wilderness, but lay no hand on him"—that he might rescue him out of their hand and restore him to his father. ²³So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe, the long robe with sleeves that he wore; ²⁴and they took him and threw him into a pit. The pit was empty; there was no water in it.

²⁵Then they sat down to eat; and looking up they saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead, with their camels carrying gum, balm, and resin, on their

way to carry it down to Egypt. ²⁶Then Judah said to his brothers, “What profit is it if we kill our brother and conceal his blood? ²⁷Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, and not lay our hands on him, for he is our brother, our own flesh.” And his brothers agreed. ²⁸When some Midianite traders passed by, they drew Joseph up, lifting him out of the pit, and sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty pieces of silver. And they took Joseph to Egypt. (Genesis 37:19-28)

This shows that hatred leads to divisions among the remaining brothers. Their plot goes from bad to worse. The original idea was to eliminate the object of their Father’s affection—perhaps to gain that affection for themselves. Or, rather, they wanted to simply make Joseph pay for his perceived arrogance. Seeking to eliminate Joseph from their lives has the opposite effect: It cements the place of Joseph in the heart of his father, Israel. Joseph's brothers do not succeed in gaining Israel’s affections, and now they are faced with the guilt of what they have done.

The story of Joseph is a story of disruption. There is a disruption among the brothers, and it is of their own making. There is a disruption in the life of Israel, as he mourns the loss of his beloved son. The greatest disruption happens to Joseph himself. He is betrayed by his brothers, left in a pit for dead, then sold into slavery. All the characters in this story are placed in significant uncertainty, wondering where God is at work in this horrible circumstance. Are redemption and restoration possible? If so, it will take a lot of humility, forgiveness, and divine intervention for that to happen.

As it turns out, this is exactly what happens. Joseph ends up in the house of Potiphar (Genesis 39), then in prison (Genesis 40), and eventually in the court of Pharaoh himself. Joseph seeks to remain faithful in all these circumstances, and he somehow seems to maintain hope and trust in God. When he eventually comes back in contact with his brothers, he has a decision to make. Joseph is given the opportunity for revenge and retribution. He has the authority to make his brothers suffer and pay for all they have done. This is a serious temptation, and choosing to forgive takes a

tremendous amount of self-restraint. You can see this in his reaction to meeting his brothers again. Joseph treats them harshly at first and tests them to see if they can be trusted:

⁶Now Joseph was governor over the land; it was he who sold to all the people of the land. And Joseph's brothers came and bowed themselves before him with their faces to the ground. ⁷When Joseph saw his brothers, he recognized them, but he treated them like strangers and spoke harshly to them. "Where do you come from?" he said. They said, "From the land of Canaan, to buy food." ⁸Although Joseph had recognized his brothers, they did not recognize him. ⁹Joseph also remembered the dreams that he had dreamed about them. He said to them, "You are spies; you have come to see the nakedness of the land!" ¹⁰They said to him, "No, my lord; your servants have come to buy food. ¹¹We are all sons of one man; we are honest men; your servants have never been spies." ¹²But he said to them, "No, you have come to see the nakedness of the land!" ¹³They said, "We, your servants, are twelve brothers, the sons of a certain man in the land of Canaan; the youngest, however, is now with our father, and one is no more." (Genesis 42:6-13)

Joseph is now in a place of power over his brothers and has a decision to make: What will he do with this new power? Through a series of accusations, threats, and tests, Joseph makes his brothers sweat and shake with fear. They are now in a position of dependency and significant need. Their success in seeking food is a matter of survival. Joseph literally holds their lives in his hands.

It is a beautiful moment when Joseph finally sees his brother Benjamin. He tries to compose himself but is overcome with emotion and love for his brother. I often wonder if Joseph's love for Benjamin and his possible resentment towards the brothers who tried to have him killed cause inner turmoil for him. In this scene, Joseph shows tremendous humility and trust in the purposes of God:

²⁹Then he looked up and saw his brother Benjamin, his mother's son, and said, "Is this your youngest brother, of whom you spoke to me? God be gracious to you, my son!" ³⁰With that, Joseph hurried out, because he was overcome with affection for his brother, and he was about to weep. So he went into a private room and wept there. ³¹Then he washed his face and came out; and controlling himself he said, "Serve the meal." (Genesis 43:29-31)

Eventually, Joseph decides on forgiveness. This leads to reconciliation, restoration, and a profound transformation in everyone involved. Perhaps, in this moment of restoration, Joseph is able to see how God has worked through this horrible situation to bring about the redemption of his family. Joseph's suffering was for the literal *salvation* of his family since he provides for their basic needs in the end. Through Joseph, the family not only receives food but shelter and security as well. That movement towards understanding the purposes of God puts Joseph's troubles into perspective and allows him to offer forgiveness to his brothers:

⁴Then Joseph said to his brothers, "Come closer to me." And they came closer. He said, "I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. ⁵And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life. ⁶For the famine has been in the land these two years; and there are five more years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvest. ⁷God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. ⁸So it was not you who sent me here, but God; he has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt. (Genesis 45:4-8)

In hindsight, Joseph is able to see God's faithfulness in the midst of the disruption. This leads to a deeper understanding of the promises of God, for both Joseph and his brothers. They are all transformed through repentance, humility, and acknowledgment of the power of God.

Moses and the Burning Bush

Disruption is also a catalyst for transformation in the life and mission of Moses:

Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. There the angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. Then Moses said, "I must turn aside and look at this great sight and see why the bush is not burned up. When the LORD saw that he had turned aside to see, God called him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am." (Exodus 3:1-4)

In this story of Moses, there are multiple, competing disruptive acts. First, Pharaoh causes a disruption through his treatment of the Israelites. The oppression, enslavement, murder, and abuse that he thrusts upon them makes life unlivable in Egypt. This disruption leads to the murder of the Hebrew boys and the rescue of Moses by Shiphrah and Puah. Second, Moses causes a disruption by murdering the Egyptian who beats Moses' kinfolk. In his anger at the injustice, Moses takes the law into his own hands and carries out this murder as judge, jury, and executioner. As a result, he flees to the land of Midian to start a new life. Moses accepts his new reality as a shepherd in the desert. It is here that God carries out a third disruptive act in a natural—yet supernatural—way. Moses' embrace of this disruption catalyzes his spiritual transformation.

Moses turns aside. As I often read this story, I wonder how many times I have seen odd "disruptive moments" in my life and dismissed them as anomalies. I imagine that Moses might have done the same. Moses takes the time to notice an important nuance of this bush: It is not being consumed. Therefore, he has the presence of mind to further investigate this disruption. His curiosity will lead to an encounter with the living God; an invitation into obedience; a call into mission; and a first step on what will be a long journey of transformation for Moses and the people of God.

Turning aside to the disruption of the burning bush is just the first step into God's rescue of the Israelites. Moses is forced to confront his fear from the past, since he is a criminal on the run. Moses also enters the spotlight as a prophet, even though he doesn't think of himself as gifted in speech. "O my Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor even now that you have spoken to your servant; but I am slow of speech and slow of tongue." (Exodus 4:10). God meets Moses in this place of deep discomfort and insecurity. In these encounters, God's faithfulness and power are

revealed. It is only when Moses comes to the end of himself that he enters into the wonders and mystery of God. As Jung Lee (quoted in Chapter 2) teaches us: Where God is alive and active in the world, God draws us into his active self. He is “not only the ‘becoming’ God but also the ‘being’ God.”⁵¹ Moses transforms in profound ways by believing in a God that is at work in that world and by embracing disruptions within that framework.

Daniel and the Repentance of the Enemy King

The entire Babylonian Exile provides another example of the significance of disruption. God allows the temple to be destroyed, Judah to be subjugated to the power of the Babylonians, and many to go into the foreign city of Babylon as exiles. Because of these disruptions, many prophets are given visions of God’s purpose for the exile. Ultimately, these visions point to the coming Messiah of Israel. In addition, the disruptions provide spaces of transformation for the prophet’s enemy King, Nebuchadnezzar. Within the broader disruption of exile for the Jews, the enemy King is disrupted by an unsettling dream.

Chapter 2 of the book of Daniel highlights this dream that greatly troubles King Nebuchadnezzar. He “dreamed such dreams that his spirit was troubled, and his sleep left him” (Daniel 2:1). Despite all the power the King has, he is overwhelmed by nightmares that plague him. No one can help him with the dream, and he thus decrees that all the wise men in Babylon are to be executed (2:13).

The story of Daniel contains remarkable examples of the ways God remains faithful even in the worst of circumstances. Daniel shows himself to be a person of

⁵¹ Lee, *Theology of Change*, 18. Previously referenced in Chapter 2, page 36.

devout faith, conviction, and willingness to speak truth to power. In the story of the sleepless King, Daniel puts himself into a very dangerous place—not only to save the wise men of Babylon, but to reveal the power of God to Nebuchadnezzar himself.

¹⁷ Then Daniel went to his home and informed his companions, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, ¹⁸ and told them to seek mercy from the God of heaven concerning this mystery, so that Daniel and his companions with the rest of the wise men of Babylon might not perish. ¹⁹ Then the mystery was revealed to Daniel in a vision of the night, and Daniel blessed the God of heaven. (Daniel 2:17-19)

The dream is revealed to Daniel, and he eventually reports the dream and its interpretation to the king. This dream reveals the faithfulness of God in many ways. First, it spares the lives of enemies of Israel—the wise men and magicians of Babylon—through Daniel’s willingness to take the risk of speaking with the king. Second, it reveals the truth that the coming Messiah will allow God to establish “a kingdom that shall never be destroyed” (2:44). Third, the interpretation leads to a transforming moment for Daniel’s enemy king. Nebechadnezzar responds with worship:

⁴⁶ Then King Nebuchadnezzar fell on his face, worshiped Daniel, and commanded that a grain offering and incense be offered to him. ⁴⁷ The king said to Daniel, “Truly, your God is God of gods and Lord of kings and a revealer of mysteries, for you have been able to reveal this mystery!” (Daniel 2:46-47)

While this transformation may have been short-lived, it still shows that God is powerful enough work through even the disruption of the sleepless nights of an enemy king.

Paul—Executioner to Apostle

One of the most remarkable transformations in the New Testament is that of the Apostle Paul. The book of Acts tells the story of the first Christian martyr, St. Stephen. Stephen himself was disruptive to the ears of the High Priest and the Council. In the end, his words get him killed. However, they leave an impression on a bystander named Saul:

“Look,” he said, “I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!”⁵⁷ But they covered their ears, and with a loud shout all rushed together against him.⁵⁸ Then they dragged him out of the city and began to stone him; and the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. (Acts 7:56-58)

Saul approves the killing of Stephen (8:1) and continues “ravaging the church by entering house after house; dragging off both men and women, he committed them to prison” (8:3).

Saul is convinced that he is doing what is right, and he feels justified in his actions. He is, however, “spiritually blind” to the realities of the true kingdom of God. In seeking to honor God, he finds himself an enemy of God. This leads to a disruption on the road to Damascus. His eyes are spiritually opened, through divine revelation, to the risen Christ. However, he is then physically blinded and becomes dependent on others.

³Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. ⁴He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” ⁵He asked, “Who are you, Lord?” The reply came, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. ⁶But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.” ⁷The men who were traveling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one. ⁸Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; so they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. ⁹For three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank. (Acts 9:3-9)

In this transforming moment for Paul, God uses a disruptive revelation to get his attention. Paul eventually finds his way to the home of Ananias, and his encounter with the risen Christ is confirmed. Ananias says:

“Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.”¹⁸ And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized,¹⁹ and after taking some food, he regained his strength. (Acts 9:17b-19a)

This leads to a remarkable transformation for Paul that establishes his place in the very church that he had sought to destroy.

Jesus—Light Shining in the Darkness

This brings us back to the greatest disruption that the world has ever known: The Incarnation of God himself as one of us. This ultimate disruptive act catalyzed the transformation of all of humanity, restoring us to God and to one another by defeating sin and death itself. The great prologue in the Gospel of John paints this picture of disruption: “the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it” (John 1:5).

Yes, we see that Joseph, Moses, Daniel, Paul, and others in scripture experience the disruptive and redemptive work of God. Ultimately, however, it is the life, death, and resurrection of Christ that proves to be the deepest disruption. The Incarnation is the epicenter of the great story of scripture and the catalyst of a radical new worldwide family, established in his Church. The disruptive power of the Incarnation culminates with the arrival of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Social structures, gender identity, race, and ethnicity are all disrupted by the unifying power of the Holy Spirit. As we enter into this family, we too encounter the risen Christ. The story of the Incarnation is where I see, as Philip Yancey (discussed in Chapter 1) states, that when “I turn to the gospel accounts of the Christmas, I hear a very different tone and sense mainly disruption at work.”⁵² The Holy Spirit gives us the presence of God that allows us to find rootedness in covenant community, to no longer fear disruption in our lives, and to recognize that God is actively drawing us into a state of sanctification in *being* and *becoming* like Christ.

