Hearing and Listening:

A Minister’s Journey with a Congregation

By

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ABSTRACT

A hermeneutic phenomenological study that looks at the question: can this minister listen closely enough to a group from the congregation to make a comparison and contrast between the experience of people in the congregation and his own experience? Three Faith Conversations are studied carefully to allow the researcher to understand the congregants’ experience of three aspects of congregational life. The researcher then enters a structured theological reflection so that he can compare and contrast his own experience of church life with that of the congregants.

Although the researcher anticipated a significant disparity between their experience of church and his own, he discovered that the gap contributed to by differences between his experience and educational level and theirs was significantly reduced by similarities in social context.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Sixteen years ago I was ordained a Minister of Word and Sacraments in the Presbyterian Church in Canada. I had been a school teacher for 24 years. My ordination came little more than two years after I had traveled to Bloomington, Indiana, to be nearby for the birth of our first grandchild, Calvin. I have been a grandfather for almost 19 years and a minister for 16. At the time of my ordination, I thought becoming a minister marked a huge turn in my life journey. I do not remember having a similar perception of what was happening to me when Calvin was born. I am not sure, but I believe I saw my start down the road of grand-parenting as not all that big a change for me. Today, we have 13 grandchildren, and I have a new appreciation of what their lives mean for mine. I have a new sense of what it means to be a grandfather.

Daniel Migliore’s introduction to Christian theology uses the term “grandfather” dismissively. In his discussion of the Last Judgment, he warns, “God is indeed a ‘consuming fire’ (Heb. 12:28–29), not a doting grandfather.”¹ I understand that dismissive use of the term. Preachers and theologians are afraid their hearers and readers are complacent. Preachers want to grab hearers’ attention and almost shake them into an awareness of the urgency of relating with God in full seriousness, in ways appropriate to what we learn from Scripture and other revelation of what God is truly like. Preachers are afraid God has receded from the consciousness of their hearers, faded into the past or into some other form of insignificance. I myself have used the term “grandfather” in just such a trivializing

manner in nearly the same context and for nearly the same reasons. But in the years since Calvin’s birth in 1993, I have rethought that glib usage.

In this thesis I will describe my ministry context here at Knox Presbyterian Church in Dunnville. I will describe the larger secular context in which churches live in 21st-century Southern Ontario. I will argue that such a secular context has pressing implications for the church. I will suggest throughout that, rather than attempt to “shake” the listeners in the congregation, the minister will need to be intentional about encouraging situations in which she or he can listen attentively to the experience of parishioners who feel safe enough to make themselves that vulnerable.

I will argue that hermeneutic phenomenology is a philosophical position that supports the qualitative research methodology I have designed and used. I will describe the method used to answer the research question that has guided the study.

I will describe the course of theological reflection that I used as my Ministry-In-Action. In that theological reflection exercise, a group of eight members of the congregation of Knox Presbyterian Church in Dunnville sat together on three different evenings and participated in Faith Conversations focusing on their experience of Worship, of Communion, and of Mission as members of that congregation. In Appendices L, M, and N below, I have provided the transcripts of those “Faith Conversations”, which constitute the initial data generated by my research. After watching video recordings of the three Faith Conversations multiple times and reading through the transcripts again and again, I created a phenomenological text in which the Faith Conversations have been interpreted according to the tradition of hermeneutic phenomenology.
My research question asked whether such a course of theological reflection could enable me to engage the experience of the eight participants in a way that allowed me to compare and contrast it with my own. I wanted to pursue a fusion of horizons between the congregation and me. To facilitate that goal, I engaged in a process of personal theological reflection in response to the Faith Conversations, following a plan laid out by Patricia Killen and John de Beer. I have included the result of that personal theological reflection in Chapter 6 below. In that personal theological reflection, I was able to interpret some of my own experience and indeed to answer my research question in the affirmative. The method Killen and de Beer recommend includes allowing an image to surface in connection with the feelings evoked by the experience being reflected on. The image that emerged for me was the image of grandfather. At first I reacted against a whiff of arrogance that came to me from the image. I also remember times I have trivialized such an image of God. I wonder

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2 I can accept the image in spite of the paternalism that may continue to cling to it as it strikes many readers, just as it initially struck me. However, I hope my reader will become relatively comfortable with it once I have unpacked it in the pages that follow. I have become relatively comfortable with it, because for me the grandfather relationship, while being especially joyful and interesting, is always fraught with heavy doses of uncertainty and ambivalence. It continues to imply something besides a rigorous equality, but that inequality goes both ways. The grandfather knows things and has had experiences that the grandchildren do not know and have not experienced. Today’s grandfather, however, is also aware of his own inadequacy and ignorance in the face of much younger people who are at ease as “digital natives” in social and technologically defined situations where the grandfather will only ever be a “digital immigrant”. A strange equality results from this. Still, the image of grandfather will continue to imply a power imbalance, an imbalance which raises questions for every minister and every congregation. What does it mean if the minister’s self-image casts the parishioners as “grandchildren”? I continue to be challenged by the presence of such paternalistic implications in the image I have chosen. I realize that I do not expect the parishioners here to act and respond out of a living faith in Jesus Christ, and how much I expect them to respond out of the same fears and aspirations that motivate people who have no faith at all and simply try to get ahead in life and provide for their own comfort and security with no thought for those on the margins of society. I am not happy with that expectation of mine. It does not match with what I know by faith about these sincere followers of Jesus at Knox Presbyterian Church in Dunnville. But it is true of me as I work among them day after day. I am surprised again whenever someone in the church acts out of evident faith and love. And they do.
what my tendency to dismiss the grandfatherly image means for my view of myself and for my image of God.
CHAPTER 2

MY CURRENT CONTEXT FOR MINISTRY

The Congregation in the Community

My current context for ministry is the congregation of Knox Presbyterian Church in Dunnville, Ontario, and the surrounding community. Knox was founded in 1833 in this community which is now home to about 5,000 people. There are about 110 active members and adherents, and an average Sunday morning attendance of about 60. There have been 29 ministers over the 178 years of the congregation’s life, all of whom have been men. The congregation meets for worship in a tall brick building with strikingly beautiful stained-glass windows. Present members recall a time when Knox was a premier Sunday morning destination and the congregation included “doctors, lawyers, and bank managers.” There was a full sanctuary Sunday mornings, and multiple Sunday School classes included lots of children.

The congregation learned to count on the presence of a significant Presbyterian cohort in the town’s population and the ability of ministers to continue attracting the attendance, participation, and loyalty of that cohort. Members tell the stories of a succession of ministers, and how each contributed to the life of the congregation. Some were colourful and warm; some were memorably good at their work. Others were not: one minister clashed insistently with the congregation, and his tenure coincided with a sharp decline in attendance.

The town of Dunnville has also changed considerably since the days when there were two fabric factories, a fencing factory, a pickle factory, multiple hardware stores,
clothing stores, bakeries, and many family farms providing consistent and adequate employment. The last major factory, Smucker’s Foods, closed in November, 2011 with the loss of over 200 jobs.

The “Presbyterian” group in the town’s population is still present, but their church attendance has become smaller and less predictable with each passing generation. This trend would fit with some theories of secularization in Canadian society. In the meantime, the congregation continues faithfully to carry out a range of church activities that came to be considered normal in the first half of the last century: Sunday school, youth group, choir, Women’s Missionary Society, Session, Board of Managers, Trustees, and so forth. The assumption seems to be that if these traditional activities are faithfully maintained, and if the minister does his job well, the church will survive. The congregation does not seem to assume a need for careful thinking about changing social realities or planning for how a local church might respond to and attempt to shape those realities. The congregation seems not to expect social conditions to make a significant difference in the activities and goals of the church. We do not seem to imagine the church constituting any important challenge to, or making any particular difference in, the surrounding community. Neither does the congregation seem to be reflective about its task. We do not seem to feel a need to work together to understand and articulate a theology of church and a theology of calling. We seem instead to believe that “doing church” is simple and obvious, and does not necessarily

3 See below, Chapter Three.

4 Again, every minister who has served Knox Presbyterian Church has been male.

5 I thought about this word “survive” and realized I do not know what word would best reflect the hopes and expectations of the different members of the congregation: “thrive”? “survive”? “go”? “work”? The rest of the paragraph represents reflection on that word choice.
reflect any particular (changing) theology; it need not be moulded to any particular (changing) local situation.

This may not be an appropriate set of assumptions for us to make. The vision that shaped the church in the 1950s may not be appropriate today. The fact that our spiritual ancestors articulated their theology does not mean we understand our calling. A mission statement for believers in Kingston might not fit our congregation in Dunnville. An “evangelical” theology might not fit our traditional Protestant church. Some things can be said in general about church, but the shape the church’s mission takes will vary by time and place if it is to fit our own take on the gospel, and fit the congregation, the minister, and the evolving social context within which we live.

My perception is that most of us at Knox tend to see our involvement in church as a personal or family tradition as much as an intentional choice of ultimate spiritual allegiance. A few are more focused on church as part of a decision to follow an alternative path in life. It seems to me that the Bible is almost peripheral to life activities for most of us, while a few do regularly read the Bible. Our congregation comprises mainly middle-class and working-class families and individuals. We are generally socially conservative, but an assertive minority is more socially critical and progressive. Most of us seem unaware of the presence of poverty in our community and congregation, yet some are concerned about poverty. We are ambivalent in our feelings about single mothers, welfare recipients, and others who are not succeeding economically. Sometimes we tend to assume that disadvantaged people have themselves to blame; at other times we ask ourselves about structural flaws in society that may help explain why people are not doing well. We listen to Jesus’ words in Matthew 25 about a Final Judgment based on our treatment of strangers, prisoners, and the sick, and
seldom draw connections to our relationships with specific groups who lack competitive ability. We hear Jesus’ statement at the beginning of his ministry (Luke 4:16–30) and, again, draw few conclusions. We may decide to understand his references to “the poor, the captives, the blind, and the oppressed” in spiritualized terms and thus fail to notice how they might reframe our conclusions about actual persons and groups and our own responsibilities in Dunnville. Sometimes we are impressed with the work it has taken us to achieve the level of comfort and security we have; at other times we feel more thankful and generous.

We tend to talk little in our congregation about native people, perhaps because we are confused about the issue. We live close to the border of the present Six Nations Reserve, on land historically ceded by the Crown to the aboriginal people of the Six Nations. We are aware of troubles in the nearby town of Caledonia and hear complicated explanations for the social problems among native people. Sometimes we point out to each other the advantages native people might realize if they took the trouble to assimilate, or we complain to each other about their tax-exemption privileges and illegal tobacco sales. Sometimes we articulate the other side of the issue. Mainly, we just lapse into silence in tacit recognition of the complex nature of the problem or the uncertainty we feel about the whole thing.

We also say little about the social position of women. Sometimes we at Knox get the feeling that discrimination against women in our society is a thing of the past, and we might even wonder if the pendulum has swung too far and women now have an unfair advantage. But at other times we see Canadian society as a place of lingering patriarchy and we want to support ongoing struggles for gender equality.

Sometimes we feel moved by the beauty and subtlety of our faith’s symbols, music, and literature. Sometimes we will seem more prosaically or literally minded, so we are not
clear on the meaning and power of the sacraments and the stories and images of Scripture. Our different levels of engagement with the Bible, our varying social positions, and our different aesthetic sensitivities leave us unsure about what we are looking for when we come to church, and hence prone to accept the traditions or definitions of church that are current in our secular society. That uncertainty makes it more difficult for us to experience church as an alternative social imaginary\(^6\) with its own plausibility structure and its own call toward a new direction in our lives.\(^7\) We have become more open to the notion that church is something like a personal hobby that may or may not seem meaningful in different periods of our lives.