As I reflect on this theology of disruption in scripture, it helps reframe how I view disruption in the context of pastoral ministry and spiritual transformation.

⁵² Yancey, *Jesus I Never Knew*, 29. Previously referenced in Chapter 1, page 15

The Disruption of the 1989 Earthquake

One of the most jarring disruptions I have ever experienced was the ground-shaking event that happened in San Jose on October 17, 1989. I was 14 years old at the time, in my freshman year of High School. I grew up a huge Oakland Athletics fan and rushed home to watch the third game of the Bay Bridge World Series between the San Francisco Giants and the Oakland A's. The game was scheduled to begin at 5:30 p.m., so we had the television on to watch the game.

At 5:04 p.m., my world was forever shaken. I had grown up in California, so earthquakes were a common experience. I would look to the dining room chandelier each time to see if it was an earthquake or just a truck passing by. Each time there would be a slight rush of adrenaline through my body, which would then subside in anxious relief. On this October day, however, there was no looking to the chandelier and no anxious relief. Instead, there was a terrifying jolt and rumble that took all my family members to their knees.

We rushed to the doorways as best we could and watched in horror as everything around us shook. This felt like the end, and we certainly had never experienced anything like this before. On the other side of town, my sister was at swim practice. She tells the story of being confused about the sudden waves in the pool. Then, she panicked as she heard the screams. As she tried to climb out of the water, the edge of the pool suddenly came close and then rushed into the air three feet above the water. The wave pushed her out of the pool and onto the deck. It would be hours before my father and I would arrive to pick her up. Our father had to navigate through side streets to avoid the powerless stoplights and traffic jams.

Without power, there was no way to get information about the extent of the damage except through the radio—and even on the radio, very few stations still had power. We heard the horrendous rumors that the Bay Bridge collapsed. Much of San Francisco was erupting in flames. We also didn't know if this was the “big one” or just a precursor to a larger earthquake yet to come.

My sister and I decided to sleep on the floor in the same room that night. We didn't even trust our beds anymore. Terrified, we would wake up to every aftershock that occurred after the main earthquake. A magnitude 5.2 aftershock occurred immediately after the main shock. In the week following Loma Prieta, 20 aftershocks with magnitudes of 4.0 or greater and more than 300 with magnitudes of 2.5 or greater were recorded. Each one kept us awake and alert. It would take a long time for us to get a good night's sleep. As a 14-year-old, I was greatly influenced by this event. So much of what I had come to know as reliable and trustworthy was shattered that day. I was disrupted to my core.

I always asked myself: What was different? What changed during that earthquake? The truth, I came to realize, was that I was not any less safe *after* the earthquake than I had been the 14 years prior. What was different was my perception of what I could depend on. Even the ground beneath my feet came into question. So did my entire purpose, meaning, and sense of security. The world suddenly became a dangerous place, and I deeply desired to build my life on solid ground that would never give way or be shaken.

As I went off to college, met my future spouse, got married, and was eventually called into ministry, I never forgot how my perceptions were transformed on October 17, 1989. I eventually had a revelation about the way that God works in the world to get our attention. There are many things that we seek for safety and security. It sometimes

takes a great disruption in our lives to open our eyes to the transience of a broken and unreliable world. When God gets our attention this way, we can perhaps experience a profound revelation about the transcendent, reliable One who created us.

A New Framework for Disruption in Pastoral Ministry

I became a full-time youth pastor in 2009. Another disruption would call me into ministry thirty years later. There was a student in our church who was killed in a car crash. I had been a volunteer with the middle school group, teaching Sunday school, and had I gotten to know the students well. Ryan was one of the mature ones who left an impression. He was always kind, thoughtful, and insightful. Everyone loved him, and he loved Jesus. A car crash, however, changed everything. We were all shaken to the core. Somehow, I felt that my time was being wasted by my work as an Engineer. I wanted to be there with those kids to support them. Within a year, when our youth pastor left, I stepped into an interim position. I then quit my engineering job to go into full-time ministry. Without that disruption, I don't know that I would be where I am. It is painful to reflect on that time, but hindsight reveals that God can work in our lives within the worst of circumstances. There is a veil that is torn, or light that is revealed, when the things of this world turn to shadow.

As I continued in ministry, however, I often felt inadequate when trying to help those who were experiencing disruption of their own. The three stories I shared in Chapter 1 were examples of disruptive moments that transformed me as a pastor. They took me to the end of my own wisdom and abilities. They forced me to be quiet and patient rather than quick to offer advice to fix the problem. Instead of attempting to bring comfort and healing, I became a quiet observer. I was merely a travel companion

through the darkness and disruption. I moved towards the unknown, embracing uncertainty with the hope of seeing where God is at work.

The Disruption of Mental Illness

After Jennifer's manic episode at our church service on Palm Sunday, I was unsure of what I could and should do to help her. It was tempting to set boundaries that would prohibit her from returning to church until she was well. Many church members simply felt unsafe around her—and many of their fears were perfectly justifiable. Caring for her in this state of mental illness was way beyond our expertise and training. We needed to move her towards those who had the capability to help her, but we didn't know how to accomplish this.

She lived in an apartment 30 minutes south of the church, in a town at the border of the Bronx. My senior pastor and I realized that we should not visit her alone because we didn't know what she was capable of doing. We had also heard of her accusations of other males, and we wanted to be sure that we could encourage and pray with her in a safe and healthy way. We set a boundary with her and met on a bench near her apartment complex. We made several visits to her to pray and serve communion. She was grateful, but she was also not at all healthy. We had no way of knowing what the social workers were doing to help her and didn't know how we could assist with that help.

For me, this became a difficult moment of discernment. I wondered, do I keep her at arm's length and set clear boundaries? Or do I move towards this mental illness and walk with her through it? I chose the latter, but I did so with serious trepidation. I was in uncharted territory and felt very small and inadequate. I told Jennifer to connect

me with her social worker, and Jennifer permitted full disclosure of the details of her treatment and current mental status. The goals for all of us were full restoration of her mental health, stability in her housing situation, and return to our church family.

What resulted was a very difficult three-year journey towards recovery. Jennifer fell into a regular pattern of manic episodes that became increasingly violent and erratic. Each time, she would end up in a psychiatric hospital, mental ward, or even jail. The entire support structure that she had relied upon was coming undone, and social workers and therapists were becoming more and more pessimistic about her ever living on her own again. Finally, her estranged sister, who lived upstate, decided to take her in. The thought was that spending some time in the countryside might help her recovery. With collaboration from Jennifer's social worker, I helped move her upstate to give her a new start. For the next few months, things were looking positive. She began to set up a new network of friends and job opportunities there.

That was short lived, however, and her manic episodes returned with a vengeance. She stopped taking her medication and started having more and more violent episodes. They got so bad that the police were called. Jennifer was arrested and spent a week in prison. Then, the court bought her a ticket back to Westchester County, and all her belongings were thrown out. She returned with nothing—no identification, no clothing except what was on her back, and my phone number. She was back to square one without any of the support she previously had.

I consulted other social workers. They determined that, for Jennifer to enter back into the “system” in Westchester, she would have to start over. I accompanied her for an initial consultation with the Department of Social Services. I filled out the forms for her, and we waited to be seen by a social worker. The goal was to find her stable housing and get the medical treatment she so desperately needed. There was no

housing available, so we had two choices: 1) have her stay with a family in our church, or 2) send her to the women's homeless shelter. This ended up being the most difficult decision, but the social workers and I knew that the homeless shelter was the next step. It was the only way for her to hit "rock bottom" and to recognize she needed to take her medication and treatment seriously.

We got her clothing that she needed, and I monitored her bank account to keep her from going on manic spending sprees. During the next year of her recovery, I attended her counseling sessions with her therapist and social worker. We worked with the county government to find housing that would meet her needs. I was eventually able to reconnect her with members of our church and begin to repair their broken trust. We found a way to give her an injected medication that would be administered monthly, so she wouldn't have to take the initiative to take medication on her own. All these efforts resulted in incredible transformations for both of us. I journeyed into areas that were scary and intimidating to me. I made contacts with social services, the local homeless shelter, and her recovery group. Jennifer is back on her feet and thriving. She has returned to our church services. When she cannot attend, I visit her on her front porch for communion.

This is a picture of Christian theology at work: When we move towards disruptive moments in our lives, we see God do amazing things. The disruption we encounter becomes a catalyst for transformation.

The Disruption of a Cancer Diagnosis

After Anthony's return to our church community with his cancer diagnosis, as also described in Chapter 1, we had our own transformative moments. His surgery was

extensive and could possibly leave his face permanently disfigured. Others who survive after this type of surgery are often unrecognizable. It was incredibly scary for Anthony to imagine what life would be like after his own surgery. We also acknowledged together that he might not survive. This was uncharted territory for Anthony and for me as his pastor.

I walked into the hospital after his surgery. It was painful to see. His jaw was wired shut, and there were sutures that extended from his lower lip, down his chin, and to his lower neck. He had a feeding tube, was not able to control saliva, swallowed with difficulty, and could not speak. I prayed for him. I asked him yes or no questions. I was completely out of my element, not knowing how to encourage or support someone during this time. All I could be was a friend, pastor, and family member. He needed our community support, since he did not have any other support to rely on.

This moment made me realize why I love being a pastor. Embracing the disruption of cancer took me to the end of my abilities and wit. This was beyond any problem that I could fix. All I could do was be there with Anthony, walk with him, and see where God was at work in this situation.

After many more surgeries over the next few months, Anthony's recovery was incredible. They managed to remove his cancerous lower jawbone, reconstruct a new jaw from one of his leg bones (which was replaced with a titanium rod), and then transplant gum tissue gradually to the bone to give him a functioning, working jaw. Even the scar down his face is minimal, and he looks almost exactly the same as before. He often jokes that he literally has his "foot in his mouth" for the rest of his life. He has become a vital deacon in our church, helping to meet various accounting needs for the congregation. The result was vastly different—and better—than the best outcome we

could have imagined. Because I moved towards Anthony in his time of need, we were both transformed in profound ways.

The Disruption of Depression

As mentioned in my story about Paul in Chapter 1, not all stories end the same. Sometimes you care for people who seem to disrupt everything they touch. When you try to help them as a friend or pastor, you discover a deep, dark hole of need and manipulation and coercion. With Paul, I encountered unending demand for attention to his restlessness in marriage, spirituality, and vocation.

In my relationship with Paul, I sought to embrace the disruption and walk with him through his labyrinth of need. I urged him to seek counseling, psychiatric evaluation, and even rehabilitation. However, he seemed to dodge and deflect every effort I made to help him. He manipulated those around him. In hindsight, we should have created a different disruption by cutting Paul off from the church community in which he was causing so much damage. His unrepentant sin led him to leave our church and join one of our sister churches across the county. He eventually burned those bridges, then started attending the church of my friend who was in a different denomination. Destruction and disruption happened at every turn, and I was naïve enough to think that I could help.

I could not help. Paul entered a self-medicated path of destruction that resulted in infidelity, deception, and suicide.

The disruption that I eventually embraced was not Paul, but my own inabilities. I was tempted to treat the situation as an anomaly—just the result of a man who did not

heed advice, did not seek wise counsel, and thought he could solve the problem on his own. So many had tried to help him and had gotten burned. I was just one of them. I realized, however, that I needed to own the arrogance that led me to believe I was the one who could help him. In reality, the disruption I needed to embrace was the disruption of church discipline. As stated by Paul in 1 Corinthians 5:5, the right thing to do was to “hand this man over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord” (1 Cor 5:5).

A Nine-Month Cohort for Disruption

These experiences led me to realize that disruption is where God is often at work. However, I reflected that disruption often happens *to* us. Then, we need to sort out the ways that God is working in our lives. What would happen if we were able to intentionally create spaces of disruption for our church community so that congregants can grow spiritually? Can we encourage members of our church community to enter into spaces of mental disability? Can we encourage them to move towards those who have been diagnosed with cancer, illness, and disease? Or perhaps they need to see the disruption of their own hidden areas of sin, which need to be rooted out before they fester and grow?

Leslie Newbigin wisely states, as mentioned in Chapter 2, “When a pastor tells me everything is going smoothly, I wonder whether the devil is having an easy time.”⁵³ As I stated before, the power of disruption is that it can uncover our idols and reveal the reality and reliability of Christ. Resisting disruptive moments exposes our idolatry and our resistance to the embrace of Christ. On the contrary, embracing disruption releases

⁵³ Newbigin, *Good Shepherd*, 46. Previously revered in Chapter 2, page 21.

us from the power of idols and increases our reliance upon Christ. Embracing disruption is an important tool that God can use to bring about significant spiritual transformation. This is not only true for scripture, but for ministry as well. I have become more aware of how important it is for me, as a pastor, to embrace moments of disruption in our church community. These moments allow us to see where God is at work in the church and how God might bring about his call for transformation through these disruptions.

My Story

The way I experienced disruption in these three stories had an important influence on my spiritual growth as a pastor. Jennifer's mental illness brought me to a deeper understanding of how God is at work in places of uncertainty and fear. Anthony's cancer diagnosis showed me the importance of patiently being present with someone in their suffering instead of feeling the need to provide all the answers. Paul's depression revealed the overconfidence I had in my own abilities to help someone. I wanted to share this experience of growth with others. So, I created a nine-month curriculum for a cohort of six to eight individuals. However, this curriculum was itself disrupted by the global pandemic in 2020. This additional disruption uncovered areas in my ministry that were previously unchecked. More spiritual growth was awaiting me in unexpected places.

When I began my work for this Doctor of Ministry degree, I was overextended and exhausted. I remember sitting down with another pastor during the Spring of 2019 and explaining all the things I was involved with. At the time, I was the chairman of the church building committee, leader of a college campus ministry, PTA president at my children's elementary school, children's ministry coordinator, fourth and fifth grade

Sunday school teacher, middle and high school group leader, leading the overhaul of the church website and logo design, leader of our Sunday morning operations, teaching adult education, and somehow also supposed to be the associate pastor of a church. On top of all these titles and responsibilities, I was also a father of three children, the husband of a wonderful wife, and a caretaker of a very chaotic household with nine chickens, a rabbit, a cat, and a dog. I explained all these roles and responsibilities with pride. In all these areas, I had stepped forward to fill a roll I saw that needed to be filled. I kept adding more and more responsibilities in an effort to help those around me.

When the entire city of New York shut down, I felt incredibly helpless and hopeless. I am sure many people who lived through the pandemic had similar feelings. For me though, the pandemic uncovered how my identity was wrapped up in all the things I was doing. For the first time in many years, I could clearly see how much I had depended on keeping busy to build up a sense of self-importance. When the COVID-19 virus reached New York, I was half-way through the cohort program and was disillusioned and disoriented. How would I finish this project if I couldn't complete my plans for the cohort? I would eventually discover that God was using this "disruption" as a tool to create spiritual transformation. The cohort provided the rootedness in covenant community I needed to reflect on the ways that God was at work through the pandemic shutdown. In this context, I could embrace that disruption and see what God was revealing in myself. I then realized that God was not done teaching me how I needed to *become* more like Christ in my dependency on him. This process gave me the tools to see where I had made idols of busyness and self-importance. When the pandemic began, I was brought to my own "Joseph" moment. I felt abandoned at the

bottom of a pit and left for dead. Where was God in this story? How would God's faithfulness be revealed?

It was only in that moment that I understood the same thing Joseph realized at the beginning of this chapter. I was taken from pride to humility, and I was shown that what I thought would be the end of my cohort was instead the beginning of a better project. With an overwhelming sense of how God was at work, I could say the same thing Joseph did when he proclaimed the faithfulness of God to his brothers: "It was not you who sent me here, but God" (Genesis 45:8).

Chapter 4: A Guide to Embracing Disruption as a Catalyst for Transformation

During the process of reflecting on a theology of disruption both in scripture and in my pastoral ministry, I sought to implement a strategy for intentionally bringing church members into places of disruption. I hoped God might use these disruptions to uncover the areas of idolatry in our lives. In the stories I have shared so far, both Jennifer and Anthony had significant disruptions imposed upon them. Elements outside of their control propelled them towards transformation and reliance upon Christ. Paul, however, had allowed hidden idols to grow and take a deeper hold of his life. His case made me wonder how many others in our congregation were living with a false sense of self like Paul. Could we create a program that would shepherd congregants towards disruptive places so that their hidden idols and insecurities would be exposed? Could intentional disruption be a catalyst for spiritual growth and transformation?

The plan was to create a “cohort” of four to eight individuals who would commit to a nine-month program that would encourage them to go into places of disruption. Each of us are unique in our areas of comfort and security, so the program would venture into different aspects of our spiritual and personal lives to see where we have been resistant to stepping out in faith. For where our fears and anxieties are, so too are the idols that prevent us from fully relying on Christ. The areas of focus for the group include self-knowledge, spiritual disciplines, our careers, rest and self-care, service to others, evangelism, and mission. We called our cohort the “Delta” group, which is the mathematical Greek symbol used for “change.”

I created a nine-month curriculum for the time we would spend together. (The full schedule can be found in Appendix A.) The goal was to create a space where the program participants could experience the rootedness of covenant community, embrace disruptions as they presented themselves, and see where God would reveal our identities as *being* and *becoming* like Christ. What would surprise me, however, was that my efforts would be thwarted by COVID-19. My plans to help others embrace disruption and uncover *their* idols would instead bring me to places of unprecedented disruption in my own life. I would be forced to confront my own identity crisis and uncertainty. My responsibilities and overcommitments would all be stripped away. In a space of rootedness with the Delta group, I would experience my own spiritual growth that would be surprising, liberating, and transformational.

Implementation of the Project

Four church members joined our first Delta group in the fall of 2019: Alex, Colin, John, and Henry. The four of them had already been in our church community group for quite some time, so I knew them fairly well. The idea was to grow in our knowledge of ourselves, each other, Christ, and our resistance to disruption in our lives. Our first meeting was an overview of the program, and it also included a “self-assessment” of where they felt stuck spiritually. Each of them had different areas where they wanted to grow, and each of them would experience different levels of disruption in different places.

We began by going through Pete Scazzaro’s book *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality*. It allowed us to consider how we have settled for a shallow version of Christianity that has prevented us from experiencing growth and renewal. We sought to find the areas of our lives with symptoms of unhealthy spirituality as well as areas where we felt

“stuck.” Many of us procrastinate areas such as spiritual disciplines, taking the initiative to serve those in need, or even resolving conflict in personal relationships. Others fail to embrace rest and sabbath and are addicted to productivity and endless work. Yet others wrestle with constant fear, internal anxiety, or unresolved struggles with sin. Knowing this, the Delta group committed to venturing into these areas together to see where God was at work in our lives.

Addressing Areas of Unhealthy Spirituality

In one of our first meetings, we charted the areas where we felt “stuck” as they were outlined in *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality*. I listed these symptoms of emotionally unhealthy spirituality to see what resonated with the Delta group:

- 1) Using God to run from God
- 2) Ignoring anger, sadness and fear
- 3) Dying to the wrong things
- 4) Denying the impact of the past on the present
- 5) Dividing “Secular” and “Sacred”
- 6) Doing for God instead of being with God
- 7) Spiritualizing away conflict (Note about “Disruption” as our main thesis)
- 8) Covering over brokenness, weakness, failure
- 9) Living without limits
- 10) Judging other peoples’ spiritual journeys

These were some of the things that the members connected with:

John

John and I have been friends since 2003. He is very intelligent, has a high standard for success, and has computer science degrees from multiple Ivy League institutions. He is a long-time employee for a tech firm in New York City, and easily works 60-plus hours per week. For him, work had become a place where he was avoiding a deep, internal sadness. He often escaped to work and home projects to

ignore his anger, sadness, and fear. In this meeting, he described some of his sleep patterns. He would “push through” his initial exhaustion in the evening to enter into an adrenaline-filled, manic state. He regularly stayed up until four in the morning to get a tremendous amount of work done. This happened multiple times every week. He would get blocks of sleep in the early morning and on the train rides to and from work every day. Because I had known John for a long time, we recalled the time his work habits caused a car crash. He was driving on the highway with his wife and three kids in the car. The car was totaled, but the family made it through without injury. John had fallen asleep at the wheel in the middle of a Saturday afternoon because of his sheer exhaustion.

Yet, John’s work habits continued. He recognized that he was using this pattern of work and busyness to escape his emotions and fears.

John also related to “dying to the wrong things.” He explained that he had developed an almost a Buddhist mentality of “killing off all of his desires.” His work and family life had taken over so much of his time and mental capacity that he no longer even knew what his own desires were. He felt that he was sacrificing his own needs and desires to meet the demands of everyone else around him. John's disruption would be to enter into places of stillness, silence, and rest. The goal would be to stop his obsession with productivity and to simply be embraced by the full acceptance and love of God.

Alex

Alex found himself in a place of deep sadness, but one that was different from John's. He said that he often found himself manipulating others and being passive-aggressive with his family and co-workers. Alex was a public school teacher in one of

the poorer cities in Westchester County. As a result, he often got caught in the politics and bureaucracy of New York's public education system. The benchmarks, curriculum, and testing standards were constantly in flux, and Alex was becoming more and more bitter and frustrated in his career. As a result of his unresolved anger and sadness, he struggled constantly with acting out in a passive-aggressive way.

Alex is a kind soul who is always willing to serve others in the church community. As his pastor for more than 10 years, however, I have often had to remind him to not overextend himself in his volunteering at the church. Alex converted to Christianity after spending most of his life as an atheist. He has since grown in leaps and bounds in his knowledge of scripture and his commitment to the church community. At one point, I realized he was teaching a Sunday school class, leading three different church community groups, and was the coordinator for Sunday morning communion setup. This busyness was not as extreme as John's, but it was causing conflict with his wife, who is not a believer. Alex related to the unhealthy spiritual syndrome of "doing for God instead of being with God."

When we looked at the curriculum for the nine months ahead, Alex was very worried about reaching out to family members for the genogram work we would do in late October. We would later uncover deep estrangements between him and his family members that he would be reluctant to address. Alex was deeply resistant to the disruption of calling family members he hadn't talked to for a long time. When asked about calling his father, he quickly replied: "No. I am not going to do that." In response, I sought to both encourage and glibly challenge him: "Well, according to the hypothesis of this course, that means you *should* do it." We wanted to propel him towards areas of unresolved conflict and fear.

On a more practical note, Alex confessed that he also would self-medicate his sadness and anger with beer and alcohol. He expressed the desire to gain better control over his “hops” drinking for both emotional and health reasons. He was not as concerned about the drinking as he was about those internal areas that he was trying to avoid. For Alex, self-denial of certain food and drink would disrupt his internal spiritual life and hopefully lead to emotional and spiritual transformation.

Henry

When I first met Henry nearly 20 years ago, he was an IT programmer who would later fall victim to the dot-com bust near the turn of the century. He spent many years in the early 2000's unemployed and found himself working as a car salesman temporarily. That was nearly 15 years ago. He is still working in car sales and feeling completely lost in his career. He constantly feels a sense of dread and incompetence in his job, and it is a source of deep sadness and depression. He never meant to end up as a car salesman. As a result, he feels a great amount of shame and embarrassment. He feels, in short, like a failure who cannot provide for his family in the way that he wants.

On a practical level, he feels like he struggles endlessly with using his “executive function” to organize and get things done. His fears and self-doubt regularly lead to procrastination, which further expands his depression and feelings of failure. He also struggles with addressing the mental health of his children. Henry is often overwhelmed with the daily stresses of life. He rarely gets enough sleep because of his anxiety, and he recently started using a CPAP machine to help with his sleep apnea. For Henry, stepping out of his comfort zone to address his daily tasks and his family conflict is the disruption he feels he needs to embrace. This will challenge him and hopefully be a catalyst for a deeper dependence on God and spiritual transformation.

Colin

Colin, a single man in his 30's, was the youngest of the group. He had moved to New York for work about 6 years earlier, and he also related with the list of symptoms of unhealthy spirituality. Colin was very attuned to his desires (unlike John) but would rather dive into the root *beneath* his desires. He wanted to be more intentional and conscious of why he sought after certain luxury items like expensive jackets and clothing. He wanted to know what was behind his spending habits. Colin also expressed an intense fear of calling people. Additionally, Colin's family showed patterns of disfunction that would be very difficult to confront in his genogram project.

Colin also had a habit of "using God to run from God." Often, his spiritual practices were motivated by his desire to elicit a positive response from God. Colin used prayers and obedience to God as a way to get God to do the will of Colin. He was not seeking to surrender his own will to the will of God. Many of Colin's behaviors seemed to be geared towards achieving blessing from God. Our discussion revealed for Colin that he would like to trust in God's will more freely. He wanted to move towards those areas of fear in his life so that his idols might be uncovered and cast aside.

My Role in the Cohort

As we began meeting in the Fall, I thought of myself as the instructor and facilitator for the group. During our first meeting, I presented my plan on the white board and instructed the group about the purpose of the project. In retrospect, my goal was to help them grow as I had done. There was very little expectation in this plan for my own spiritual growth and transformation. I did recognize areas that I felt I could

improve upon. But mostly, this simply became another church meeting to add to the list. In order to coordinate with family, other responsibilities, and the schedules of those in the cohort, we chose to meet on Wednesday nights. This alone showed how overextended my life had become. My Wednesdays involved a full workday, then picking up my kids and taking them to their activities, then driving to the college ministry I ran at the local college campus, then coming back to church to run the middle and high school group. All of this was then followed by the Delta group meeting from 8 p.m. until 10 p.m. Sometimes our discussions would last until midnight. I was overextended and exhausted by trying to do this project. However, I was not aware of how I was unhealthy as a leader. Nevertheless, we persevered with this effort for spiritual transformation. However, in my mind, that transformation was for *everyone else*—not me.