**My Role as Minister**

As minister, I have some input in and responsibility for the congregation’s sense of itself and its calling. Still, that responsibility is limited, and any power I have to carry it out is partial. In these years, I am a highly visible piece of the puzzle of Knox Presbyterian Church in Dunnville, but only one piece. In some respects I am unlike the members of the congregation, and in some respects also unlike previous ministers here. This gives me a sense of being a pilgrim, of not quite belonging. Not only am I technically not a member of the congregation,\(^8\) I am also not “from here”: I did not grow up in Dunnville, and did not even grow up in the Presbyterian Church in Canada (PCC). I came to the PCC in middle

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\(^6\) See below, Chapter Three, fn 41.


\(^8\) Presbyterian ministers are members of the Presbytery, the local grouping of Presbyterian churches, rather than members of local congregations.
age, and arrived in Dunnville in 2002. I was born in the US, and remain an American citizen. These factors are advantages and disadvantages.

Not being “from here” may make it easier for me to think critically about the town and the denomination, and to imagine things done differently. It may make it easier for me to avoid complacency and see some of the limits to my understanding. At the same time, my instincts are not PCC; they are not Dunnville instincts. They were developed in the fundamentalist, American church of my youth and the evangelical (Christian Reformed) church of my middle years. I have to work harder than others to understand what goes on in Dunnville and in the PCC, and to figure out an appropriate response to a situation in the congregation. And all of that is added to the “exceptionality” felt by many ministers: the difference between people who spend their week “in the world” and the minister who spends much of his week in the study, focusing on the Scriptures and on spiritual and congregational issues.

My own personal, religious origins have an ongoing impact on who I am, of course, and on how I relate to this congregation. Because I grew up in a fundamentalist Presbyterian home and church, I carry an ongoing fascination with the meaning of salvation. What it means to be “lost” and what it means to be “saved” were very clear in that context: to be lost meant above all that one was headed toward an eternity of torture in hell as punishment for refusing Christian salvation, and to be saved meant above all that one would be rewarded through all eternity with a blessed life in heaven. There seemed to be no awareness in my

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9 Incidentally, my wife and I applied for Canadian citizenship in October, 2012, after more than forty years of “landed” residence in Canada.

10 Of course, personality type will also affect one’s sense of being “at home” and being ready and able to give direction to groups of which one is a member.
home or my local congregation of whether those ideas of salvation reinforced any particular set of social and political power arrangements.

I came of age during the Vietnam War, and the resulting countercultural movement provided many in my generation with our first critical look at our culture and the ways it projects power. We questioned what we had been taught in school about the moral superiority of the United States, and what we had been taught in our church about our faith—including the meaning of salvation. On the larger Christian scene, these were also the years of conversation about integration of the World Council of Churches (WCC) and the International Missionary Council (IMC), conversations that circled warily around some of these same issues regarding the definition of salvation, along with related questions about witness and mission.¹¹

The social critique into which my generation invited me provided a new freedom from the obsession with individual, eternal salvation typical of my fundamentalist upbringing. That critique implied that the energy fundamentalism puts into salvation as escape from eternal hell was at least partly a distraction from large questions of social justice. Similar issues underlay some of the questions between the WCC and the IMC. It may be impossible for some people raised in that fundamentalist obsession with eternal destiny to fully leave behind vestiges of that understanding of the nature of life and church, salvation and mission. As a minister in a traditional Protestant church, I find that these questions are always in play for me. I am always working toward a theology that sees through the issues of culture and social power suppressed by some theologies of individual,

eternal salvation. I always live against a background of low-grade anxiety about salvation and damnation.

What I am always looking for, though, is not a casual dismissal of the importance of God and of the community’s and individual’s relationship with God. I am looking for theologies that give crucial importance to God and to the spiritual health of human society and human persons, yet still recognize powerful social contexts within which people think through theological issues and their implications for the health and wealth of social groups. The question of the meaning of salvation will always be gripping for me. One of the most committed members of the congregation here at Knox Presbyterian Church in Dunnville confessed to me that the whole question of salvation had always been a puzzle, and asked, “What is so important about salvation?” I can hardly imagine asking that question myself.

The Nature of the Ministry in This Congregation

Christian ministry here will encourage believers who gather for worship to continue to self-identify as believers and as people of God called into worship, communion, and mission, and to deepen their commitment to that identity. This includes affirming the evident faith among us and calling all of us to move forward into still more faithful being and acting. It includes holding up before ourselves the beauty and wonder of the gospel and encouraging our sensitivity to and critique of any worldly or deadening effects of the society of which we are part. It includes encouraging among us a restless sense of being called out of the world and into the church for the sake of the world. It works toward salvation for our congregation, our community, and the members of this church. Will we work toward our own salvation? Will we depend on God’s working within us?

Ministry within this congregation usually follows a traditional form. It involves worship in a familiar style each Sunday, conventional pastoral care focused in home visits and phone calls to members, and activities of community chaplaincy, such as chapel services in local long-term care facilities. Still, this relatively traditional ministry is informed by a critique of this church’s tendency to maintain an almost exclusively reassuring, nonthreatening role in the life of the community. Instead, believers are challenged to question the prevailing expectation that Christian faith is primarily about good citizenship, rewards for good behaviour, and occasional assurances of eternal blessedness. We are encouraged to question our sense that the traditional Protestant church is primarily the approving chaplain to consumerist, militarist, paternalistic North American culture, calling us all simply to be slightly better and more successful citizens. A change in traditional liturgy, whereby the sermon is broken into three or four shorter homilies each preceding and directly associated with a lectionary lesson, facilitates the issuing and recognition of this challenge; it is intended to focus the congregation’s attention more closely on the text itself and “give Scripture the last word.” It also recognizes the attention span typical of many 21st-century congregations.

Ministry will continue to call believers to notice, question, and struggle with the values of our culture and the accompanying assumptions it makes about our goals as a congregation, as families, and as individuals. We are encouraged, when making decisions about the church, to pay more attention to Jesus’ instructions to “repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” than to contemporary management theory. We are alerting one another to different standards than the “normal” quantifiable measures of success. Without necessarily using these terms, we will work to leave behind our triumphalist sense of entitlement and
anticipation of institutional “success”, and to think first in terms of spiritual growth in the congregation and in the lives of individual members. We will appropriate the scriptural language of salvation as we articulate that vision of spiritual growth.
CHAPTER 3
RESEARCH PROBLEM AND RESEARCH QUESTION

Reasons for the Study

Our church’s calling is both obvious and puzzling. Obviously, we are responsible for the proclamation of the Word and the celebration of the sacraments. Obviously, we are to respond in faith to the context in which we have been placed. It is less obvious what that response will look like, which of the church’s traditional programs will be helpful, and what that response and those programs actually feel like in the hearts and minds of people involved. It is less obvious what theological lines we might draw between Scripture and church tradition and our current articulation of our task. It is less obvious what my own emphases should be in the next few years if I am to help the congregation draw those lines and make those responses in faith and love.

In order for the congregation to respond in faithful ways to our changed and changing social situation, we may need to let go of the assumption that a sizeable part of Dunnville’s population will automatically want to attend the local Presbyterian church. We may need to relinquish the assumption that how well things go in the congregation is simply a function of the minister’s effectiveness and attractiveness. We may need to become more attentive to changes in society and to the suitability of the congregation’s programs and activities in light of those changes. We may need to become more intentional about inviting others into our faith communion, and pay more attention to the dissonances and harmonies we are hearing between secular assumptions and the call of the gospel. We may need to learn to do some critical theological thinking. And, of course, the members of this
congregation may be uninterested in doing these things. Things may seem one way to me, and other ways to them; the learning and change that I think are important could seem irrelevant or unnecessary to the congregation.

The ethos of this congregation seems to include a *laissez-faire* attitude toward the specific shape of a member’s commitment to the congregation and its underlying values. Again, there seems little conscious grappling with the meaning of the tradition and Scripture for our faithful communal and individual living today. One consequence of that casual attitude is the nearly complete lack of formal or informal agreement on traditionally important issues such as frequency of attendance or levels of giving. Members seem to feel little obligation to attend every Sunday, with many committed folks missing one or two or three Sundays in a given month. Any appeal toward raising money for the budget or for specific mission projects is carefully phrased in terms that emphasize the voluntary nature of the campaign: “You may give if you wish, but of course it is completely up to you.”

As someone with instincts shaped in the evangelical church, I wonder if members at Knox Presbyterian Church in Dunnville are more comfortable than we should be with the secular society of which we are part. There may be little sense of being called out for the purpose of transformative mission to “the world”. There may be confusion about some of the traditional language of the church, including such religious words as “salvation” and “mission”, and a sense that more socially acceptable words such as “spirituality” and “health” have replaced some of this language. The understanding that traditional Protestant church members have of our relationship to the surrounding culture might sometimes be better expressed by “in the world and of the world” than by the more standard and biblical “in the world but not of the world”.

On the other hand, members of this congregation do have a commitment to being church, and therefore some understanding of what calling to Christian discipleship means. My reading of that understood calling sees first of all an emphasis on the Sunday morning worship service. That service should be inspirational, casual, and orderly, and should include a “good sermon”—which means at least that it should be entertaining. The service should also encourage members to be good citizens of Dunnville, of Ontario, and of Canada.

Further, the church should maintain a range of activities focusing on church management and community service, as mentioned above. There is some sense of outreach: the Women’s Missionary Society holds educational meetings and fundraising activities to support the church’s mission, and in the past ten years a Mission and Outreach Committee (M/O) has sent several mission teams to El Salvador and other Central American countries. The M/O has also engaged in a variety of smaller, local mission projects, but has unfortunately drifted toward inactivity in recent months; activities that fall under the heading of “outreach” are almost exclusively designed for those who are already members of the congregation.

We have many members who participate in service activities in the community. On certain days of the week our members deliver Meals on Wheels. Knox Presbyterian Church in Dunnville supports a local elementary school’s snack program that is part of the province-wide Child Nutrition Network, and once a month our people operate a Community Kitchen on site with developmentally delayed adults. Besides these congregational activities, many of our members faithfully carry out individual volunteer activities in the community. There is also a Sunday morning adult Bible study in addition to the Sunday School program for
Our Understanding of Calling Seems Inadequate

With all this, it seems to me that something is missing. I miss the sense that we are a group of people consciously embracing our shared faith and calling. In fact, I miss the sense that we even see ourselves as a distinct group of people. I do not find in the congregation a strong drive to make an impact on the world that is specifically related to a sense of thankfulness for the grace of God in Jesus Christ. There is more of a general urge to be “pretty good individual people” who fit into the normal goals of the community, not a commitment to a mission in the world that flows out of the mission of God and the mission of Jesus Christ. There is a charitable concern for “the less fortunate”, but not a sense of our own spiritual poverty and our need to be present with the powerless in society so that we can receive from them the gift of the presence of Jesus and be closer to God. I do not detect much sense of a need to repent as a congregation, to change our minds from a comfortable assumption of the goals of our society, to turn around to move along the path Jesus walked. I do not detect much sense of a need for salvation from the way we naturally tend to live, nor much interest in sorting out what salvation would mean and how we would attain it or share it. It was not surprising to me that I found among participants in the Faith Conversations (below) little interest in probing the goals that might motivate “mission” activities. I want to encourage, in myself and in the congregation, more of that intentionally Christian call
toward the margins of society in search of God.\textsuperscript{13} I want to listen for a sense of that call in the congregation. Then, out of that heightened appreciation for our sense of our calling, I want to urge all of us toward a new embrace of our identity not only as pretty good people, but especially as disciples of Jesus.

\textbf{Statement of Research Problem with Research Question}

The description above is shaped by some assumptions about people in this congregation based on my personal observation. Through this study I want to learn more accurately something about how members of Knox Presbyterian Church in Dunnville experience their faith and their involvement in church; how they understand the relationship between their lives as members of the church and their lives as members of this Canadian society. I want to learn how they understand the task of the church and the relationship of the church to the rest of society. I want to learn what our members understand their calling to be, and in what ways they regard it as similar to and different from the responsibilities of other, unchurched members of the community. I want to learn how their experience is like and unlike my own experience of the church and its place in society. Through this process I want to work toward a “fused” awareness of our calling.\textsuperscript{14}

My own sense of the church’s calling is different from the one that shaped my parents’ experience. My parents saw the Christian church as the only avenue to God. They understood the business of the church as the salvation of individual souls. I am not


\textsuperscript{14} Hans-Georg Gadamer, \textit{Truth and Method} (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 1989), 305. Gadamer claims that “…understanding is always a fusion of these horizons supposedly existing by themselves.”
comfortable trying to restrict God’s acceptance of people to those in my own religious tradition; I imagine God as able and eager to relate to people within the contexts of different traditions. That would mean the Christian church has a calling to be open and humble toward people who are committed to other traditions of faith. That conviction will have an impact on our understanding of our calling.

I hope for a ministry that both arises out of a respectful interfaith perspective and at the same time encourages strong commitment to specifically Christian confession and discipleship. That would encourage reflection around such questions as: How can we become more committed and intentional followers of Jesus Christ without being arrogant toward people from other traditions? How can we be open to the good in other faiths and learn from them without being vague, generic Christians? How can we learn that an openness toward others does not remove the requirement to struggle with questions about our own calling? What will constitute salvation for us, and what will our responsibility be for the salvation of others in our community and our world? Some traditional Protestant people pride themselves on tolerance and being open to the good in other traditions,15 without an equal urgency placed on a specifically Christian commitment to discipleship and confession.16 Is that how people at Knox Presbyterian Church in Dunnville experience their faith?

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15 Diana Butler Bass, Christianity for the Rest of Us: How the Neighborhood Church is Transforming the Faith (New York: HarperOne, 2006), 143–156. Butler Bass writes about “Diversity” as a characteristic of what she calls “the neighborhood church” or what we are calling the traditional Protestant church.

16 This is my own observation and it conflicts with some of the observations Diana Butler Bass makes about neighborhood churches she visited in the United States. In my experience, traditional Protestant churches are home to people who see themselves as good community members not different from other good community members with no church connection. I see little evidence that many of these church people see themselves as particularly Christian or intend to make any
Therefore, this is my research question: Can I use a process of theological reflection to listen carefully enough to the church community to detect similarities and differences between a group of volunteers from Knox Presbyterian Church in Dunnville and me regarding our experiences of church and faith? Can I reach beyond the significant differences I expect to discover, and find a common experience that can inform the approach I want to take to future ministry at Knox?

To address that question, I initiated a process of theological reflection with a group of members of our church. Before I describe that process of theological reflection, I will set out the theoretical horizons operative for the study.
CHAPTER 4
THEORETICAL HORIZONS OF THE STUDY

Introduction

In this chapter I will examine aspects of the secular social context in which churches and ministers live and work in Ontario today. I will suggest some of the effects of that secular social context on attitudes and expectations of ministers and congregations, and discuss different views of church current in our secular society. I will argue that our secular society with its individualism and its commitment to personal and institutional domination presents the congregation with a range of options, from trying to appear harmless to and even supportive of that secular society to trying to repent of our commitment to that secular society’s values and function as a countercultural influence reflecting Jesus’ instruction to be “salt” and “light” in the world. Laying out these theoretical horizons will also prepare the reader to understand some of the bias with which I approach my ministry and the thinking I do about my calling; in Chapter Four we will see that hermeneutic phenomenology embraces the pre-understanding of this researcher, and that instead of attempting to eliminate all bias, it claims some of this researcher’s bias as a positive value. In addition, laying out these theoretical horizons will prepare the reader to understand some of the ways my listening will be framed as we anticipate the Ministry-In-Action. What will the Faith Conversations initiated in the study and described below reveal about the congregants’ sense of church and how it relates to Scripture and church tradition, as well as to the secular society in which we live and meet?
People in churches love to talk about the good old days. In today’s sparsely attended traditional Protestant churches, some people clearly remember a time forty or fifty years ago when those same churches were full of families. Sunday morning services were popular, and Sunday School classes were filled with well-behaved children of all ages. Today, towns in Ontario have more large, old church buildings than needed to meet current demand. In many traditional Protestant churches, one will find on Sunday morning a small group of elderly people and perhaps a handful of Sunday School children, if any. In some cases, the children have come with grandparents.

Communities surrounding our Ontario churches are more secular today than ever before. Church services gamely compete with an inviting array of alternative Sunday morning activities, while the system of beliefs and values traditionally taught by the church is foreign to much of the society around it and seems increasingly strange to the believers themselves. Committed churchgoers sometimes feel they live in a strangely secular culture not very hospitable to their beliefs and their way of life. It goes deeper, though: many people have suggested that secular culture has seeped into the lives of churchgoers themselves, to such an extent that their own faith tradition sometimes seems a little strange even to them. Is this the case here at Knox Presbyterian Church in Dunnville? We will need to develop a pattern of attentive, intentional, evaluative listening if we are to discover what members of Knox Presbyterian Church in Dunnville experience as their congregational life.
Our Secular Social Context and Congregational Life

The Secular Social Context

Churches in Canada in the twenty-first century do find themselves in a secular context. A secular context is a worldly or material environment in which decisions are made less and less with reference to God or religious considerations, and more and more in terms of philosophical or commonsense considerations. A secular context is one in which fewer and fewer people attend church and other places of religious worship, and where churches and other religious organizations have less and less influence over the rest of the society. For many people, such a secular context and such secular attitudes call into question the place religious movements and institutions will have in society in the future. That secularity also influences the understanding church members and ministers have of the nature and calling of the church.\textsuperscript{17}

Sociologists have articulated theories to explain this decline of religious influence in modern society.\textsuperscript{18} These theories have been hotly debated, rejected, and reformulated, but the decline of religious practice and the waning of the social influence of churches are undeniable. Gregory Baum suggests that “[A] wave of secularization produced significant

\textsuperscript{17} Andrew Irvine, “Clergy Well-Being: Seeking Wholeness with Integrity,” 6, 21. Centre for Clergy Care and Congregational Health http://www.caringforclergy.ca/ Accessed on June 25, 2012. This article reports a study begun through the Centre in 2003. Irvine’s investigation suggests that ministers’ sense of identity have shifted with changes in our culture, which this researcher relates to a growing secularism in Canada.

\textsuperscript{18} For many years sociologists accepted and spread a simple theory of secularization. That theory suggested that as society modernizes, rationalizes, and industrializes, religion will inevitably decline. Some of those same sociologists have, on reflection, backed away from that simple causal connection between modernity and secularism. Discussion and debate continue around what connection it may be possible to claim between modernization and a decline in religion. Cf. I. Furseth and P. Repstad, An Introduction to the Sociology of Religion (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2007), 59.
changes in Canadian society…. [That secularization] passed through English-speaking Canada…. The decline of religious practice among Protestants and Catholics has been studied and recorded. American church historian Mark Noll, noting the “disappearance of Christian Canada” says that “under the new Charter, Canadian legislation and jurisprudence have increasingly privileged principles of privacy, multiculturalism, enforced toleration, and public religious neutrality, even when such moves de-christianize public spaces in which religious language was once commonplace.”

Reginald Bibby wrote twenty-five years ago that “two in three Canadians were sitting there in churches on that Sunday in 1946 … Forty years later, a typical Sunday finds only one in three adults making their way to the nation’s places of worship.” He described religious leaders and laity as bewildered and demoralized. At that time (1987), the future of religion in Canada seemed so inevitably and predictably negative, and its course so clearly downhill, that Bibby later admitted he considered changing his field of research from religion to pro sports. Ten years ago, however, he published another book on Canadian religion in which he joined such writers as Peter Berger and Harvey Cox in a radical revision of his negative assessment of the future of religion. Still, his revised outlook was

19 I will use “Catholic” with a capital “C” to refer to the Roman Catholic Church, and “catholic” with a small “c” to refer to the character of the church as a phenomenon that stretches around the world and through the last two millennia of world history.


23 However, note the critique of Bibby’s conclusions in Brian Clarke and Stuart Macdonald, “How are Canada’s Five Largest Denominations Faring?” Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses 40 No. 4 (2011): 519, accessed November 1, 2012. Clarke and Macdonald look behind Bibby’s conclusions about religious changes to note that he admits his figures are “estimates”. Clarke and
hardly more positive for traditional Protestant churches. Along with clarified and fine-tuned definitions of secularization, and enthusiastic affirmations of Canadians’ spirituality, he admits, “Canadians may be hungering for the gods, but that is not to say they are hungering for the churches.”

Bibby’s more recent book is still punctuated with charts detailing declining church attendance figures. Attendance by Roman Catholics drops from 83% in 1957 to 33% in 1990, while attendance by traditional Protestants drops from 35% to 14% over the same years. Even conservative Protestant denominations, often seen as exceptions to negative attendance trends, show figures dropping from 51% to 49% over those years. Reginald Bibby’s renewed hopes for religion in Canada are not based on positive statistics related to the churches but on studies showing strength in soft indicators of “latent spirituality—fascination with mystery, the search for meaning, and religious memory.” It is appropriate for a sociologist to look beyond simplistic views of religion based on attendance at public worship. It is also notoriously difficult to draw conclusions about connections between those soft indicators and the future of churches as we know them, or even the future of a positive impact by religion on the culture.

Macdonald show how the use of denominational statistics of membership and Sunday School attendance in connection with “census affiliates” provides a more reliable picture of changes in the fortunes of the five largest Protestant denominations, especially in the years since 1960. They claim that the decline in those Protestant denominations can hardly be overestimated.

25 Ibid., 20.
26 Ibid.
27 Ibid., 28.
Bibby’s renewed interest in his chosen field of the sociology of religion, and his change of heart regarding the future of religion and religious studies in Canada, are related to a shift in the thinking of sociologists about secularity and secularization. Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor has contributed nuance to the definition of secularization. He distinguishes three senses in which we understand secularity. The first relates to the emancipation of social institutions from the control of religion. The second refers to the falling off of religious belief and practice among the people. And the third points to the conditions of belief. He speaks of “a move from a society where belief in God is unchallenged and indeed, unproblematic, to one in which it is understood to be one option among others, and frequently not the easiest one to embrace.”

Taylor suggests that secularization does not eliminate God from society, but “opens a new space for religion in public life.” In the modern social imaginary, religion is no longer the foundation for society, but assumes a place as an important factor in the lives of “substantial bodies of citizens.”

Jose Casanova gives several convincing examples of what he calls the “deprivatization of modern religion.” Reginald Bibby has his own three-level definition of secularization: 1) religion loses control over other areas of society; 2) individual

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30 Ibid., 194.