Addressing Attachments & Idols

After spending several meetings addressing areas where the cohort felt “stuck” spiritually, we sought to discover where our attachments and idols were. In doing this exercise, we hoped to find our hidden “grasps” on things in our lives that keep us from trusting in God. Everyone has a Christian identity, which is rooted in the fact that we were once slaves to sin, and the gospel of Christ sets us free. The process of moving towards that faith, however, takes time. Often, daily habits and practices that keep us from experiencing spiritual growth take a hold of our lives. Sanctification requires us to constantly work towards a deeper dependence on Christ and embrace our identities as “new creations” who are given the power, through the Holy Spirit, to overcome sin.

Answering the question, “Who Am I?” is part of this process. We often answer it with our careers, personalities, relationships, experiences, epigenetics, cultures, and histories. While these are important identifiers that make us unique, they can also become our idols. The question is: How can we initiate disruption to get unstuck in these areas and reveal our attachments? In the Delta group, many of our attachments seemed to be related to our fears and anxieties.

As a result of our discussion, the members of the cohort felt they uncovered some attachments in the following areas:

John: Addicted to routines, productivity, and feeling useful. John also doesn’t like problems to go unresolved and will become obsessed with fixing problems to create a sense of self-worth (particularly at work).

Alex: Addicted to comfort and the status quo.

Henry: Addicted to habits and avoiding conflict. Henry shared that he still uses a DVR out of habit, even though he knows the technology is outdated. He is afraid of discussions about money and his career as a car salesman.

Colin: Addicted to personal comfort and cynicism in the office. He feels anger at work when he sees people treated unfairly, which often leads to gossip. Colin also expressed that his gossip habit stems from a sense of incompetency in his job.

Sharing Genograms

One of the most productive and rewarding aspects of the curriculum was working through the group's family systems by creating pictorial displays of their family relationships, called “genograms.” Though I had known the men in the cohort for many years, this allowed us to get to know each other even more deeply. While we had talked about many areas of our lives over the courses of our relationships, we rarely spoke about our family histories in detail. The genograms helped us uncover habits in our families that we have inherited and areas of conflict where we still might be able to seek resolution and healing. In our individualistic culture, we do not often see ourselves products of our family histories. Yes, many aspects of our personalities,

spiritual gifts, and abilities help make us unique. It is also true, however, that we are products of our pasts. Family cutoffs, conflict, trauma, and dysfunction can all significantly impact how we see ourselves, how we relate to others, and how we relate to God.

Colin's Genogram

The first to share his genogram was Colin. He grew up in the South and noticed a history of violence, abuse, and estrangements in his family's church and home life. On his mom's side, his grandmother was married three times, and the entire side of the family is a bit dysfunctional. His mother tends to speak her mind and often speaks ill of other family members and sisters. This has shaped Colin's opinions of relatives on his mother's side. He recognized that he doesn't fully know a lot of his family's history. Colin might work on these issues by reaching out to his aunt who has been ostracized by his mother. Efforts to repair some of these estrangements might help him work through some of his own negative opinions and resentments. There is also a possibility of unresolved sexual abuse committed by his great-grandfather. While Colin cannot solve this on his own, of course, he hopes that he can build a better relationship with family on his mother's side.

Colin comes from a strong Baptist tradition on both sides of the family. His dad's side of the family, however, belonged to a Baptist church that went through a horrible split over a narcissistic pastor who turned out to be a closet Calvinist. When the pastor left the church, he took half of the congregation with him—and half of Colin's family members. While they are still "family," they don't talk about the "elephant in the room": the church split that happened so many years ago. Colin's parents were also left with some resentment towards Calvinism, and Colin has yet to tell them that he belongs

to a Reformed church. He has not told them about his most recent theological leanings—much less his new-found embrace of the Reformed faith. Colin's brother has also recently come out as gay, which is another unspoken topic for his family.

Colin's genogram revealed several patterns in his life, and it revealed how some of those patterns have carried over to his personal relationships and interactions with people at work. The main pattern Colin found was that he is the “peacemaker” of the family. In many family conflicts, he has been the ambassador for reconciliation. When his great grandmother on his mother's side died, he was one of the only members from his mom's side of the family to attend the funeral. He remarked that his attendance was one of the reasons the relationships on that side of the family began to heal. Because of his presence, people in the family began to reconcile. In other areas, he seeks to keep the peace by avoiding topics that are controversial. This is why he still has yet to tell his parents that he is now Reformed. Also, because Colin's brother on the West Coast is seen as a “lost sheep,” Colin finds himself overcompensating for his brother's absence in caring for his parents. Colin shared that he wanted to work on being open and honest with his parents about his beliefs and opinions—even if that might cause disruption and discomfort. He also sees himself falling into patterns of cynicism and resentment that are very similar his mother's patterns. Colin must work to address those bad habits in his own heart so that he doesn't proliferate the rifts and resentment that he has witnessed in his family history.

Henry's Genogram

As Henry shared his genogram, we immediately noticed a pattern of mental illness in his family. Henry's grandfather apparently had a mental breakdown when Henry's dad and aunt were young. They ended up being raised by an uncle who ran a

jewelry store in Detroit, Michigan. His aunt has a mental disability and has the behavior and mental capacity of a 12-year-old. As he shared, Henry noticed that many of his own struggles were similar to those of his father. Henry's dad struggled with depression and a lack of "drive" to get things done. In addition, Henry's children are already showing these patterns. Henry realized that he must be proactive in his care for his children and give them the tools to overcome their challenges and disabilities.

Eventually, Henry's dad moved to Seattle, Washington for work, which is where he met Henry's mother. Henry and his sister were raised in Washington State until Henry met his wife, Wendy, in college. They moved to New York to be near Wendy's family in the area.

Alex's Genogram

Alex's story was the most surprising to me. Even though I had known Alex for a long time, he never shared his family history with me. Alex was an only child, and it seems that he was born as the result of a one-night stand. His mom was from New Rochelle, New York, and now lives in Yonkers with her sister. On his mother's side, obesity is a chronic problem—especially for his aunt. Depression is also an issue. Alex's mom has clinical depression. He recognized this area as an ongoing struggle since Alex has also struggled with his weight and with depression.

Alex's father never had a relationship with his mother, but he remained in Alex's life. His father lived in Houston, Texas for most of Alex's childhood. Alex spent most of his summers there as a child. He enjoyed that time and got to know many of his cousins on his father's side. Alex's grandfather, however, was "old school" and abusive. Alex's father took the brunt of that abuse. Alex shared that he and his father had a lot of similar characteristics, like being quiet and reserved. His father also had a restlessness

about him. He was always seeking the next “big thing” and spending money on new items. He was unsettled and frequently broke. At the time the genogram was created, Alex had not spoken to his father for many years. Reaching out to his dad was one of his areas of “disruption” during his time in the cohort.

John’s Genogram

John was the last to share his genogram. He grew up with two older brothers—one full brother and one half-brother from his father’s previous marriage. John and his full brother share many of the same characteristics. Both are hard-working, successful, competitive, and ambitious. His older half-brother has become sort of a lost soul. He is constantly in financial trouble and is married to his fourth wife. John often reaches out to his oldest brother to support him, and his brother has formed a pattern of taking advantage of him. At the time he shared his genogram, John was frustrated with his oldest brother. John hired the construction company where his brother worked to help with a major renovation in his house. What was supposed to be a six-month project had taken close to two years and still wasn't done. The company was facing bankruptcy, and John was afraid the project would never get finished.

John also shared that his grandfather was a famous furniture designer. His grandfather was Gilbert Rohde, who was at the forefront of modern furniture design in the 1920s. He provided many of the designs for the Herman Miller company. John shared that, while his grandfather was famous, John did not inherit any of the furniture that he designed. He died in 1944 at the young age of 50, long before John had the opportunity to meet him. We noticed that John inherited much of his grandfather’s work ethic and ingenuity. He also perhaps had inherited an unhealthy preoccupation

with success and self-worth. John realized his need to divorce his success in his career from his identity as a child of God who is fully loved and fully accepted in Christ.

Additional Work and Self-Assessment

After creating genograms and working through *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality*, we began to study a proper theology of work and develop a proper understanding of rest and sabbath. We read *Every Good Endeavor* by Tim Keller and *Sabbath as Resistance* by Walter Brueggemann. First, we identified areas of spiritual growth where we recognized significant “roadblocks” for transformation. The path of self-knowledge of spiritual disciplines and the genogram project were helpful tools in uncovering some of those idols. We then moved onto understanding a proper theological framework for our professional identities. Many of us perceive a separation between the work we do during the week and the “kingdom work” we do as members of the body of Christ. Tim Keller does a good job of reconciling those two things. He shows us how to reclaim our work as a spiritual endeavor. As Keller says, we are working towards the new creation and participating in the kingdom work of shining God’s light in a broken world.

We then contrasted Keller's teachings with Brueggemann’s framing of sabbath. As Brueggemann shows us, sabbath can help us resist correlating our value with our productivity. Sabbath calls us out of our endless toil to embrace the commandment to rest and to allow our “to-do” lists to remain unfinished.

Once our cohort visited these areas of study, we sought to put our faith into practice by moving into areas of disruption in our communities. We planned to work with those experiencing homelessness, encounter those suffering from mental illness, make visits to our incarcerated and hospitalized neighbors, and move towards cross-cultural experiences in our own community. These activities all were designed to take

us to places of both physical and emotional discomfort and to reveal the idols we have in our lives that keep us spiritually stagnant and complacent. In tandem, we planned to study of *The Art of Neighboring* by Jay Pathak and Dave Runyon to help build relationships in our own communities as well.

In January 2020, we shared areas in which we had felt spiritual growth. We also shared some of the self-knowledge that we had discovered since beginning the cohort.

John's Assessment

John expressed a sense of relief and rest that he hadn't felt in quite some time. He had worked to improve his practices of rest, prayer, and sabbath. He was beginning to get more regular sleep and to take time off on Sundays to spend time with his family. As of January, he was also excited about his family's vacation to Barcelona that was scheduled for Spring Break 2020. His sons were big soccer fans, so they had bought tickets to several games for the Premier Soccer League in Spain. Others in the group encouraged John to use spiritual practices if he ever has sleepless nights in the future. Colin told him, "If you can't sleep, maybe that is God telling you that you need to talk to him... and he has your attention!"

Henry's Assessment

Henry felt called to engage in the practice of prayer. He was inspired by Douglas McKelvey's book *Every Moment Holy*. He now understands that "blessing the Lord" ought to be one of our primary functions. McKelvey's book offers liturgical prayers for everything from washing the dishes to doing laundry. We can reclaim activities in every area of our lives as prayerful, worshipful acts. Henry also resolved to take more initiative in his career. He has not applied himself as much as he would like and doesn't

seem to have the same traits as his colleagues. He is not a “typical” car salesman because he is extremely kind, honest, empathetic, and patient. However, he is realizing that the Christian qualities that keep him from achieving high sales numbers also make him unique in the car sales industry. The group encouraged him to update his resume—just to reflect on the things he has achieved in his 16 years as a car salesman. They also recommended that John simply apply for other job opportunities to rethink and reimagine where God has called him. Perhaps God will call him elsewhere. Perhaps God will show him that he is exactly where he is supposed to be.

Colin’s Assessment

About three weeks prior to our January assessment, at one of the Delta group meetings, Colin recognized that he had low-grade anger and resentment constantly simmering under his surface. Part of his disruption was recognizing that he was always thinking about his disdain for his boss. Colin had become hyper-focused on the ways his boss mistreated his colleagues. She was not honest, she was selfish, she had a short temper, and she used foul language constantly. Colin felt convicted to start practicing the discipline of praying for her every day. Colin decided to pray for her to prosper. He began to pray before, during, and after work. This practice helped him to see his boss as loved by God and made in the image of God. It also helped him better understand the defensiveness and resentment he felt towards his boss and move towards more love and compassion for her.

Alex’s Assessment

Alex resisted reaching out to his father, but he finally was able to make the call for his genogram. This helped Alex reconnect with his father, and they began to talk

more regularly. At the time, Alex had a young baby at home, so he was struggling to find time for prayer and rest. He also realized that he had been using food and alcohol as coping mechanisms to deal with his stress and depression. He and his wife, who is not a believer, found that alcohol was causing a cycle of stress and anxiety in their home. She got anxious and panicked if she had too much to drink. As a result, both Alex and his wife decided to give up alcohol for three years until the baby was older. Alex was struggling, however, to enjoy being with his family without indulging in food or drink. For much of his life, family gatherings centered around consumption. He realized he needed to be more present with his family and more of a witness to his wife.