31 Jose Casanova, Public Religions in the Modern World (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 75–207. Casanova traces five case studies as examples of deprivatization of religion: Spain, Poland, Brazil, Evangelical Protestantism, and Catholicism in the United States. These case studies are cited by Casanova as a challenge to reigning theories of the relationship of religion and modernity. They provide an instance of the recognition of that new space for religion in public life mentioned by Charles Taylor.
participation in organized religion declines; and 3) religious groups are increasingly
influenced by secular culture.32

Another important factor for understanding secularity in Canada today is
immigration. Beyond broad figures and the large trends they show are important changes to
our society created by growing “ethnic” groups.33 These changes mean that simple
assumptions about secularity are no longer appropriate, if they ever were. Stuart Macdonald
reports on Korean, Ghanaian, Dutch, and other “ethnic” congregations in the Presbyterian
and Reformed traditions and challenges any assumption that Presbyterian and Reformed
churches are ethnically homogeneous. He further challenges us to avoid easy generalizations
about the significance for Presbyterian and Reformed churches in Canada, now and in the
future, of extensive immigration and resulting “ethnic” communities.34

But even this increasingly sophisticated understanding of secularity and social trends
toward secularity does not negate the clear implications of church attendance statistics.
Students of the Canadian census have noted the arresting spike in the number of those who
claim as their religious affiliation “none.” While figures for traditional Protestant
denominations were dropping steadily from 7.5 million in 1961 to 6 million in 2001, the


33 There has been considerable talk about the Conservative Party of Canada and the success
of its strategy of “targeting” “very ethnic” ridings in the 2011 federal election. An article appeared
on the website of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation in October, 2012, under the title, “‘Very
Ethnic’ Ridings Targeted by the 2011 Conservative Campaign”. Accessed online October 25, 2012

34 Stuart Macdonald, “Presbyterian and Reformed Christians and Ethnicity,” in Christianity
and Ethnicity in Canada, ed. Paul Bramadat and David Seljak (Toronto: University of Toronto Press,
2008), 168–203.
“nones” rose from 95,000 in 1961 to nearly 5,000,000 in 2001.\footnote{Kurt Bowen, “Religious Demography of Canadians,” in Christians in a Secular World: The Canadian Experience (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2004), 24.} Regardless of debates over secularization theory, this information alone makes it reasonable to speak of secularization in Canada. In the 1960s, some sociologists seemed to think that secularization theory was a simple fact of modern life: it seemed obvious that religion was a natural part of pre-modern, pre-industrial society and that the rationalization that accompanies industrialization is incompatible with the religious outlook.\footnote{Peter L Berger, The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion (New York: Anchor Books, 1969), 107. Peter Berger is well-known for his 1999 renunciation of the relatively simple theory of secularization that informs the argument in his 1969 work, which seems to imply that secularity inevitably accompanies modernization. In spite of this renunciation, his Sacred Canopy still rewards a careful reading for its clear and helpful analysis of the impact of secularity on society and on the church. Cf. Grace Davie, The Sociology of Religion (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2007), 46–65 for a thoughtful survey of the rise and fall of secularization as a theory. In earlier work, she has spoken of Europe as “the exceptional case”. Secularization theory originated in Europe, encouraging thinkers to generalize from the European experience. It was assumed that what had happened in Europe—secularization accompanying modernization—could predict what would happen in other places. Latin America, the United States, and South Korea provide contrary examples of societies where modernization has been accompanied by thriving religious activity. Canada, however, seems to fit the European paradigm. Still, immigration is changing the face of religion in Canada. Cf. Stuart Macdonald’s above-mentioned “Presbyterian and Reformed Christians and Ethnicity.” Macdonald shows the impact of immigration as he reports and reflects on visits to Reformed congregations of immigrants from South Korea, Ghana, and the Netherlands, where he finds vital groups that bear little resemblance to stereotypes of the tired, secularized societies of Europe.} That assumption has disappeared from the thinking of many sociologists. But regardless of which take we adopt on secularization, the fact remains that our congregations and our ministers live and work and believe in a secular context.

Congregational Life in this Secular Context

Strange as it seems, secularity in society could actually lead to a strengthening of Christian faith within the congregation. Canadian theologian Douglas John Hall argues that...
common indicators of the decline of the strength of religious institutions in our culture could actually point to new possibilities for the growth of true religion. “The end of Christendom could be the beginning of something more nearly like church—the disciples’ community described by the Scriptures and treasured throughout the ages by prophetic minorities.”

Hall insists that the partnership between governments and Christianity, commonly dated from the Roman Emperor Constantine in the 4th century, simultaneously strengthened the power of the church as institution and weakened its commitment to the teachings and example of Jesus. He urges the church to embrace, participate in, and take control of our own disestablishment and to look beyond the allure of attendance and revenue statistics when assessing the health and planning the future of congregations.

A trend toward secular society can have other positive effects. As the Western social imaginary has been shaped less and less by the Christian church, new freedom has opened up for other faith traditions to exist and thrive in the countries of the West. This has probably increased the likelihood that Christians will discover the strengths and positive contributions of non-Christian religions and cultures.

On the other hand, the impact of secularity on congregations may not be positive. The drift toward secular attitudes in society affects what happens in congregations in ways that are not always predictable. It affects the way congregants hear Scripture and other messages coming from the pulpit. It will even affect those messages themselves—the preacher is not immune to social influence. Increasing secularization will affect members’ attitudes toward their faith and their church.

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The members of a society have a conscious or unconscious agreement about what is generally considered to be believable, and secularity changes the criteria underlying this agreement. For example, in 1500 it was “virtually impossible not to believe in God … while in 2000 many of us find it not only easy, but even inescapable”.\(^{39}\) What is plausible in a given society is shaped by certain assumptions, and some of the doctrines held by churches are not plausible according to the assumptions of modern scientific society. This means that, at church, people may be asked to accept ideas that would seem implausible anywhere else in society. People attending church on Easter Sunday, for example, form part of a group where resurrection is being celebrated. In most other contexts in our society, a suggestion of resurrection would seem completely implausible.

Powerful institutions also play a role in shaping what seems plausible and what does not. During certain eras, the church was the social institution that shaped society’s plausibility structure.\(^{40}\) In Medieval Europe the church was often the most powerful institution in society, and in 1500 it was part of a nearly undifferentiated society: governments in Europe may have struggled with church officials for control of that society, but it was a struggle for control of Christendom. Plausibility was not being contested; the entire “Christian” society constituted a plausibility structure. That is no longer true today.

In Canadian society, general plausibility is determined in ways that do not lie within the control of any church. This means that people in congregations must arrive at some understanding of their relationship to the reigning plausibility structure. For the most part, fundamentalist churches are known for strongly resisting aspects of the plausibility structure.

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\(^{40}\) Berger, *Sacred Canopy*, 134.
of the surrounding society; many traditional Protestant churches are known for trying to work out some sort of accommodation with it. But all churches face choices as society becomes more and more secular: the church will tolerate increasing tension in relation to the wider society, or bring its teaching and programs into line with what is generally plausible, or in some other way negotiate that tension. Lesslie Newbigin bluntly insists, “the Bible furnishes us with our plausibility structure.” Still, a secular society has a powerful impact on a congregation regardless of its style or theological stripe.

Churches in Canadian society find themselves situated among many different institutions, participants in a market-driven consumer culture. Our context includes not only governments and corporations that are clearly more powerful than today’s church, but also a wide range of other Christian congregations in the community that offer a similar “service” and compete for a shrinking “customer” base. That brings to bear upon the congregation market forces such as standardization and marginal differentiation. Standardization pushes the congregation to provide a product that resembles what is generally on demand by religious consumers, while market differentiation pushes it to emphasize small differences between its traditions and those of competing congregations. Both standardization and market differentiation are “brought about by consumer pressures”. For example, when congregations decide to provide electrically amplified music and digitally operated projection screens, they are probably, to a certain extent, responding to market pressure toward standardization.

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41 Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publish Company, 1989), 99. He claims that to “dwell in Jesus” is to “inhabit an alternative plausibility structure to the one in which our society lives. A plausibility structure is not just a body of ideas but is necessarily embodied in an actual community.”

In such a market-driven context, churches are likewise under pressure to operate by rationalized internal structures, with bureaucratic officials who operate much like functionaries in secular institutions and make decisions according to the same sorts of rationales. Craig Van Gelder refers to Shailer Matthews’ 1912 publication *Scientific Management in the Churches*, where Matthews urged church denominations to adopt the rationalized approach of scientific management.\(^43\) Even when churches today have a clearly articulated theological rationale for their own polity, some of that polity has probably been shaped, if unconsciously, largely by the demands of the market. There was a recent argument on the floor of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Canada between people who thought that heads of the church’s departmental offices, such as finance, should be on the same pay scale as the denomination’s pastoral ministers, and people who said that the Presbyterian Church would be unable to attract skilled administrators who could exercise proper Christian stewardship unless we matched salaries of private industry.\(^44\) The argument for matching the pay scale of private industry reflects the pressure faced by all church bodies to make policy decisions not primarily according to any claimed theology but simply according to the demands of market pressure.

Churches and religious people are not alone in recognizing the power of social imaginaries and plausibility structures. Anyone who sees the importance of initiating social change will bump up against the power of the reigning view of things.\(^45\) Ironically, churches


are sometimes among the most conservative forces in society and in the past have resisted important shifts toward justice and equality in society. Examples can be found in the support for slavery and apartheid, respectively, in some American and South African churches. At the same time, other churches and church leaders took principal roles in opposing slavery and apartheid in each country. For example, note the split of the American Presbyterian church into northern and southern branches, a split caused partly by the opposition to slavery of some Presbyterians and the support for slavery by others. In South Africa, Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu is famous for his opposition to apartheid. But it is still true that churches are sometimes among the most conservative institutions in society.

Recognizing the impact of social context on the church’s programs and policies should prepare us to expect similar pressure on the church’s teachings. In 1999 we heard questions raised about the reality of hell by both The Reverend Mr. Bill Phipps, Moderator of the United Church of Canada, and by Pope John Paul II. These questions by major religious leaders may reflect, among other pastoral concerns, the impact exerted by changing social contexts on church teaching. They may reflect the shrinking ability of the church to determine plausibility or believability for members. In an earlier era the church had the power to shape the mental world within which ideas did or did not make sense, but times have changed. “The world-building potency of religion is thus restricted to the construction of sub-worlds, of fragmented universes of meaning, the plausibility structure of which may

social relationships among people...developing new ways of containing, avoiding, deescalating the violence that climate change fuels.”

46 Bowen, “Religious Demography of Canadians,” 42.
in some cases be no larger than the nuclear family.”

A secular society has reduced the plausibility of the church’s teaching, and the church cannot ignore its changed situation.

The secularity of the society will affect not only the congregation’s sense of the plausibility of church doctrines but also its sense of the nature of the church itself. Secular society has brought with it a wave of individualism. Conversely, New Testament images of the church, including “the Body of Christ” and “the vine and the branches” communicate an organic view of the church with a strong sense of communion and connection among the members. Church members often feel the impact of their secular culture’s individualism, and it undermines their ability to relate to these organic New Testament images. As a result, the church suffers the loss of members’ commitment to one another and to the needs of the institution as such.

The individualism that has driven changes in our society in the past several decades is not new. The fundamentalism of my childhood and youth with its interest in salvation for the soul was an individualistic interpretation of Christian salvation and faith. Arguments within and around the WCC often involved the difference between individual views of salvation and a wider concern with social issues.

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47 Berger, Sacred Canopy, 134.


49 1 Corinthians 12:12-31.

50 World Council of Churches, “History of World Mission and Evangelism.”
http://www.oikoumene.org/en/who-are-we/organization-structure/consultative-bodies/world-mission-and-evangelism/history.html (accessed October 12, 2012). Note the reference on this World Council of Churches website to the Bangkok Conference of 1972–73 on the topic “Salvation Today”, at which both spiritual and socio-political issues were recognized as parts of the definition of salvation.
When individualism is dominant, there will be a tendency to view the value of any institution in terms of its immediate importance to the individual doing the evaluating. Church members are affected by this attitude and might simply sit back and allow church to compete on a given Sunday morning with any “better offer” they may have for “spending that time”. This attitude erodes the congregation’s ability to be a body, to think in terms of the impact one individual’s actions might have on the quality of life of the group. The effects of individualism are not all negative, of course; individual members of congregations today undoubtedly appreciate the freedom they have to opt in or out of particular church activities, and that sense of freedom could also strengthen the church by making people happier with their own participation. Still, individualism weakens the ability of the congregation to make plans for the coming year, not to mention for coming generations.

The impact of secular culture can also reduce the ability of members of the congregation to critically evaluate that culture and sort out its demands in relationship to their Christian faith. Specifically, for example, church members and ministers live in a world that assumes the necessity and goodness of what Walter Wink has called the “domination system”. In North America we often assume, based on generalizing the notion of scarce resources, that to accomplish our goals we have to prevent others from getting what they want. At a personal level we compete for jobs and for positions of prestige in the community; at a corporate level we compete for market share; and nationally, we struggle to enforce our borders with at least the threat of Canadian military force. We learn that it is only natural to attempt to dominate others in order to realize our own goals. This domination system sounds opposed to Jesus’ teaching about love of enemies and non-retaliation in the

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Beatitudes (Matthew 5:1-12), but it is uncritically allowed to infiltrate and shape church programs and teachings. It is part of our consciousness that has evolved “out of a drive to mastery”.

Unwittingly, as part of our culture and as expressions of our culture’s consciousness, churches often become venues for power struggles between individual members and groups as the local congregation is pulled away from Jesus’ teachings by the secular influence of the surrounding society. And each year around Remembrance Day, it is usual for most Ontario churches to reinforce our society’s common statements of faith in the domination system.

The effects of our secular society on the church are many and varied. Positively, the secular context offers an invitation to the church to differentiate itself from the world and face its calling to come out and be separate. But many effects are mixed or negative. For example, the secular context positively shapes the way we hear the Scriptures in that it provides us with new insight into the meanings of traditional teaching, but at the same time, because of its powerful effect on our whole sense of plausibility, that same secular context can make it difficult for us to relate to the ancient teaching. Secularity puts the church into competition with other social institutions and other Christian churches for the attention of church people on Sunday morning, bringing powerful market forces to bear on the programs and teaching of the church. It strengthens the ideology of individualism, contributing a new freedom for church members to make decisions about their own levels of involvement, but also weakening organic New Testament metaphors for the church. And it makes the domination system seem normal and convincing, weakening Jesus’ teachings about non-retaliation and love of enemies. The local congregation will feel all of these strong effects

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52 Ibid., 120, 135-6.

53 Fensham, Emerging, 85.
from living in our secular context. If the minister is to do her or his job faithfully, some intentional listening to just how people in this congregation are thinking and feeling about these issues will be required.

Different Views of the Church in Our Secular Society

The Church as Viewed from a Secular Perspective

The strong effects the congregation feels from our secular society will reach right into the way members of the congregation understand church. One way people look at the church in our day accepts most of the conclusions of the secularism described above: secular plausibility structures, individualism, consumerism, domination. Classical secularization theory claims that the process of modernization is inevitably accompanied by a decline in religious participation and in the influence of religious organizations. This has certainly appeared to be the case in parts of Western society, especially in parts of Europe and in Canada. The process of modernization with its accompanying industrialization has produced a differentiated society with an array of independent institutions functioning alongside one another. This society looks very different from the one it replaced, in which two dominant institutions, church and state, were both seen as Christian organizations and agencies of God’s rule in the world. The Holy Roman Empire and medieval England were examples of such more or less monolithic societies.

The cooperation of political and ecclesiastical officials in those medieval societies was partly the result of a change in the church’s social location, facilitated in the fourth century when Emperor Constantine issued the Edict of Toleration and, two years later, the Edict of Milan. Constantine was finally baptized as a Christian himself shortly before his death. Before the Edict of Toleration in 311 AD, the church had been illegal, and this outlaw
status protected it from insincere members with ulterior motives.\textsuperscript{54} When the emperor embraced\textsuperscript{55} Christianity, that much-disputed action started a process that led to the Edict of Milan, through which the church’s “protection” was removed: people flooded into the church, and the church was tempted to make all sorts of changes in its teaching and practices to fit into the program of its new partner, the Roman imperial state.\textsuperscript{56} That partnership contributed to the creation of virtually monolithic medieval societies in which church and state saw themselves as two arms of one powerful Christian organization. Each struggled for supremacy, but both agreed on the Christian nature of their society.

With the coming of modernity, that situation began to change. Corporations gained more power and greater independence. Banks and guilds sprang up alongside hospitals and educational institutions. Without going into detail, we can see that this changed social situation would reshape the church’s position relative to the rest of society. Meanwhile, changes inside the church further reduced its social influence. The Great Schism of the 11\textsuperscript{th} century and the Reformation in the 16\textsuperscript{th} century shattered the Roman Catholic Church into a growing number of independent churches with no united front and shrunken political power.

By our time, the church has been reduced to one among many institutions of society. That society is increasingly seen as consisting of free individual persons pursuing personal

\textsuperscript{54} Stone, \textit{Evangelism}, 119. Cf. Hall, \textit{End of Christendom}, 41. He provocatively calls on the church to “Disestablish yourselves!” in the hope that the church can again clearly understand and live out of the difference between the church and the world.

\textsuperscript{55} Charles Freeman, “The Emperor’s State of Grace,” \textit{History Today} 51:1 (2001), \url{http://search.proquest.com.myaccess.library.utoronto/docview/202814928} (accessed June 28, 2012). Freeman clarifies the interesting and unclear circumstances around the so-called conversion of Constantine. The fact remains that, despite our inability to assess the sincerity of Constantine’s “conversion”, his actions facilitated the transition of the Christian Church from persecuted minority to a position of power and influence in the Empire, an experience that has continued to beckon and threaten the Church from that day to this.

\textsuperscript{56} Stone, \textit{Evangelism}, 116.
goals and organized into various public and private institutions. The Christian church with its many denominations has been reduced from arguably the most powerful social organization in the West to a variety of much weaker private institutions reflecting the personal opinions of people who made individual free choices to associate themselves. The church has been disestablished, moved from being the official religious arm of a civilization to one among many voluntary associations in that society. People in Western societies generally have become less and less concerned about what church officials might think or say about public issues or their private lives.

These changes have naturally made a difference in how church members themselves tend to understand their role in the church and the church’s role in their lives. Their role in the church has become nearly completely voluntary. Association with a church used to be almost required in North America for people who wished to seem respectable, but this is no longer the case. In fact, after US President Bill Clinton’s famous 1996 fall from grace, it even became common to hear public discussion of whether a person’s private morality is even relevant to the question of suitability for public office, a discussion which no doubt reflected the American constitutional “separation of church and state”. Churches are seen more and more as consumer options: if a person wishes, they are free to choose to be involved with a church, and just as free in most cases to define the nature of that involvement.

Few Christian ministers still try to act as if they have the power to tell parishioners what they have to think or do. Most realize that, just as the church has lost much of its power in society, so the positions of ministers and other church leaders no longer imply much
control even inside the church.\textsuperscript{57} This can create the perception of a power vacuum in the church, which is filled according to rules that operate in other social institutions. Individuals in the church vie for domination over other individuals. The same skills and strategies used in business or politics enable ambitious individuals to enforce their will even inside the church, where we might hope to find different standards and different goals. It can seem natural for congregations to plan programs and marketing techniques that might enable them to attract a larger share of the churchgoing public than competing congregations can command. The principles of individualism and of the domination system can exercise a powerful influence inside the church, pushing aside more traditional churchly approaches including intentional, evident piety and the use of prayer as part of the decision process. Careful questioning of church members and attentive listening to their ideas and inclinations will help the minister evaluate parishioners’ attitudes toward the domination system and the spirit of individualism.

Many church people who have perhaps uncritically adopted such secular values as individualism and domination are nostalgic for a time when the church was still a powerful institution in the community—when society was undifferentiated, or the church and the world seemed more or less the same thing. It is not uncommon to hear church people express sadness or anger about the elimination of the Lord’s Prayer from the opening exercises in government-operated schools in Ontario. Church people will need a new and subtle sense of the difference between the church and the world if they are to understand the confusion that would be reflected by the presence of specifically Christian symbols in public institutions in a multicultural society. We will need to attend to and understand the

\textsuperscript{57}However, note below (Chapter Seven) reference to Donald Capps’ notion of the paradox of pastoral power.
distinctive nature of the church if we are to understand similarities and differences between the church and the rest of society and sort out what it will mean to embrace our calling as members of the church within the society, our calling to be “salt” and “light” in the world.

The Church as Viewed from a Communitarian and Prophetic Perspective

Counteracting the effects of secular assumptions will require a theory of church, an ecclesiology, developed as part of a critical, contextual theology. That theology will question any understanding which simply assigns the church a role defined by other voluntary organizations competing to serve the private interests of free individuals. It will also question assumptions about domination as a mode of operation for church members inside the church and out in the broader society. It will question assumptions that ignore the influence of social location and issues of power while actually bolstering an existing hierarchy, and will challenge church ideas and practices that seem to simply model the traditions of our secular society. However, it will not be enough for ministers and theological colleges to appropriate such a theological understanding; to make a difference, that theology will need to work its way into the hearts and minds and lifestyles of the congregation. I will argue that a minister who plans an agenda of theological consciousness-raising will need to support that agenda with a program of intentional, evaluative listening to assess just what the levels of awareness are within the congregation.

To help suggest the theological horizons in terms of which I want my own consciousness and that of the congregation raised, I will refer first of all to two theologians, Letty Russell and Bryan Stone; in the section below where I do some intentional personal
theological reflection, other theologians will also be invited into the conversation. Letty Russell has been chosen for her fresh thinking around issues of salvation and power, and her rigorous critique of the church’s tendency to ignore the influence of social location and power while actually reinforcing an existing paternalistic social structure. Bryan Stone has been chosen for his insistent questioning of church ideas and practices that seem to uncritically model traditions of our secular society. His questioning results in a broad, bold, new definition for salvation as an alternative social imaginary and way of life. These writers have been singled out for their corrective and provocative combination of similarity to and difference from my own background, and for their pointed assessment of the contemporary church. While notably different from each other, each seems like a theological “cousin” of mine. They will help me set out horizons for the theology informing my research.

The late Letty Russell, who was a professor of theology at Yale Divinity School, a feminist thinker, and an ordained Presbyterian minister, will provide the primary theological horizon for this chapter. She offers a feminist ecclesiology critical of patterns of patriarchal domination that have typified the church through the centuries. I experience her writing as a disconcerting and refreshing challenge to my experience of church through most of my life, and as an inspiring corroboration for my hopes for church today. We will also listen to Bryan Stone, who draws a radical contrast between the church and the world, and calls church people to live in terms of an entirely different image of what life is all about. For Bryan Stone, the unapologetic embrace of that alternative social imaginary, and the humble offer of it as an option to anyone who will listen, constitute evangelism. My own imagination has been captured by Russell’s rejection of any hierarchies of power, and

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Theologians and missiologists David Bosch, Lesslie Newbigin, and Charles Fensham will be invited into the conversation below (Chapter Seven) as part of my personal theological reflection on the Faith Conversations and my own experience of church.
Stone’s stark opposition between world and church. While that (to me) appealing starkness will probably need to be softened by metaphors such as “journey”, it is a bracing stimulus to the rethinking that would be helpful to me and to our congregation.

It will help us understand the difference between these two theologians if we remember their birth and publication dates. Letty Russell was born in 1929, was married to Johann Hoekendijk, thought in terms of the WCC debate between ecumenical and evangelical voices, and published her book in 1997. Bryan Stone was born 30 years after Russell. His background is in the Nazarene Church, and he now teaches at the (United Methodist) Boston University School of Theology. He has been influenced by the pacifist Mennonite John Howard Yoder and is seen as a representative of the ecclesial ethics school of thought. Reflecting on these differences helps us understand how it was that, in the 60s and 70s with all of their social foment, Letty Russell probably thought the church had much to learn from justice movements in the broader world—learning from the world. And it would help us anticipate that Bryan Stone, on the other hand, might have carried the conviction that the church of the 80s and 90s was in urgent need of distinguishing its calling and its ethics from those of the world—resisting the influence of the world. Nevertheless, people in small, traditional Protestant churches could expect to find ways in which both of these very different types of critical theological thinking could actually converge and prove helpful to us.

Letty Russell’s image for the church is a round table, chosen for its contrast with the hierarchical arrangements she sees in church history. The round table pictures an inclusive, egalitarian community opening out all the way to the margins of the society in which it finds itself. Russell’s image is inspired by Jesus’ inclusive table fellowship, which was known to
include “tax collectors and sinners” (and women) and for which he was criticized by the religious establishment of his day (Mark 2:15–17). “Table” has itself already been a rich image in Christian tradition; in the central sacrament of the Eucharist, the community gathers at the table to share bread and wine according to Jesus’ example and command. That sacramental meal symbolizes a hospitality that is one of the defining practices of the Christian church. Provocatively, Russell calls on women to resist the temptation to “choose for the center” by the assertive action of “sawing off their own table corners.” Instead of “emulating the oppressors”, she urges women “on the margin to claim the margin by working in solidarity with others on the margin as they move toward the center … and no one will need to be marginalized.” She also urges us to look around in church meetings with the question, “Who’s missing? Who are the ones whose voice is not heard?”