The Disruption Gets Disrupted

Shortly after this assessment in January, we began to see reports of the spread of the Coronavirus in China and in the United States. By the time cases were first reported in the United States in January 2020,⁵⁴ our group had been meeting weekly at our church for four months. Our new-found Delta group had successfully grown closer in our relationships and stronger in our encouragement of one another. We also were thinking critically about how God uses the power of disruption as a tool to invite us into spiritual transformation. At this time, we were beginning to grow further and intentionally step out into new places of disruption. The goal was to see if those disruptive moments would reveal where God was at work in the world and at work in

⁵⁴ "First Travel-related Case of 2019 Novel Coronavirus Detected in United States," *Center for Disease Control and Prevention*, January 21, 2020, <https://www.cdc.gov/media/releases/2020/p0121-novel-coronavirus-travel-case.html>.

our own hearts. We would then see if those moments would lead us towards spiritual renewal and transformation.

What I didn't expect, however, was that I would soon be disrupted myself. Instead of merely helping *others*, my focus on disruption would radically challenge my own spiritual journey.

Our last in-person meeting was March 11, 2020. We were half-way through the cohort curriculum when it seemed that the whole world fell apart. This colossal upheaval brought my entire project to a halt and forced me into my own area of disruption. I had to stop and address areas of my own unhealthy spirituality, attachments, and idols. My project, which began as a way for me to pastorally guide *others* into spaces of disruption, soon became an exploration of *my own* disruptive moment. I became undone. I became hopeless and afraid. My heart was filled with deep despair and restlessness. Our routines were upended, and all my unhealthy spirituality came to the surface. In complete shock, I became prayerless and hopeless. I was no longer attentive to my family or to myself. What started as a temporary shutdown gradually extended to a total shift in lifestyle, spiritual mindset, and worldview.

The lockdown of 2020 was a disruption beyond what any of us had experienced in our lifetimes. I was in a unique position, however, because I had been studying the theology of disruption for the previous two years. What began as a disorienting moment slowly grew into an opportunity to embrace the ways God was at work in my own spiritual transformation. My project to document change in *others* became a recorded history of my own spiritual journey. I came to a deeper understanding of the faithfulness of God, my own need for spiritual growth, and my dependence on Christ.

Winter 2020—Watching the News and Hoping for the Best

Shortly after the United States began to report cases of COVID-19 that were the result of community spread, the first positive case in New York was reported on March 1, 2020.⁵⁵ I remember teaching a Sunday school class for adults in our church on the Synoptic Gospels after the news broke. I had been trying to teach, but the discussions kept getting off topic. The minds of the class participants were preoccupied by concerns about the spread of COVID-19 in the United States. The first case in the United States was reported in Washington State in January. The first case in New York City was reported on March 1. In all these cases, people had contracted the disease in other countries. The hope was that they would quarantine and minimize exposure, and we could mitigate any community spread in the United States.

On March 4, however, things became increasingly concerning. The first case of community spread in the United States was reported, and it was in Westchester County. Specifically, it was in the city of New Rochelle, which was just eight miles from our house. A 50-year-old attorney tested positive, as well as his wife, son, daughter, and a neighbor who had driven him to the hospital.⁵⁶ The attorney had not traveled to another country. The virus reached him through community spread, and he was a regular commuter in the New York City transit system. This created a new level of concern. As a result, many people in his community were asked to quarantine, including members of our congregation. COVID-19 was coming close to home. Yet, we still held out hope

⁵⁵ Ella Torres, "A timeline of Cuomo's and Trump's responses to coronavirus outbreak," *ABC News*, April 2020, <https://abcnews.go.com/US/timeline-cuomos-trumps-responses-coronavirus-outbreak/story?id=69914641>.

⁵⁶ Torres, "Timeline."

that this disease could be contained and that we could avoid the worst-case scenario of a total, uncontrolled outbreak.

As the news of new cases and quarantines became the primary topic of conversation everywhere, we discovered that our immediate neighbor was in voluntary quarantine. They had been exposed to COVID-19 through a day care facility in New Rochelle. I soon realized, however, that they neglected to tell me this. I was in their backyard, helping them with a project. While I was there, my wife texted me, “come home now.” I came home and asked what was wrong. She said I might have been exposed. This would be my last interaction with a neighbor for many months. New Yorkers retreated into their homes and waited to see what would happen next.

Yet, that same week, we had tickets to see a Broadway show on Friday. As far as we knew, the only local cases were in New Rochelle and the surrounding community. My family had just seen *Hamilton* on Broadway on February 27, and we went to another show on March 6. With each event we went to in New York City, we noticed more anxiety and fear. Masks began to appear, and hand washing became more prolific. My heart started to race when I walked into an elevator. I began to reduce my visits to grocery stores and large gatherings.

On March 6, we took my parents to a preview of the new show *Six*, which is a musical about the six wives of Henry VIII. This was the first time I felt stress in a crowd. We were sitting close together and were with my parents, who are in their 80's. We knew that the virus posed a greater risk to the elderly, but it was still not widespread enough to be an imminent threat. My wife and I tried to be careful in our breathing and were hyper-aware of any nearby coughing. The intermission restroom break caused particular concern. This was the first time I saw people wearing masks and carefully washing their hands. Everyone seemed to have the same mindset: we bought these

tickets months ago; we wanted to watch the show; we were praying that the pandemic scare wasn't a real threat. Later we would find out that one of the ushers at that performance had COVID-19.

For the next week, we watched news reports that cases continued to rise in Westchester County. On March 7, a day after we saw *Six*, a state of emergency was declared. Confirmed cases in Westchester rose to 76, then reached 89 later in the day. New York Governor Andrew Cuomo said the declaration would allow the government to help local health departments that "are very stressed."⁵⁷ The rest of that week, companies in the New York metropolitan region encouraged everyone to work from home if possible.

In this context, our Delta group met in person for the last time. The meeting no longer had the positive atmosphere we had experienced in the previous months. It was tense and somber, and we stopped hugging and shaking hands. There was a sense of imminent danger, and we didn't know how we could proceed with our in-person meetings. The news of the rapid spread of COVID was our primary topic of discussion. We waited in hope that we could contain the outbreak. Governor Cuomo had recently announced that there would be a shutdown of schools, houses of worship, and large gatherings within a 15-mile radius of the New Rochelle outbreak. We knew people in that region and began to realize that this crisis was coming closer than we cared to admit.

By the next weekend, cases were increasing exponentially. It was announced that all New York City schools would close on Monday, March 16. This included "New York City, Westchester County, and Suffolk County, as statewide confirmed cases reached

⁵⁷ Torres, "Timeline."

729.”⁵⁸ Lines at Costco and Trader Joes were getting longer. Essential supplies like toilet paper, paper towels, hand sanitizer, and cleaning supplies were becoming hard to find. By the end of the next week, most grocery store shelves were bare. Our community was preparing for the worst.

Two Weeks to Slow the Spread

The week all things went dark, grocery shopping caused a new level of stress. Supplies of hand sanitizers and gloves were ravaged at the local Costco. People were creating astronomically huge stockpiles of toilet paper and paper towels, thinking that this might be the last time they could visit a store for months. I began to feel anxiety as we shopped next to our neighbors. We tried to be cordial and polite, but there was also an underlying desperation causing us to buy as much and as many things as possible. I saw shopping carts overflowing with frozen food, toiletries, basic items, and other non-basic items. I recall a conversation at a Trader Joe's with another parent I knew from the elementary school my children were attending. They had bought an extra freezer and were planning to buy all the meat products they could find. They were at Trader Joe's to buy as many frozen items as possible. The panic was as contagious as the coronavirus. With each conversation with friends and neighbors, my own internal fears and sense of dread increased. Whatever sense of optimism I was trying to hold on to was slipping away like sand through my fingers.

I thought they were crazy at the time, but their anxiety and stress would soon become nationwide.

⁵⁸ Torres, "Timeline."

During the first week of the shutdown, it felt like we were living in a science fiction novel or a dystopian psychological thriller. The roads were empty. The bars and restaurants were closed. The grocery store shelves became more and more bare, and we all entered a time of unprecedented, worldwide disruption. New York City came to a stop. Times Square soon became a ghost town. Neighbors stopped walking their dogs and the parks and playgrounds were empty. My family became confined to our home, and we would soon be embracing an entirely different reality.

My Wife at the Hospital

As I stated before, my wife Amy is a physician. She quickly became a frontline worker in the effort to control the pandemic. She had been involved in the New York City Ebola scare in 2014 and was trained to be a first responding physician in Harlem if needed. This time it was different. The virus was spreading locally and rapidly. Drastic measures were needed to reverse the course of this disease.

We stopped wondering *if* she would get COVID and began wondering *when* she would get it. We assumed that she would contract the coronavirus from her work, and it was our job to make sure that she didn't spread it to the rest of the family. Within two weeks after the lockdown, she discovered that one of her colleagues had contracted the virus. Amy had been in her office without a mask right before her colleague was diagnosed. Amy had been directly exposed. There was still limited testing available, so the only thing she could do was wait and see if any symptoms would emerge.

We forced everyone in our family to wash hands so much that our hands became chapped and sore. We used Clorox wipes on everything after she came home from work every day, and my wife and I slept in separate rooms. This would be our living situation for the next six months. When Amy would come home from work, we would

stay in our rooms and let her wash her clothes and take a shower. Her laundry went immediately into the wash. There were no hugs, no kisses, and no close contact. Yes, New York City was on lockdown mode, but so was the Magneson household.

The New Household Regimen

We entered a daily regimen of sanitizing and cleaning. My son's job was to take out the trash and replace all the hand towels daily. My youngest was in charge of disinfecting the bathrooms. My middle daughter took care of the pets and the dishes. My wife mainly took care of her own possible work exposure and tried to prevent us from contracting the disease. We stopped all gatherings and playdates with friends.

My wife was in a constant state of anxiety. We became accustomed yelling at the kids daily. This was a symptom of their lack of understanding about the seriousness of the situation, combined with Amy's own work-related stress. Coughing was not allowed. Nor was sneezing or breathing in anyone else's direction. One time during dinner, my son made a joke by breathing directly on his sister's face. Amy didn't find this funny at all. She proceeded to lecture him about the death she was seeing at the hospitals. One of her much older colleagues would actually die from COVID-19. She described this grim reality to my son in passionate detail. He never made a joke about that again. It was one of the most stressful moments of our entire lives. This was my new earthquake. I was reliving 1989 all over again, and the ground beneath me was shaking.

It took me a while to realize that I was experiencing significant trauma. It also took me a while to understand where God was at work in this disruption. During the first few months of the pandemic, I could not properly see anything redeemable in my situation. I became numb and callous. I stopped praying. I stopped reading scripture. I

simply entered head-first into a deep, dark valley of social media, news updates, and all the fear this evoked. It was many months before I finally embraced this situation as a means of profound spiritual transformation. God was breaking me down to uncover the areas of my life where I needed to surrender and depend on him more than ever before.

Needing to Care for Others When I Needed Care

During the pandemic, I had great difficulty being a pastor to a church that was also experiencing anxiety and fear. I was counseling over Zoom and dealing with the individuals in our church family who were suffering from loneliness and depression. I was counseling one member through decisions about how to engage with her mother, who was sick and dying in a nursing home. She had to figure out how to visit even though her mother was diagnosed with COVID. Then, she had to cope with the loss of her mother and grieve in the absence of a funeral. I also got frantic calls from members having anxiety attacks at 3 a.m. I was confronted by other church members who were going through marital strife and facing divorce. These burdens were often overwhelming for me to carry. How could I care for others when I felt like I was the one in crisis? I began to pull away from all the commitments I had previously made and soon had to face my personal and pastoral limitations.

It was also challenging to figure out how we could function as a church during the lockdown. This fell to me since I had taken over managing and maintaining the website. As stated before, this responsibility was one of the symptoms of my over-functioning and overcommitting, as it wasn't part of my official job description. We had to learn how to utilize our web platform to allow people to worship from home. I made a push to do a "livestream" service on either YouTube or Facebook Live, which we could broadcast from the church offices each Sunday. The music director and I decided

to do a test run of the livestream on Friday, March 20 to see how it would work for our first virtual service on March 22. The pastors, musicians, and staff would be the only ones in attendance. During our test run, however, we learned that “all non-essential business across the state would have to close under [Governor Cuomo's] ‘New York State on PAUSE’ order.”⁵⁹ According to the New York State government, churches were considered non-essential. We could not even do a live recorded service within the state guidelines. My stomach churned at this news. All the effort we spent trying to solve this problem was rendered useless by the new orders from the governor.

Home Projects and Home Schooling

During the lockdowns, I decided to keep myself busy with new home projects. I made a sizeable order from Home Depot the first week of the lockdown and decided to renovate our living room. We had planned to build a new entry closet and powder room during a future home renovation. I became optimistic that the lockdowns would provide me the opportunity to build them myself, since construction projects were put on hold as well. I filed for the permit with the building department and went to work on the demolition.