Russell warns that those who make such choices will be perceived as “uppity women” who are a threat to the domination system, just as Jesus was. The sort of table politics she advocates will indeed be a threat to existing arrangements in church and society and will imply a willingness to overturn some tables. The goal is not disorder for its own sake, but a clearing of obstacles to a hospitality found in “kitchen table solidarity”. Unlike that of the legendary King Arthur, Russell’s round table admits women and men, and its hospitality is not limited to a particular social class. The table image reaches past both the individualism and the domination—and obviously the paternalism—typical of our secular

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60 Ibid.

61 Ibid., 14.

62 Ibid., 58.
society. Hospitality by its very nature is communal rather than individualistic,\textsuperscript{63} and the embrace of equality implied by the round shape is a rejection of the domination system characterized by hierarchy.

Letty Russell gives considerable attention to the meaning of salvation. She insists that “salvation” is a story rather than an idea.\textsuperscript{64} She explains the Old Testament’s vision of \textit{shalom}, or “personal, familial and communal wholeness, well-being, and prosperity… a summary of all the gifts God promises to humanity in the mending of creation, including those of justice and righteousness”,\textsuperscript{65} and says that Jesus affirms this broad view of salvation as \textit{shalom} and uses it to define his own calling. Paul, she says, reduces this broad, inclusive view of salvation to a more specific concern with the divine-human relationship. But it was in the early church under the influence of a Hellenistic split between body and soul that salvation came to be focused more exclusively on “…the destiny of the soul in the afterlife.”\textsuperscript{66} This salvation was to be controlled through the church with its sacramental system, and thus the formulation, “No salvation outside the church.” Russell sees in this formulation a devolution of the rich, biblical notion of \textit{shalom} and calls urgently for the church to divest itself of its self-interested control over the eternal destiny of the soul in order to hear Jesus’ insistence on \textit{shalom} for those on the margins of society, or, in her language, “the poor”.

\textsuperscript{63} Reynolds, “A Rooted Openness,” 13–16. In fact, Reynolds argues that in Christian hospitality, the line between host and guest is blurred as the host becomes vulnerable to the guest. More than being a simple act that leaves the host free, hospitality creates a new social situation.

\textsuperscript{64} Russell, \textit{Church in the Round}, 115.

\textsuperscript{65} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{66} Ibid., 116.
Letty Russell provides acerbic commentary on the commitments and convictions of the church at the end of the last century. However, that critique is softened by her kindness and realism. She allows for a range of Christian communities that can claim connection with a properly biblical tradition of justice and liberation. One gets the sense that the best communities are what she calls “Feminist Christian communities,” but there are also the “Basic Christian communities” familiar to students of Latin American liberation theology. And she even makes room for something she calls “Renewed Christian communities,” plain old traditional Protestant churches moving towards this appealing feminist interpretation of the church. “Renewed congregations represent the continuing ferment in the lives of established church institutions that breaks out from time to time at all levels of church life and calls people to use their ecclesial and social power for advocacy for those who have been marginalized in society and in the church.” Many people find it necessary to leave the traditional church to find liberation for themselves and the opportunity to join in the liberation of those on the margins of society. But Letty Russell still holds out the possibility that traditional churches can themselves gain access to the movement of liberation by intentionally aligning themselves with groups and causes working toward justice for those who are disenfranchised. When a church takes that public stand and sees itself in the image of a round table, it can be considered a “Renewed Christian community.”

It is not clear where Letty Russell’s generous classification of congregations leaves individual persons of good will who find themselves in congregations not ready to take positions in solidarity with groups on the margin. There are people who are sympathetic with groups on the margins and who work for justice, who are yet members of

67 Ibid., 96–111.
68 Ibid., 97.
congregations that could not be classified as Renewed Christian Communities. Our best efforts at theorizing will only be able to approximate the reality we find as we sensitively listen to people in the congregations we serve.

American Theologian and Boston University School of Theology Professor Bryan Stone could be seen as representing post-liberal ecclesial ethics and therefore as coming from a theological corner quite different from feminist Presbyterian theologian Letty Russell. Still, he provides images that complement Letty Russell’s “round table.” He defines “church” as “a visible communion, a material culture, a form of life, an embodied social imagination, a public, a politics and economics in its own right”. 69 Such an “embodied social imagination” would be based on an alternative plausibility structure that provides members with an unconventional perspective on the world and their lives. Stone bases this unusual perspective on his interpretation of Jesus’ instructions to the early church to baptize people and to remember him in the sharing of the Eucharist. The responsibility of the church is not to offer helpful insights for becoming successful in the politics and economics of secular culture. The church demonstrates its own distinctive politics and economics, directed toward an alternative goal that it calls “salvation”. Stone argues for an inclusive baptismal politics: a community open to all the baptized regardless of their gender, social class, race, or ethnicity. He suggests a Eucharistic economics for that alternative community: the unrestricted sharing of bread and wine in the Sacrament as part of a whole economics of open allocation of other material goods. For Bryan Stone, church and salvation cannot be separated, because salvation entails a transfer from one community with its reigning plausibility structure to a different community with a different plausibility structure and way

69 Stone, Evangelism, 170.
of life. That is a conversion from being embedded in and defined by secular society to being embedded in and defined by the church. The church’s way of life is called salvation.

Christian economics is critical for the practice of evangelism, for in the double movement to and from the Lord’s table a community of witnesses is created and made competent to be for the world something it otherwise would not and could not be. This “something” we may call salvation, or, as in John’s Gospel, we may refer to it simply as “life,” but it takes many forms—bread, housing, solidarity, hope, justice, mercy, and healing.

This communitarian understanding of salvation is thus an alternative definition of success, different from the one that prevails in secular society. Salvation is not a fine-tuned path an individual might freely choose to get ahead in secular society, or some plan to ensure eternal bliss, but is the way of life typical of the church. Over against the individualism of secular society, the church is called to be an egalitarian community into which committed followers of Jesus are initiated by the sacrament of baptism. Of critical importance to that alternative way of life is the sacrament of the Eucharist, in which the bread and wine are shared and a community of witnesses created; by their communal life of sharing, they witness to the power of the resurrection of Christ, and offer an alternative way of life to the world. That offer, lived and demonstrated and spoken, the church calls “evangelism.” Evangelism is not a competitive claim to a set of beliefs that are smarter or superior to those of others in the secular community. For a world in serious trouble, evangelism—the offer of an alternative plan for communal living—is a good-faith suggestion for a radical turn in the direction of the abundant countercultural life advocated by Jesus.

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70 Ibid., 269. Cf. the reference to Lesslie Newbigin’s notion of plausibility structures in fn 41 above.

71 Ibid., 205.
Bryan Stone’s suggestions about politics, economics, and salvation highlight the urgent need for conversations among theologians and sociologists, not to mention between theologians and ordinary believing people. It is going to be a large jump between Stone’s provocative references to Jesus’ table fellowship on the one hand, and actual social structures in today’s Canada on the other. Conversations in small-town, traditional Protestant congregations about radically different social structures will produce opportunities for perceptive listening to discover how such suggestions for social change strike people in these congregations. In some cases, the minister will find an eager receptiveness; in other cases, suggestions may run headlong into congregants’ assumption that church is nice, but not particularly related to life in the real world. The privatized, individualized assumptions of our secular culture outfit members of the congregation with internal mental “screens” to filter out ideas and visions that do not fit secular plausibility. To get past these, we will need interdisciplinary discussions: theology will need sociology to give some imaginable/imaginative shape to prescriptions like Stone’s political and economic ideas. The average traditional Protestant congregation includes a high proportion of aging members who hope that those “bad, secular systems” in which they have so much invested (pensions, savings, corporations, banks, supermarkets) will hang on long enough to see them through. Criticism of secular systems and structures often has to come from, and appeal to, either people with less opportunity to invest, or to those who have the intellectual distance and courage to speak critically and credibly of things they personally depend on.

Interdisciplinary discussions between theologians and sociologists will need to include conversations with ordinary ministers and congregations. Perhaps we need to point out some (attractive, even seductive) idealism in the thinking of a theologian like Bryan
Stone. We must not get caught in a false dichotomy between beautiful, ideal prescriptions for faithful Christian communal living, and discouraging descriptions of actual congregations. What kind of reality-inspired vision do ministers share that can appeal to and ignite the real faith living in congregations that are not leaping up in joyful determination to repent, believe, and follow Jesus? We need to articulate a “third way” that involves concrete models for people with normal styles of faith to relate to and get a little bit excited about.

Bryan Stone’s prescribed alternative way involves relationships that are dialogical rather than hierarchical.\(^72\) Letty Russell’s image of a round table pictures the alternative way typical of Christian faith. The church must not see itself as simply a temporary aggregate of similarly motivated individuals, but realize that it has the capacity to function as a body, an instrument of God’s grace, and to exert greater power for good than the individual members could by themselves.\(^73\) More than a collection of individuals, the church is catholic: stretching not only around the world, but back into the past and forward into the future.

The church is therefore tied to its own typical, traditional practices and not simply pragmatically inventing “what seems like it might work for us” right now.\(^74\) The church will attend to and maintain its typical practices such as the Sacraments, Bible reading, prayer, proclamation of the Word, hospitality to strangers, and care for the marginalized in the community and around the world. These practices will be carried out in works of meekness,

\(^{72}\) Alistair I. McFadyen, *The Call to Personhood: A Christian Theory of the Individual in Social Relationships* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 78. McFadyen argues energetically that “As a subject of communication, a person is more like a ‘place’ (a location of communication) than a thing or an object.” And, further (82), he claims that “person indicates a subject of communication rather than a private subjectivity.” Cf. Galatians 5:13–15.


\(^{74}\) Diana Butler Bass, *The Practicing Congregation: Imagining a New Old Church* (Herndon, Virginia: The Alban Institute, 2004), 89.
mercy, and peacemaking. And significantly, meekness, mercy, and peacemaking will begin at home as church members find ways to attend carefully to one another. Habits gained within the church family will naturally overflow into the broader community. That overflow is the shape of the mission of the church, which is seen as an affirmation and extension of the mission of God in the world.

Such traditional church practices are neither a blueprint for a fine-tuning of institutions in the broader society nor a better idea of how to get ahead in the economic competition of the free market. They are, again, an alternative suggestion about how all could live. Making that alternative suggestion is called evangelism, “spreading the gospel”; living and offering that alternative suggestion is the mission of the church. As I listen to the participants in the Faith Conversations below, I will be listening for indications that the participants are or are not interested in alternative suggestions about how all could live. Do they feel a need for change, or are they deeply hopeful about their own prospects for successfully negotiating existing political and economic arrangements? Are participants ambivalent about such a stark alternative? Of course, answers to these questions will affect how much interest we find in the notion of “salvation”. Salvation is of interest to people who feel lost; those who feel hopeful about their prospects in the present situation are not so much interested in salvation. And yet, salvation is deeply embedded in the customary message of the church. What will salvation mean in today’s traditional Protestant church?

For Bryan Stone, salvation is a concrete, worldly, “social imaginary” rather than simply a personal choice about some claimed distant future. It is an alternative way of life.

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75 Charles Taylor has used the term “modern social imaginaries”, especially in his book by that title, to refer to the set of assumptions, ideas, and traditions that underlie modern society. By this term he indicates the socially constructed nature of reality including society. I am using Bryan Stone’s term “social imagination” as mentioned on p. 39 above to suggest that the church has an
that involves conversion, a conscious transfer from one community to another marked by the Sacrament of Baptism. Salvation involves a commitment to justice and liberation. In fact, salvation will include an awareness of justice as perhaps a fifth mark of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church. Salvation requires addressing power differentials between the church and its periphery, including a determination that power differentials even within the congregation be carefully attended to and rejected. For example, salvation calls church members to withhold judgment of “nominal” Christians found at the periphery of the congregation and not to assume an understanding of their faith experience. Salvation requires repentance, which is a clear-eyed decision by the congregation to turn around to journey toward God—which means to “journey toward the world in life-giving, liberating actions”. These views of salvation can shape the minister’s thinking and speaking and frame her or his listening. However, it will take a determined effort for the minister to distinguish what s/he wants and says from what is actually being heard, how it is received, and what is then genuinely vigorous in the hearts and lives of the congregants.