The home projects gave me an “escape” from the stress of the pandemic, but it was only temporary. I recall oscillating between feeling ambitious and enthusiastic about working in my spare time, and being despairing and unmotivated. My sleep patterns became unsettled, and I was no longer able to go to the gym for exercise. My body seemed to be convulsing from the disruption in my regular schedule and the anxiety that permeated my subconscious. I would regularly wake up at 3 a.m. with a

⁵⁹ Torres, “Timeline.”

panic attack, then fail to fall back asleep. This led to a general lack of physical, emotional, and spiritual self-care. This affected not just me but my family as well.

Our local school district shifted to online education. My children developed routines of logging in on their own and doing their course work for the day. I did my best to keep up with their curriculums and schedules, but it was confusing to keep track of three different children attending three different schools. I would ask them if they were doing what they were supposed to and made sure they were doing the assignments Amy and I knew about.

By late April, we realized our kids were lying to us.

On Tuesday, April 28, I received a call from my daughter's middle school. I remember the exact date because it was the day the Thunderbirds and Blue Angels were doing a flyover of New York as a show of support for the frontline workers. We were on the roof waiting for the jet fighters to arrive.⁶⁰ The school administrator began the call by asking, "How is your daughter doing?" I said that we were doing great, and everything was fine. She responded, "We were wondering why she hasn't submitted any of her assignments this semester?" I was shocked. We soon discovered that our daughter had been avoiding her classes and watching YouTube and playing Minecraft when we weren't looking. She was failing all of her classes.

This increased the stress in our household tenfold. Amy couldn't help with our daughter's assignments because she was needed at the hospital. I had difficulty interacting with my daughter because her anxiety was exacerbated by the fact that she was so behind in her schoolwork. As a result, my home projects became yet another source of stress. Our living space was a construction zone, my daughter was in need of

⁶⁰ Jen Chung, "Thunderbirds and Blue Angels fly over New York City, April 28, 2020," Gothamist, April 28, 2020, YouTube video, 1:43, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6tJaX8INhTE>.

extra help and attention, and I was not able to give her the focus she deserved. In addition to all this, I was still the associate pastor for the church. It was becoming more difficult to provide guidance and counsel to others when I also felt in desperate need of guidance and counsel.

Writing a Dissertation

When the pandemic struck, I was also supposed to be writing this thesis for my Doctor of Ministry program. I was in a program led by Dr. Chuck DeGroat for “Deepening Soul Care and Spiritual Transformation for Mission.” I had used learnings from this program to deepen soul care and spiritual transformation for my Delta group cohort. However, I had not yet applied any soul care to my own life and ministry. The disconnect between my goals for the project and the reality that I was living during the lockdowns left me with writer’s block.

I had completed two years of research on disruption. I had organized my research into three compelling categories: rootedness in covenant community, embracing crisis and disruption, and being and becoming like Christ. As of May 2020, I had notes and data from the books I had read, but I had not written a single sentence. My writing was supposed to be inspired by the research from the Delta cohort. Thus, my work felt uninspired and incomplete because that cohort research would never be completed.

This began to unravel my sense of call for not just the doctorate program, but for ministry in general. I felt grossly inadequate for either of these worthy endeavors. I grew increasingly disillusioned when I heard about the progress my classmates were making. I had been distracted by home projects, home schooling trauma, and restless nights. So, I was jealous of others who had taken the lockdowns as an opportunity to

rent an Airbnb to retreat and write in solitude and focus. I was in a program aimed at deepening soul care and spiritual transformation for mission, and I felt none of those things. I did not feel like I was taking care of my soul. I also felt unable to move in any direction towards spiritual transformation. What made matters worse was the fact that I was questioning my calling in the mission entirely.

What I soon realized was that this aimlessness was the disruption I needed to embrace. My identity in ministry, sense of purpose and self-worth, and exhaustion from the busyness of ministry, were keeping me from the self-care and spiritual transformation that God was beckoning me towards embracing.

Regathering and Embracing Disruption

It took me a long time to recognize God's purposes in the disruption of a global pandemic. I didn't fully grasp the significant irony of this for many months. My Delta group came to a halt, and I was resigned to the fact that my project had failed. Our group stopped meeting and our "projects" were never finished. I stopped writing and had no real clarity about how to move forward—or if I would move forward at all.

In this moment of unprecedented disruption, I realized that *Steve Magneson* was now the project. God was at work in my own disruption, uncovering the idols that had remained hidden and unchecked for so many years. Through the great disruption of a long year of shutdowns and quarantines, God exposed my insecurities. The events that began as a global crisis soon became a personal, pastoral *identity* crisis. My spiritual insecurities became apparent, and I began to see my own sins of arrogance, codependence, and failure to admit my own shortcomings and limitations. In other words, my resistance to the disruptive pandemic crisis exposed my own idolatry and resistance to the embrace of Christ. Once I moved *towards* the disruption, I began to

experience the freedom of release from the power of my idols. Finally, I was able to increase my reliance on Christ. It was then that I experienced a deep and personal spiritual transformation.

Addressing My Attachments, Idols

The coronavirus pandemic of 2020 forced me to stop a pattern of codependence and over-functioning that I developed over the course of my work as a volunteer, and later employee, of the church. The months during the shutdown gave me the space and time to look back and reflect on my addiction to self-importance. In short, I realized my idol was this simple belief: that the church needed me in order to succeed.

As stated before, at the time the shutdown began, I was overextended and exhausted. I had been stepping into extra roles and responsibilities with little consideration or discernment. The main area that I wrestled with was my addiction to making myself important in the ministry of the church. I realized that I had a deep, internal *need to be needed* by others. I rarely passed by an opportunity that I felt I could handle better than others. I have very little patience for discernment and very limited ability to say “no.” My sense of self-importance was also wrapped up in my pride, arrogance and personal agenda. Many of my relationships in the church had become coercive and manipulative because of my effort to carry out the mission of the church in the way that I thought was best. This even included my work with the Delta group. Adoration and praise from others helped mask how overcommitted I was. I craved compliments about how much I was doing for the church, how hard I worked, and how important I was to our mission. I was able to justify my actions, of course. Many of my efforts were Christ-like in outward appearance. The global shutdown, however,

presented an opportunity for me to seriously question my underlying motives and confront who I was as a follower of Christ.

During this unveiling and undoing, I felt that my sense of self-worth had been ground up and blown away like chaff. I resonated with the prayer of Julian of Norwich: *God's grace and the Church's teaching gave me a deep longing to be wounded in three ways: first, to have my ego ground down into pieces; second, to be able to suffer with others; and third, to have a firm and unfailing desire for God's presence.*⁶¹ I had been doing the ministry for the church, trying to suffer with others and to be in God's presence. I tried to do those things, however, with the fullness of my ego intact. This had become my downfall.

Once I understood this, I was able to rebuild my sense of Christ's presence and trust God's sovereignty to carry out his mission—with or without me. It took these months of reflection to enter new places of growth and maturity. This only happened, however, when I stopped fighting against the disruption, leaned towards my place of brokenness, released my grasp on those exposed idols, and more tightly grasped the hand of Christ. Then, finally, the disruption became a catalyst for spiritual transformation.

⁶¹ Julian of Norwich, *All Shall be Well: her Revelations of Divine Love*, page 23.

Chapter 5: Moving Forward into Disruptive Spaces

This project began with my lived experience of pastoral care to Jennifer, Anthony, and Paul. That experience then inspired a program for a cohort of John, Alex, Henry, and Colin to reframe our view of disruption as a catalyst for transformation. What surprised me, however, was the added impact the project had on me. What started as a phenomenological research project quickly turned into an autoethnographic reflection. As I sought to proactively begin moving a congregation *towards* disruption, disruption unexpectedly found me. The experience has reshaped my inner self, my dependence on Christ, and my place and purpose in pastoral ministry. This disruptive journey has been a significant milestone of transformation, and it has paved a path for a renewed and reshaped mindset for ministry moving forward.

Jennifer

I still cherish the front porch visits to my dear friend Jennifer. I am happy to see her smile as she has returned to her true self. She exudes gratitude to God despite the rough road she traveled. It is a beautiful example of how the church of God can become our truest family in the midst of a broken and isolated world. We have resumed our in-person church services, and Jennifer is there every Sunday. I still am in contact with her social worker, and we continue to monitor her health and well-being to make sure she maintains her spiritual, physical, and mental health. This next Sunday, she is inviting her friend. She won't stop talking about Christ, her faith, and her beloved church community. Her story is inspiring to me and is a testimony of the faithfulness of God during difficult circumstances.

Anthony

I am meeting with Anthony on a regular basis, and it is wonderful to see him contribute to our church in so many ways. He is remarkably different from the man I knew 10 years ago, and he is incredibly humble and compassionate in his service to God and to others. He continually reaches out to other people in our church community who are experiencing suffering. Anthony is the first one to call if there is a cancer diagnosis, or if someone is about to go through chemotherapy. He calls me if there is a pastoral need in the church. He is an incredible voice of encouragement, and he affirms the goodness of God in some very dark places. Anthony has learned to embrace disruption and to move towards those who are experiencing deep need.

We also serve together on our building committee, and Anthony is fastidious in the accounting of the project. Our church family is so thankful for his faithful accounting of the income and expenses for such a large undertaking. The pandemic has been tough for Anthony, however, because he lives alone and is especially vulnerable to complications caused by COVID-19. While he has mostly worshipped remotely, I still am able to see him online for church meetings and pastoral calls. I am thankful for members of our church like Anthony and Jennifer. They are living examples of God's faithfulness and of how dependent we are on Christ and his love.

Paul

I often reflect on my experience with Paul and his struggle through his depression. The experience reminds me of the importance of setting pastoral

boundaries. It also taught me to remain steady in my role as a pastor even if someone rejects my pastoral advice. Sometimes, a cutoff from the church community is the disruption we need to embrace. I am reminded of the wisdom that Christ himself gives in Matthew 18 and how difficult—yet important—that wisdom is:

¹⁵ “If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. ¹⁶ But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. ¹⁷ If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. ¹⁸ Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. (Matthew 18:15-19)

It is challenging to know, however, when it is time to allow someone to deal with the consequences of their own choices. As a pastor, I have found that it is the moment when you need to let go and recognize your own limitations. In a way, that is what all disruption is. It is coming to the end of yourself and your own abilities and moving towards a deeper dependence on God.

The Delta Team

For this project, I had gathered a group of four men from our church community to help them embrace disruption in their lives and experience God’s spiritual renewal and transformation. The group, however, soon became a place for me to process the challenges during the global pandemic. I was brought to an unprecedented place of disruption and began to question many things that I had taken for granted. I had been focused on where God might provide spiritual growth for others but was blinded to the unchecked areas in my own life. My own idols and dependency on God were revealed.

The Delta group was a tool that God used to help me process my own areas of spiritual growth.

Henry experienced a difficult road during the pandemic. He expressed nervousness about going back to work, and he still feels inadequate in his job as a car salesman. He shows incredible compassion and care for his colleagues and continually reaches out to them if they have needs. Many of them, unfortunately, contracted the virus during the past year, and some came very close to losing their lives. Henry continued to be a witness to them, offering them encouragement—even when he got the virus himself. Henry spent two weeks quarantined in his basement. Yet, he continued to serve others even when he had needs of his own. We were all excited and encouraged when he recovered.

As for his career, he still questions his work as a car salesman. One of the disruptions we encouraged Henry to do was to work on his resume and apply for other jobs. While he never fully looked for another position, the resume helped him to feel that God is using him where he is now. He seems to have a renewed sense of purpose and is encouraged to serve in any way that he can. He also, for the first time in 16 years, was the number one car salesman for a month at his dealership. I was thankful to be able to celebrate that small victory for Henry, and I could see the joy this accomplishment gave him.

The Delta group also helped me to see, first-hand, the affect the lockdown had on individuals who were living alone. Colin had been struggling with his relationship with his boss and coworkers prior to our Delta group meetings. The pandemic took a serious toll on Colin because he lived alone and was far away from his family back in Georgia. The shutdowns affected his company so much that they closed the entire office in New

York. Rather than relocate to a different office with the same company, he took the opportunity to move back with his family in Georgia and work on the family farm.

Colin describes his first reaction to the lockdowns as a positive one. “In the first part of when all this was going on, I felt I had time to do creative things, spend time on myself, and to invest in relationships I have neglected. But the longer this has gone on, the less motivated I have been to do all those things. At this point, I just don’t want to do anything.” It was surprising to see that Colin didn’t have motivation to do any of the things he wanted to do. He found it difficult to even get up in the morning for any prayer. He would just hit the snooze button and log online for work, which he never did before. During our interview in May of 2020, he lamented his lack of initiative and desire. This was due to the “malaise” of living alone and also working at an office that was in the process of closing.