From this discussion we can conclude that there are at least two different views of the church in our society: in one of them, generally held by our secular society, the church is imagination of the nature and goal of social life different from the reigning imagination in our secular society, and that this alternative imagination is so important and powerful as to allow us to call the church a social imagination. Cf. Taylor, Modern Social Imaginaries.


77 Stone, Evangelism, 135. Letty Russell’s suggestion to add a fifth “mark of the church” is catchy, since it proposes modifying such an old and virtually canonized formula. One wonders if a less sensational suggestion might be to exegete the terms “holy” and “catholic” carefully enough to demonstrate that they actually require the same thing Russell is urging with her addition of “justice” as the fifth. One also wonders, though, if a less sensational suggestion would even be noticed.


a gathering of individuals with a private interest in a certain type of religion, a gathering more or less irrelevant to other activities and associations those individuals have out in the real world of public life — business, politics, and entertainment. The other view, held historically by the church itself, is that the church is a community with an alternative way of living in the world, with its own politics and economics and its own perspective on the world’s business, politics, and entertainment. But the church itself in many cases has blurred its historic self-understanding in the direction of the prevailing view of contemporary secular society. As this happens, the church’s ability to perform its mission in the world is compromised. That mission is described by Jesus in the open, metaphoric terms of “salt” and “light” (Matthew 5:13–14), “vine and branches” (John 15:1), and “table” (Mark 2:15–17). The church’s own understanding of evangelism is eroded, shifting from that of a natural witness integral to an alternative lifestyle to that of a predictable and embarrassing form of self-interested advertising, or proselytizing. To be a communitarian and prophetic church, a congregation must attend to, understand, and decide to act on the imperatives implied in these biblical images from Jesus’ teaching and practice in the gospels. It will be unwise for a minister committed to this view of the church to assume that the congregation s/he serves does or does not hold a similar commitment. Rather, the minister will have to invest time and energy researching the commitments of the members of the congregation through an intentional course of careful, evaluative listening.

The Local Congregation and the Minister

The Impact of Accepting Society’s Definition of Our Church

Choices around secular society’s definitions of the church and the church’s own historic definitions of itself will have serious social consequences for any congregation.
Local congregations, including ours, often seem relatively unaware of religious trends in the larger society. Conversations with congregational leaders about “how things are going” may reveal their impression that the fortunes of local congregations go up and down in response to factors such as the commitment and energy level of congregants, and the effectiveness, work ethic, and attractiveness of incumbent ministers. Whether that assumption is current in a particular congregation can only be determined by listening to the people. How things are going is often understood in terms of quantitative data such as attendance and revenue. While not irrelevant, these factors can only really be understood in terms of some appreciation of general declines among churches in the West over the past two hundred years.

Local factors in their larger context will also be understood in terms of some definition of church, and can be understood to fit some mixture of the two competing definitions above. They can be seen mainly in terms of secular society’s view of the local church as an interest group competing with others for the support of such individuals as can be convinced to join it in its efforts to gain power and influence. Those holding this view may evaluate it primarily by those quantitative measurements. The factors can also be understood, though, in terms of a different view; they can fit into a view of the church as an alternative social imaginary with its own plausibility structure and its own standards for measuring. The minister will want to explore which definition is current in the congregation by asking questions and listening to answers.

The secular view will infiltrate any church to some extent. When that happens in our church, it will have some impact on our consciousness, with possible serious consequences. Such impact will reduce our ability to challenge individualistic assumptions about the nature
of the church and our role in it. It will shrink our ability to think critically about domination and mastery as ways of operating and relating inside and outside the church. We will tend to base our involvement in the congregation on consumer models, so that, for example, decisions about whether or not to participate in a particular program will be based more on the perceived payoff that program has for us personally. Our sense of being a congregation will be undermined: we will tend not to see the congregation as part of a catholic church with a stake in God’s crucial mission in the community and the world, and we will not feel a need to work on relationships or resolve conflicts with others beyond what seems helpful to us personally. We will not articulate or live out of a sense of being the Body of Christ, responsive to the call of God to journey toward a world God loves. We will not look as much for the fruit of the Spirit in ourselves and among our congregation (Galatians 5, Ephesians 6). We will not particularly imagine ourselves as an alternative to the way of competition, conflict, and environmental degradation around us, but will instead find our identity mainly as unreflective, committed members of that very society to which we are called to minister.

We will become nervous when we detect criticism of our culture or our country in the message of the church, as our opinions will be shaped more by the plausibility structure of the surrounding society with its growing secularity than by biblical instructions to be witnesses to the gospel.\footnote{Newbigin, \textit{Gospel}, 95.} We will, for example, be more susceptible to the “broadcast culture” typical of globalized society,\footnote{Fensham, \textit{Emerging}, 95–107.} which shapes our consciousness and teaches us to “watch” rather than to engage and speak and take responsible action. This will tend to make us prefer church services that are entertaining over those that direct us into communal
worship and praise of God. Is it not obvious that once the congregation carefully attends to the
effects of uncritically drifting into society’s definitions, they will understand the
necessity of decisions about how to be faithful to their own calling?

Of course, any congregation in any context will be influenced by its cultural setting, and much of that influence will be good. Church services that are fun are not bad. Entertainment value need not be stripped from plans for those services. Congregations must always be journeying toward a clearer and clearer perception of the spiritual directions in which the broader society is moving, so that decisions can be made about which influences to embrace and which to resist. Interestingly enough, some important growth in the church occurs not out of careful study of Scripture and tradition, but as a result of the spiritually sensitive prodding of the secular society around us. Issues such as the role of women, respect for and acceptance of gay and lesbian people, and care for the environment have often entered the agenda of the church first of all in response to pressure from the society around.

The Role of the Minister

The congregation’s struggle to be faithful to its own alternative calling will be influenced by the minister’s leadership. However, the minister is also embedded within his or her own personal history and within our secular context. The minister is not immune to the influence of the surrounding culture on his or her consciousness. Some ministers smart under their loss of social influence, power, and credibility. One way ministers can try to regain credibility is to speak and live in terms that make sense within the reigning plausibility structure. Some ministers who have read critical analyses of passages of the

Bible based on scientific or literary points of view may back away from some literal interpretations in order to avoid raising plausibility questions among more skeptical members of the congregation. On the other hand, exposure to other critical analyses of Scriptural texts can actually provide support for the communitarian and prophetic view of the church. For example, by clarifying the realities of Jesus’ own social context, such analyses can work against a spiritualized or individualized interpretation of the Beatitudes of Matthew 5. They can show that Jesus himself was a socially aware prophetic preacher and teacher with a clear notion of power arrangements in his society. Still, sometimes skeptical members are the more urbane and sophisticated ones, and their opinions may matter more to the minister than the opinions of some of the more naïve members. Before the minister can clarify what approach to take, it would be wise to determine the actual inclinations of the congregation. Figuring this out will require some patient listening to what people are saying. It may require intentionally designing situations in which people feel safe enough to share deeply enough for the minister to get the crucial listening done.

In the past, the minister was one of a few educated members of the local community, but today ministers often have educational backgrounds that seem inferior to that of other academics and professionals in the congregation and the community. Fear of such educational and intellectual inferiority can tempt the minister to try to buy credibility by taking positions that fit more appropriately within the plausibility structure of broader society. Sermons, for example, can focus more on “plausible” explanations of the biblical text than on its oddness or integrally challenging character. When the minister gives in to such temptation, the congregation is not invited inside what Peter Berger would call the
“sacred canopy” of the religion objectified in the church. Under such a sacred canopy, members could see more aspects of their lives in terms of their calling to follow Jesus, but if not invited beneath that canopy they are left to view their lives during the Sunday morning service from the same secular perspective that shapes the surrounding culture.

If the minister is to live the church’s faith and have a believable ground from which to invite the congregation to live in their proper spiritual home, s/he must respond in faith to the Scripture and resist the temptation to speak reflexively out of the “realistic” perspective presented in the media. The minister’s ability to withstand the urge to buy into society’s plausibility structure depends ultimately on the grace of the Holy Spirit; still, the minister is also the product of his or her own human development, through which the Holy Spirit also reveals grace. I shall refer here to one helpful generalized account of this development as explained by Erik Erikson, who traces eight stages from infancy through old age. He suggests that each stage holds a “task” to be accomplished by the developing child, youth, adult, or elder; the minister always finds himself or herself at some stage of human development, having more or less successfully accomplished the tasks of earlier stages. According to Erikson, the most important stage is the fifth, adolescence, during which the future minister did or did not succeed at healthy ego identity formation. Individual ministers find themselves having more or less succeeded at that crucially important task of their own human development, and the residue of that earlier experience will have an impact on decisions and tasks that shape the minister’s relationship with the congregation. Elements of

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83 Berger, *Sacred Canopy*, 33, 44.

personality type will also play a role, affecting, for example, the minister’s inclination to listen calmly enough to learn effectively about the experience of the congregation.

As church attendance and church social power decline, pressure comes to bear on the minister as well as on other leaders in the congregation. The minister can respond in different ways. He or she can become brittle and defensive, exploiting reservoirs of guilt and grabbing whatever opportunities present themselves for exerting pressure on the congregation to accept his or her definitions of their spiritual and religious responsibilities. A different response, common in the traditional Protestant church today, is for ministers to adopt a relativistic stance, assuring the congregation that whatever they feel like doing is perfectly fine and that one person’s choice is as legitimate as another’s. This tolerant approach communicates to church members that their spiritual choices do not matter, because there are no standards beyond those they might want to choose for themselves. And, of course, most of us respond in different ways depending on a host of factors within ourselves and the situations we encounter.

An appreciation of the psychological dynamics involved in the formation of one’s own personality can be helpful as ministers interact with congregations and listen to individual members. While some secular outlooks would see psychological dynamics as determinative of possibilities in the minister’s life and in the congregation, an outlook shaped by a Christian ecclesiology would not agree. A position based on Letty Russell’s round table image or Bryan Stone’s baptismal politics and Eucharistic economics will not be friendly to psychological determinism. Both the round table and the appeal to baptism and Eucharist imply a living connection between the congregation and the risen Christ through the Holy Spirit. That living connection holds out the hope that minister and congregation can
experience some degree of freedom from both the outlook of the secular society and the very real power of personal psychological formation.

The minister needs to develop as much as possible the freedom to set aside his or her own anxious concerns for self and the success of the church, and to listen thoughtfully to parishioners’ own concerns and needs in order to be able to hear and respond to their real situations. Questions parishioners have about their own faith journeys will be easier first to hear and then to answer if the minister has formed a healthy ego identity that enables him or her to be sensitive to psychological health in the parishioners and in their families. To an even greater extent, freedom from anxious concerns and the ability to listen intentionally and respectfully depend on the minister and congregation being committed, within the constraints of their own personal and psychological development, to embracing their living connection with the risen Christ through the Holy Spirit.