We had a farewell party for Colin during his last week in New York. We spent an entire day on our front lawn and scheduled visitors from the church to come by and talk with Colin. That day was one of the highlights of our experience during the pandemic. I was reminded of how wonderful our church community is and how faithful they had been even in our isolation and separation. By that time, we really didn’t know who was still listening to our church podcasts and online worship. The goodbye party helped all of us cherish the love and fellowship that we share in Christ. We continued to keep in touch even when Colin returned to Georgia. He gave us a tour of the farm over FaceTime, and we saw such a contrast from the doom and gloom Colin experienced in New York. At the time, he was overseeing the harvest of their seedless watermelons and enjoying time with his mother and father.

For John, his work and commuting schedule in the fall was exhausting. He was overextended and stretched thin with minimal sleep and long work hours. After our

initial work in the Delta group, he began to practice more of a regular sabbath and made efforts to have a more regular sleep cycle. At first, the shutdowns gave John some relief from his never-ending schedule. He was able to slow down to get some much-needed rest. His commuting time was reduced significantly, but he confessed that he spent most of the time he saved on more work. For the most part, he found the shutdown to be good for his family. They spent a lot more time together—for both good and ill.

As the pandemic continued, however, his work schedule got increasingly worse. With the world relying on the internet more than ever, his workload at Google increased tremendously. The Delta group helped him grow in his spiritual disciplines, but his overloaded work schedule continues to be a challenge. During the late summer of 2020, both of our families were blessed to be able to go camping together. Spending four days without internet, phones, or work email was a highlight of 2020 for both of our families. I realized how much we had missed being with others. The experience gave us a hopeful glimmer of what life would look like when we returned to a sense of normalcy again.

For Alex, the pandemic brought complete upheaval to his work as a middle school math teacher. At the peak of the shutdowns, he could barely get 10 percent of his students to log in to the online classroom. There was a lack of equipment, internet access, and parental supervision for many of the families in the district. As a result, Alex lamented the loss of education for these students, which would only exacerbate the divisions that already existed. He and his wife, who is also a teacher, were both instructing remotely while simultaneously raising a toddler and a fifth grader. Life for them was more or less survival.

Sadly, Alex's father passed away in April, shortly after the pandemic started. His father apparently died from a heart condition and breathing problems, but he did not test positive for COVID-19. Alex was grateful to have reconnected with his father for the Delta group's genogram project in the fall and had that time with him before he passed. Because of the lockdowns, Alex had to navigate the management of his father's estate from a distance and was not able to arrange a proper funeral. Alex was able to get in a good rhythm for his spiritual practices. He maintains a routine of Bible study and prayer in the early morning before his family wakes up. In his reflection on the COVID crisis, Alex recognized that not everyone will respond to the disruption with a spiritual awakening. He quoted Origen of Alexandria, saying that "the same sun that melts the wax, hardens the clay."⁶² Not everyone will be transformed by the disruption in the same way.

The Same Sun that Melts the Wax, Hardens the Clay

As stated before, resisting disruptive moments can expose our idolatry and our resistance to the embrace of Christ. On the contrary, embracing disruption releases us from the power of idols and increases our reliance upon Christ. Embracing disruption is an important tool that is used by God in scripture to elicit spiritual transformation. However, not everyone is transformed by disruption. Not every revelation given to us by God leads to faith. We see this in Paul's letter to the Romans, as he describes how some respond to the revelation of God:

⁶² Paraphrase of what Origen of Alexandria wrote in *De Principiis, Book III*: "...the sun, by one and the same power of its heat, melts wax indeed, but dries up and hardens mud not that its power operates one way upon mud, and in another way upon wax; but that the qualities of mud and wax are different, although according to nature they are one thing, both being from the earth."

²⁰ Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made. So they are without excuse; ²¹ for though they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their senseless minds were darkened. ²² Claiming to be wise, they became fools; ²³ and they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles. (Romans 1:20-23)

Not all of the people in this project were transformed by disruption. Some simply got by during the pandemic and did not experience profound spiritual renewal. For me however, personally and pastorally, the pandemic has been a revelatory disruption that has helped melt some of the wax.

Curriculum: What I Would Keep

The most beneficial component of the curriculum for everyone in the Delta group was creating and presenting their family genograms. It was remarkable to reframe our friendship and understanding of each other through the study of our family systems and how they impacted our worldviews, ambitions, desires, and inner struggles. We also paired that with the Enneagram, which gave us more complete views of one another. This helped us offer insight into each other's backgrounds. Putting our family histories into a pictorial format helped each of us to identify connections, patterns, and repeated behaviors that we hadn't noticed before. The Enneagram also helped to show us how we respond under stress, where we reside on a regular basis, and how we function when we are living in emotional and spiritual health.

We also had the book *The Art of Neighboring* in the curriculum, which we were able to study over Zoom once the pandemic hit. This book gave us practical ways to get out of our comfort zones and show love for those in our neighborhood and our community. During the lockdowns, this challenged us to reach out and serve those

immediately around us. My family moved a set of “socially distanced” patio chairs from our back yard to the front lawn. This provided an opportunity for my wife and me to sit and chat and invite neighbors we saw walking by to join us. We have a great walking neighborhood, and we realized we often miss those who pass by our house because we are either inside or in our back yard. This moved us out of our comfort zone and into the disruption of conversation. We were forced to be flexible with our time to make accommodations for unexpected guests.

The weekly Delta group meetings were key for routine and regularity. At first, it was hard to find a time that worked for everyone. Once we got in the regular rhythm of meeting, however, we were able to adjust our schedule when necessary. Sometimes members would show up exhausted, in crisis, or in need of prayer. Having regular meetings helped us be flexible to the group members' different needs. It also allowed us to change the schedule if we wanted to focus on certain topics longer. The genograms, for example, took a lot longer than I had anticipated. We ended up spending a whole two hours on each genogram. It was a great opportunity to participate in active listening, ask questions, and to provide insight into where we saw patterns, cutoffs, and areas that might help grow one another's self-awareness.

Curriculum: What I Would Change

The Delta cohort schedule needed to be compatible with the members' work and family obligations. The group I assembled had some very challenging schedules, which made planning outreach events and retreats difficult. Most everyone had weekends free, but the car salesman and I worked most weekends. I could usually coordinate weekend cohort events with my Sunday duties because leading the group was a part of my job as a pastor. However, Henry would lose a significant amount of revenue if he

took Saturday and a Sunday off. On the other hand, a schoolteacher finds it hard to take time off during the week. Alex would have had to take vacation time. While this was workable, the scheduling conflicts made retreat planning nearly impossible. In the future, I would recommend that the retreat begin the cohort program, possibly in the late summer or early fall. That would accommodate the members' work schedules, but family vacations would still need to be taken into account.

The length of the cohort was also a bit intense. It might work better to shorten the total length to four to six months, or to create two separate segments of three months each (Sept/Oct/Nov and Feb/March/April). The Thanksgiving and holiday breaks were tough to schedule around, and May and June just got busy with everything else. I was impressed with how consistent the members were. They took the material seriously and rarely missed meetings. If I would skip one book, it would be *Every Good Endeavor* by Tim Keller. While the book offers a good basis for proper work theology, the material could easily be summarized in a 20 to 30-minute lecture. All of this would depend on the group's level of spiritual maturity.

Determination of Success

As stated before, intentionally leading church members towards places of disruption had mixed results. Our group was able to uncover some of our hidden motives and desires. Some members were challenged to stop procrastinating in areas like spiritual disciplines, evangelism, and service to the poor. Once the in-person meetings ended, however, several members moved back into their old habits and practices. This makes it difficult to assess whether this program is effective overall in helping individuals embrace disruption as a means of spiritual transformation. This then leads to two questions for future cohorts. The first question is the one this study

sought to answer: How can we foster opportunities for members to intentionally move into places of disruption for spiritual transformation? The program can help ignite areas that were previously dormant. It can also reveal some of the idols that we have left unchecked. Additionally, it provides the opportunity for us to do some deep inner work to see where our desires and ambitions don't align with the character and love of Christ. The initial program provided space for all these good things, but not everyone experienced the same level of transformation. The second question is then: How can this program help *prepare* participants theologically to assume a posture of readiness when disruption occurs? In addition to providing places where disruption can happen intentionally, we can also provide the tools that will allow participants to respond quickly to future moments of crisis or disruption. This can be true in their own lives as well as in the lives of others.

This is perhaps why my own experience of disruption was so transformational. For two years, I had been praying, studying, and spending so much time and energy on the theology of disruption. I had experienced disruptive moments in the past and sought to help invite others into the powerful experience of embracing disruption. It took me a while to realize, but I believe the COVID-19 crisis happened at the most opportune time for my own ministry and spiritual growth. I was so eager and excited to share what I had learned about disruption with others. I had NO idea that God had more transformation in store for me—more than I could have ever realized.

My story has ended with my “ego ground to pieces,” and yet with me more grounded in my calling as a pastor. Over the past 12 months, I have limited my commitments. I have reacted more selectively to immediate, critical needs. I have been able to more carefully protect my time, my self-care, and my flexibility to serve others. Many of my empty ambitions and bad habits of coercion and manipulation have

subsided. I seem to, for the moment, have an awareness of my idolatry and sin that helps me step back and reflect on what my underlying motives are. I am better able to understand what unmet need I am trying to satisfy in an unhealthy way.

Instead, I have a new awareness of my own temptations and shortcomings. This has helped me realize that I need to be faithful to where God has called me *now*. That is enough. I am no longer asking: “What is God’s will for my place in ministry?” Instead, the question is: “Where is God already at work?” If I look hard enough, I usually find God at work in those places of disruption. I am ready and willing to move towards those places to see what profound spiritual transformation God has in store—for me and for those who surround me.

A Deeper Level of Self-Care for a Pastor

As the project was coming to an end, I was challenged to take my own interior work to a deeper level. One of my colleagues from my Doctor of Ministry cohort works as a therapist. In one of our conversations, she said bluntly: “I don’t trust any therapist that hasn’t first done their own therapy.” This resonated with me on a profound level. Here I was at the end of this project (a project inspired by challenging and traumatic stories of pastoral care), and I had never attended a single counseling session to process my own spiritual and emotional needs. I had been in full-time ministry for over twelve years and had never sought my own therapy. I had always viewed therapy as something for broken people, so I had never considered it for myself. My colleague’s statement inspired me to seek out a professional counselor to process my experiences as a pastor. Through the recommendation of a friend, I scheduled sessions with a local therapist whose clientele was mainly made up of active Christian clergy.

In my first therapy session, I acknowledged that this was not just my first therapy in my time as a pastor, but my first counseling session *ever*. There was a little bit of nervousness but also excitement to explore new areas for spiritual growth and healing. I described the stories of caring for Jennifer, Anthony, and Paul. I shared my excitement about doing pastoral ministry for those who are experiencing significant need. I also shared the challenges of not always being able to help in the right way. In the case of Paul's suicide, there was still work for me to do to process the grief and trauma of that experience. I not only watched him spiral down into the depths of depression, but I was also the one to help the family pick up the pieces and move on. The night of the suicide, I went to the house to be with his new widow, and we processed our shock and grief together. She asked me to be there to help explain to her two sons that their father was dead and not going to come back. This was uncharted territory at the time, and I had never processed how it was affecting me emotionally.

Paul's wife also asked me to give the eulogy at his funeral. This too was a challenge because of the complicated circumstances surrounding his suicide, and because I was trying to minister to a grieving community while I was grieving myself. It wasn't until five years after the incident that I processed the emotional burden with a therapist. It was extremely liberating to have someone there for me in that way.

It was in this session that I also realized the challenges I faced as a pastor during a pandemic. I was experiencing trauma of my own, having to care for a family with a wife who was a frontline worker in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic. Yet again, I was asked to provide care and counseling for others and didn't seek it for myself. Therapy gave me an eye-opening realization: My therapist was only there for *me*! There was no expectation or responsibility for me to provide care for the therapist. There was no reciprocity. It was a one-way relationship that gave me a deep sense of

wholeness I could not quite explain. Within a few minutes after the end of the first session, I broke down and cried. Not from sadness or grief, but from gratitude. I simply felt full.

The fullness and gratitude I felt was like a spring that had just been widened, and the flow that had been a moderate stream was now a gushing fountain. The only phrase that encompassed the emotion of that moment was sincere thankfulness. I was thankful for the long journey of disruption that brought me to this place of reception. This space of listening and understanding ushered in a new sense of self-knowledge and self-empathy. It was okay to be vulnerable in my brokenness and sorrow. It was okay to offer myself grace. I also came to understand the grace of God in a new way. I was not just giving lip-service to the grace of God as I cared for others. This was me receiving the grace of God in a magnified and personal way.

Within 10 minutes after my counseling session, I spontaneously called up a flower shop and ordered my wife a bountiful bouquet of spring lilies and roses. There was no birthday or anniversary, no agenda or apology. I did it out of an overflowing sense of gratitude. This outpouring of love showed me the power of deep spiritual self-care. It allows God to do the work of healing and restoration in me before I try to offer that healing to others. Pastoral care became more exciting to me and seemed to provide a new world of possibilities. I felt empowered to embrace disruption in a new way—from a place of a deeper wholeness and fullness. I came to a clearer understanding of this project and the purpose of my doctoral degree, and I developed a new perspective of ministry moving forward.

I continued to meet with my therapist over the next several weeks, and we explored additional areas of need. One important area of weakness that I discovered during the pandemic was my habit of over-functioning and overcommitting. To work

on this, I looked at the instances where I felt compelled to volunteer and take charge and thought about how my own interior insecurities were reflected. What I discovered, as mentioned in Chapter 4, was my *need to be needed*. This also revealed the arrogance that routinely led me to believe that I was the one who could do it best. I had an addiction to praise and adoration from others. It is no wonder that the hardest command in scripture is from Psalm 46:

“Be still and know that I am God.”

The restlessness of keeping busy is connected to the way I wrap my identity up in my accomplishments and achievements. I am tempted to see being still and as a waste of time. Being still, however, is often what God wants for me the most. It is the space where I can stop and *receive* without an agenda or expectation of reciprocity. Having the courage to take the time to *be still* is similar to the having the courage to seek out the counsel of a therapist. It comes from a place of weariness, brokenness, and humility, but it leads to receiving an abundance of mercy, grace, and fullness. Stillness is the disruptive place where I can break the pattern of transactional and reciprocal ministry. It is a place for me to simply receive, and to acknowledge that Christ sees me as worthy of love because of who I am as a child of God—not what I *do* as a child of God. This has become the new benefit of embracing disruption. It does not just transform how our lives reflect the *righteousness* of Christ, but it also transforms how our lives can be filled with the *love* of Christ. Disruption is both a place for transformation and a means of deeper understanding of God’s great and abundant love.

The Next Chapter of Embracing Disruption

I am continuing my work as a pastor in Westchester County with a new sense of gratitude, fullness, and love. My journey of embracing disruption led to a place of

spiritual transformation. I feel that God used this experience to grant me a deeper understanding of the power given to us through the Holy Spirit. We go forth as the royal priesthood as temples that are first and foremost filled with mercy and love. We overflow with that love and gratitude as we enter into spaces of disruption to see where God is at work.

Last month I visited Arlene, another member of our church, in the hospital. She had been unresponsive for the previous three days, and her husband Gary asked that I come to pray with her and talk to her. When I arrived, we were able to see slight movements in response to the scripture, to our prayers, and to our conversations. It was a glimmer of hope in what was otherwise a devastatingly disruptive crisis. Arlene has been in the hospital for 10 months in an effort to fix her broken heart. She was diagnosed with a rare heart condition that required a heart transplant. She finally received the new heart but had been struggling with complications, infections, and exhaustions. When I visited her, she had lost most of her hair, had bruises all over her body, and was dependent on a breathing ventilator to stay alive.

My family and I have been close friends with Arlene and Gary for over twenty years. My wife and I even asked them to be godparents in 2010 when our daughter was born. Arlene is an important presence in our lives, so her illness led me into a new encounter with significant disruption. Gary said to me, "If I lose her, I am going to need a lot of help." I responded, "I am all yours." I offered this promise as a close friend, but also with an understanding of how God can use disruption to reveal a deeper sense of his faithfulness and love.

After months of transplants, surgeries, infections, and complications, Arlene died this morning. She died with Gary and her family at her side and left all of us with holes in our hearts. I will now enter into the next chapter of embracing disruption as I offer

myself to Gary and to his family in their time of grief. This will become my new space of supporting those who are experiencing great sadness, while at the same time working through my own grief and loss.

What is different for me in this new place of disruption? What has changed in my new effort to move into the space of Gary's disruption, in comparison to my experiences with Jennifer, Anthony, and Paul? On many levels, not much has changed. I entered into this space with fear and great sadness. I came into that room struggling to know what to say, or if I should say anything at all. In many ways, this is the same calling and mission I had before I began the project: to walk with people in disruptive spaces to see where God is at work in our lives; to be attentive to where God's grace, mercy, and faithfulness will be revealed.

Yet, on another level everything has changed. I was able to enter that space with a deeper understanding of who I was and what my limitations were. I had a better understanding of how to be still and simply know that God is God. I was also able to enter into the crisis and disruption with a new sense of fullness and gratitude. I look forward to seeing how God will continue to reveal more of that fullness and gratitude in the years to come. I pray that I can share that fullness with others and gather with our beloved church community to embrace disruptions and the transformations that follow.

Appendix A

Delta Group Schedule 2019-20

September 25, 2019

Overview

What does it mean for us to experience “spiritual transformation?”

Jung Young Lee states the following in *The Theology of Change*:

“To be good means to be in accord with the way of change, which is equivalent to saying that justification (or righteousness) is to be in accord with the divine. To be evil means to be in disharmony with the process of change.”⁶³

This view of evil as a “disharmony with the process of change” suggests that to experience true Christian discipleship, church members ought to embrace the process of change in their lives as a vital aspect of their spiritual sanctification. So often, however, Christian discipleship is seen as simply avoiding “public sins” and generally obeying God’s commands. While those avoidances are important, they can sometimes leave the hidden, darkened areas unchecked: our cultural idols, our apathy towards others, and our lack of obedience in areas of social justice, reconciliation, and restoration of all things.

Peter Holmes similarly states in *Becoming More Human*:

“I have come to the conclusion that human nature is in a permanent place of self-deception, whereby we conceal the real narrative about ourselves with a ‘cover story’ which we choose to let others believe while we ourselves only half believe. For most of us, the blind arrogance of our nature is to think outwardly more highly of ourselves than we should while denying the true darkness in all of us, described in Scripture as evil.”⁶⁴

In an effort to foster deeper spiritual transformation in our church community, I am interested to see if a season of “intentional disruption” in the lives of community members can help Christians reveal those false narratives and places of self-deception. By providing opportunities that intentionally take us to places of discomfort, uncertainty, and challenge, can we provide a more deeply connected community and deeper experiences of growth, renewal, and transformation?

The question is:

How can the church community embrace disruption as an opportunity for spiritual growth, renewal, and transformation?

The hypothesis is:

Through the use of a nine-month curriculum, church members in a small group can be invited into different opportunities for disruption. Through physical, spiritual, cultural, and emotional disruption, the church community can experience tremendous opportunities for growth, renewal, and transformation.

⁶³ Jung Young Lee, *The Theology of Change: A Christian Concept of God in an Eastern Perspective*, (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1979), 63.

⁶⁴ Peter R. Holmes, *Becoming More Human: Exploring the Interface of Spirituality, Discipleship, and Therapeutic Faith Community*, (Milton Keynes: Paternoster Press, 2005), 121.

The project is:

Encounter a nine-month intensive curriculum of weekly meetings, retreats, and projects to provide disruptive experiences to foster spiritual growth, renewal, and transformation.

2019-20 Schedule

September 2019 – Self-Assessment

- September 25, 2019 – Intro and Self-Assessment
 - Understanding of sin as a reluctance to change
 - Tasks: Ideas of disruptive engagements we can take in the next few months
- Set up 1:1 Meetings
 - Consideration of the deep areas that remain hidden from others
 - Document desired change for each cohort member, either in writing or (confidential) recorded audio testimony

October 2019 – Discipline

****Reading: *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality (EHS)*, by Peter Scazzero**

- October 9, 8 p.m. – Reading: Chapters 1–3, EHS
 - Personal Practices: What resonated with you in the first 3 chapters?
- October 16, 8 p.m. – Reading: Chapters 4–6, EHS
 - Assessment on fruit of the spirit, integrity, empathy, patience and love for others.
- October 23, 8 p.m. – Reading: Chapters 7–8, EHS
 - Review of financial plans, budgeting, priorities
 - Homework for next time: Family Systems (handout)
- October 30, 8pm – Family Systems Theory
 - Workshop on reviewing family systems

November 2019 – Calling

****Reading: *Every Good Endeavor*, by Tim Keller**

- Week 1 – Theology of Work
 - How does God view work and calling?
- Week 2 – Faithful Presence
 - James Davidson Hunter
- Week 3 – **36-hour Retreat**: Work/Life balance
 - Review of priorities and goals
- Week 4 – Fellowship Event

December 2019 – Rest and Self-Care

****Reading: *Sabbath as Resistance*, by Water Brueggemann**

- Week 1 – Theology of Rest
 - How does God view rest?
- Week 2 – Self-Care
 - What rhythms do you have in place to care for yourself? Where do you recharge? Where do you feel renewed?

- Week 3 – **Disruption:** Practice Radical Sabbath
 - When is your sabbath? How do you unplug?
- Week 4 – Break

January 2020 – Month of Disruption

- Week 1 – Disruption: Those Experiencing Homelessness
- Week 2 – Disruption: Encounter with Mentally Ill
- Week 3 – Disruption: Service to Those in Prison, Hospital
- Week 4 – Disruption: Cross-Cultural Experience

February 2020 – Community

****Reading: Transforming Church Conflict, by Deborah Hunsinger and Theresa Latini**

- Week 1 – Theology of Fellowship
 - Koinonia, family and church community
- Week 2 – Nonviolent Communication
 - Learning
- Week 3 – Disruption: Radical Community
 - Re-imagine our church community
- Week 4 – 36-Hour Retreat, Community Focus

March 2020 – Justice

****Reading: TBD**

- Week 1 – Theology of Justice
 - Scripture study of justice, righteousness, and the Eschaton
- Week 2 – Theology of Neighbor
 - Expanding the purpose of Trinity Church with justice in our communities
- Week 3 – Disruption: Radical Justice
 - Local service project
- Week 4 – Fellowship Event

April 2020 – Evangelism

****Reading: The Art of Neighboring**

- Week 1 – The Great Commission
- Week 2 – Sovereignty of God
- Week 3 – Disruption: Door-to-Door Evangelism
 - Either street or neighborhood evangelism, and invitation to Trinity Church
- Week 4 – 36-Hour Retreat, Evangelism Review, and Prayer

May 2020 – The Church

****Reading: TBD**

- Week 1 – The Purpose of the Church
- Week 2 – The Commitment to the Church
- Week 3 – Disruption: Radical Exhortation of Church Community
 - Encouraging others in our church community
- Week 4 – Closing Fellowship Event

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The Rev. Dr. Steven R. Magneson, P.E.

10 Cobb Avenue, White Plains, NY 10606

Phone: (914) 486-0111

Email: smagneson@gmail.com

EXPERIENCE

Ordained Presbyterian Minister (2009-Present)

TRINITY PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, Purchase, NY

- Worked full-time as the Director for Youth and Children and later as an Associate Pastor for Trinity Presbyterian Church.
- Chairman of the Building Committee from 2009-2016
- Managed staff and volunteers in setting goals, managing performance, and promoting collaboration and teamwork.
- Counseling for professionals in the New York City Area, including Doctors, Lawyers, Bankers, and Executives.
- Managed the church building project with Architects, Engineers, Lawyers, and Engineering Consultants for filing with the Town of Harrison.
- Achieved final approval change-of-use occupancy, achieving zoning variances & site approvals, and submitting building permit applications.

Mechanical Engineering Consultant (2006-2009)

EYP MISSION CRITICAL (now Hewlett Packard) White Plains, NY

- Designed Data Centers in the New York City Area. Design includes Raised Floor Systems, Computer Room Air Conditioners, Chiller Plants, Emergency Generator Plants, HVAC Systems, Fire Protection, and Fuel Oil Systems.
- Managed projects with high profile clients such as AT&T, Morgan Stanley, Aetna, NOAA, the State of Delaware, Chase Bank, and Bank of America.
- Managed large-scale Engineering projects from design concepts to final construction. Set project goals, and attended project meetings with clients.
- Created drawings, Details, and Specifications to set contract agreements including materials, and cost performance.

Mechanical Engineering Consultant (1998-2006)

CHARLES G. MICHEL ENGINEERING, P.C., White Plains, NY

- Designed HVAC Systems for projects in the New York City Area.
- Small company required marketing skills, setting project goals, customer relations, and completion of design drafting, specifications, and revisions.
- Created drawings, Details, and Specifications to set contract agreements including materials, cost performance, and schedule requirements of subcontractors.

EDUCATION/OTHER

Doctorate of Ministry, Western Theological Seminary, Holland, MI, 2021

Masters of Divinity, Western Theological Seminary, Holland, MI, 2016

BS in Mechanical Engineering, University of California, Davis, Davis, CA, 1998

- Dean's List Engineering & National Engineering Honor Society

PROFESSIONAL ENGINEER – New York State Professional Engineer since 2003

OTHER INTERESTS

- Fine Art (Oil Painting), Gardening, and Woodworking
- Post Road Elementary School PTA President (2016-2018)