A minister who is intentional about that connection with Christ, and who has a well-formed pastoral identity, will be freer to pay attention to parishioners’ experience and needs and then to help design and lead church programs that encourage the human and faith development of parishioners of all ages. Worship services will include more sermons, prayers, and other messages from the pulpit designed to avoid twin dangers: rigid, uninformed insistence that everyone conform to the minister’s interpretation of God’s word, and the broad suggestion that every decision about a way to think and live is equally valid and good. The comfort and challenge of the gospel will come through in an appropriate combination.
Intentional Theological Reflection in the Life of the Congregation

Faith journey questions that deeply concern parishioners living in this secular context may not automatically surface in day-to-day interactions with the minister. It may be necessary for the minister to be deliberate about methods of attending to the congregation so as to call those crucial issues to light. Theological reflection has been proposed by theologians such as Eugene King and Mary Ellen Sheehan as a way of careful listening in the parish that can help the minister invite and respond to important questions of faithful daily living that are urgent for the congregation. This method can also be used to help groups within the congregation, or even the congregation as a whole, come to grips with important issues of faith in our secular context.\(^5\)

King and Sheehan urge the incorporation of Bernard Lonergan’s four epistemological steps or “dynamics of human knowing” (attending, understanding, judging, deciding) into a method of theological reflection.\(^6\) Sheehan shows an appreciation for the complex levels and dimensions of pastoral intervention by including multiple aspects in her method of theological reflection: “the culturally situated pastoral situation… the tradition, including both scripture and theological development, and the person of the minister as a


\(^6\) Eugene King references Bernard Lonergan, Method in Theology (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1972) for his discussion of the four “epistemological steps”. Lonergan had published Insight: A Study of Human Understanding in 1957, one year after Benjamin Bloom’s 1956 Taxonomy of Educational Objectives: The Classification of Educational Goals, Handbook I: Cognitive Domain. The Ontario Ministry of Education has based the objectives for teachers in this province on Bloom’s famous taxonomy (knowledge/understanding, thinking, communication, application: c.f. http://tbes.edublogs.org/files/2010/10/Achievement_Chart-1gge8w8.pdf). One wonders how Bloom’s 1956 Taxonomy may have influenced Lonergan’s 1957 Insight. Conversely, what was “in the air” in the mid 1950s that simultaneously inspired Lonergan’s interest in general empirical theory and Bloom’s taxonomy? To what extent is Lonergan’s insight simply one form of what has become standard educational theory?
confessing member of the Christian community”. These three elements interact in a human context which always includes a “personal, interpersonal, and wider social or global character”. The interactions of situation, tradition, and minister in that personal, interpersonal, and global setting are responded to in the four movements of Lonergan’s dynamics of human knowing, mentioned above, which can result in careful, attentive, intentional, evaluative listening.

Sheehan describes contexts in which she has used this method. Most settings have been academic, but she has also used it at a residential therapy centre for Christian ministers. The method could be adapted for use not only in the minister’s own reflection on the practice of ministry, but also in a group within the congregation who have become interested in responding carefully and faithfully to the secular context in which we find ourselves.

Eugene King spells out how Lonergan’s four movements can inform good pastoral care. He claims that adequate attention to pastoral documents is “at the heart of theological reflection” and, further, that such attention is sadly lacking in the practice of many ministers. The attention King is urging corresponds to Lonergan’s first step in

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88 Ibid., 32 (emphasis in original).

89 Eugene King, “Towards a Method,” 39. Eugene King uses “pastoral documents” to refer to notes taken by the pastor following a pastoral intervention with a parishioner. One thinks naturally of Anton Boisen’s references to “living human documents”, and the connection is appropriate. Boisen uses the phrase “living human documents” to refer both to the actual person and to a written text such as the “verbatim” report of a pastoral intervention or the “critical incident report” of a concerning episode on the ward. That he does so means that a connection between King’s thinking and Boisen’s is appropriate, since King refers to notes taken following a pastoral action. Cf. Thomas St. James O’Connor, Clinical Pastoral Supervision and the Theology of Charles Gerkin (Waterloo: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 1998). Cf. also David A. Steere, “Anton Boisen: Figure of the Future?” Journal of Religion and Health 8 No. 4 (1969): 359–374, and Glenn H. Asquith, “The Case Study Method of Anton T. Boisen,” The Journal of Pastoral Care XXXIV No. 2 (1980): 84–94.
understanding: attending. King urges ministers to attend carefully by applying to pastoral documents what they have learned from historical and critical studies of biblical texts. He proposes carefully keeping written records of pastoral interventions which will allow ministers to "return responsibly and constructively to the experience."\(^{90}\) Carefully attending to the original experience, and then to the written record of that experience, functions like a wave that crests in insight, bringing us in turn to the second step: understanding.

We have always understood that theological enquiry aims at generating "clear and powerful insight which expresses itself in theories and hypotheses".\(^{91}\) The pastoral theologian brings those theoretical theological insights to a case in which a real life is at stake; that is the unique calling of pastoral theology. Armed with the insights of theoretical theology and attending carefully to the concrete reality of the case, the pastoral theologian makes her unique contribution: seeing "in a situation the radical goodness of creation, or the working of grace, or the working of the Holy Spirit, whereas other [secular] participants would not share such perceptions".\(^{92}\)

In the third step, judging, the minister discerns judgments already made by others in the situation and brings normative teachings from the past into an encounter with the present case to extract appropriate personalized meaning in the present.\(^{93}\) This is a profound moment in pastoral theological method: "It challenges the pastoral theologian to own his own

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\(^{90}\) Ibid., 40.

\(^{91}\) Ibid., 44.

\(^{92}\) Ibid., 45. These connections could also be seen as attempts to distinguish this method of theological reflection from ordinary educational theory.

\(^{93}\) Ibid., 48.
personal theology, to respect the theology of others, and to realize that growth is fostered in not running away from life.”

During the fourth step, deciding, the minister walks with another person as “a new situation is unfolding, someone’s future is breaking into the present.” The minister is not to make decisions for the other, but to help the person construct meaning for that breaking future, using symbols and rituals from the tradition. This theological construction is a community enterprise, neither done for the person by the minister, nor done by the person without reference to the theological insights and judgments of the minister. Realizing that theological construction is a community enterprise would naturally encourage adaptation of this method to a congregational group setting, allowing the group to confront their secular context from the perspective of their Christian faith.

King and Sheehan are calling for an approach to ministry that will be more intentional than what we might find happening in the average parish. No more casually listening to a person facing a difficult situation and then murmuring a few supportive words of comfort. The minister begins with silent reminders to herself of the cultural and theological situations in which this pastoral meeting will occur, and of her position in that situation as a confessing member of the Christian community. She listens for the personal, interpersonal, and wider social character of the story she is hearing. She listens well, attending to what she is hearing, perhaps taking notes, certainly mentally preparing to write notes following the meeting. The notes become part of a document that she will study with some of the same seriousness and the same skills that she applies to her exegesis of Scripture in sermon preparation. Her careful attending leads to insights shared either as part

\footnote{Ibid., 49.}

\footnote{Ibid., 50.}
of that meeting or at a later meeting, insights that come partly from careful attention to the language used by the other person. As insights are mulled over between the minister and the other person, the minister begins to form judgments which have roots down into the reality of the case. Making judgments takes more courage than generating insights does, and making those courageous judgments pushes the conversation toward deciding. The minister does not make decisions for the other person about what s/he will do, but does make decisions about how the case and the judgments about it encounter the symbols and ritual of the minister’s Christian tradition.

When this method of theological reflection is adapted for congregational groups, Bible study groups will not be limited to casual chat about how a certain passage strikes us or how it makes us feel, and ministers leading them will not assume that everyone has come to hear the minister talk, or that the minister knows what the people need or want to hear. Instead, the group can move purposefully into the steps of theological reflection that begin with attending and progress toward decision. The process of attending will require group members to remind themselves of important issues concerning the secular context in which they are living and reflecting as well as of their own positions as confessing members of the church. It will involve an awareness of personal and social contexts, and will include the word from the Scriptures. It will move toward insights about the Scripture and the group’s situation, and those insights will invite the group to make courageous judgments which, in turn, will argue for decision. That decision will reflect the specific issues that have pushed the group into theological reflection, and will push them out toward redemptive contact with the margins of their social context.
This method of theological reflection is certainly related to current educational theories that build on Bloom’s taxonomy, but that relationship is not necessarily a problem. Bloom’s taxonomy is designed to assist in understanding cognitive skills and levels of abstraction, and these can be just as helpful for thinking about faithful Christian congregational action as for thinking about history or biology, especially when used in a method that focuses on the symbols and teachings of the minister’s Christian tradition. The theological reflection method insists on moving beyond thinking about faithful action: it drives toward decision and action.\footnote{Compare further Glenn Asquith’s comment about Anton Boisen’s frequent references to John Dewey’s five-step method of reflective thinking, in “Case Study Method,” 88.}

**Conclusion**

There have been times in the history of the church when believers found themselves living in societies that were more or less intentionally Christian. The church in our day carries out its calling in a different context, one that can be accurately described as secular. Unfortunately, the church often tries to carry out its calling uncritically, with a consciousness shaped by modern social imaginaries. Often the church lacks a consciousness “that we are destined to be the person we see in Jesus Christ”,\footnote{Charles Fensham, *A Missional Christian Spirituality for the Emerging Church: A Journey to the Nations and for the Earth* (Toronto: Clements Publishing, forthcoming) manuscript, ch. 3.} that we are called “to suffer by denying or turning our back on death while turning towards community and the sharing of life.”\footnote{Ibid., ch. 1.} The changed and changing context in which we find ourselves demands a response from churches and their leaders. Churches can respond by resisting that secular context or by accepting it and accommodating to it. However, no decision about that
response will be able to place the church beyond the powerful and pervasive ability of that
secularity to shape all of society’s institutions including the church.

Ironically, even when churches decide to critique and intentionally respond to
society’s secular influence they can find themselves becoming more secular in their ways of
operating and even their teachings. Modern society’s individualism and its instinct toward
mastery and domination infiltrate the ways churches conduct themselves. Churches may find
themselves unconsciously adapting to market forces and shaping their program offerings to
meet consumer demand. The congregation might find even its own self-understanding
evolving uncritically to fit secular social assumptions. While conscientiously teaching New
Testament organic views of the church, congregational leaders and members may find
themselves operating in terms of ideas about the church as free individuals forming voluntary associations: they may simply attend when there is no more attractive option, and assume that the Bible is merely an interesting ancient document rather than sacred Scripture. Ministers might be tempted, for reasons explained above, to assume they know what the experience of the people in the congregation is, and hence fail to spend the time to create situations in which listening to the people is possible.

I argue here that the church will be influenced, but not helpless, in the face of that powerful secularity. I claim that an intentionally biblical ecclesiology can strengthen the church’s understanding of the broader society and the church’s resolve to shape its various responses to that society in terms of the teaching of Jesus.99 Letty Russell’s “round table” image, arising out of a woman’s own experience as an outsider inside the organizational

99 Darrell L. Guder, The Continuing Conversion of the Church (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000), 72. “Our faithful witness can only happen when we learn to see and repent of our [cultural] conformities. These conformities must be addressed when we examine the issue of gospel reductionism and open ourselves to our own continuing conversion.”
church, challenges prevailing views inside and outside the church. Bryan Stone’s description of the church as a social imagination with its own baptismal politics and its unique Eucharistic economics can support Letty Russell’s imagination of the church reaching out toward the margins of society.

It is my contention that the minister has an important role in helping to form and nourish this imagination. Without determined leadership, most churches will never come into contact with contemporary theologians and their insightful help; many traditional Protestant churches have drifted away even from the practice of studying the Bible. I argue that the minister’s role will be affected by the level of his or her healthy ego identity formation and resulting ability to put aside personal ambition to attend to the journeys and faith questions of the congregation and its members. The minister’s own human development need not be the only factor in interactions between minister and congregation: it is my claim that a commitment to an intentional process of theological reflection can enable the minister to grow, to understand parishioners, to address them where they are, and to help them move toward where they want and need to be. The same process of theological reflection can also enable groups within the congregation to deepen their awareness of conflicts between their calling and the secular assumptions of the context in which that calling is carried out.

It is my assumption that such theological reflection will drive not merely toward “correct” thinking by those who participate. Rather, its goal will be liberating action directed toward the program of Jesus announced in Nazareth in Luke’s story: Jesus described his goal and ours as addressing the needs of the marginalized and disadvantaged in society. The most faithful way for us to become intelligently aware of and (where appropriate) to resist
the individualism, domination, and market orientation of our secular society is by a commitment, in Christ, to those at the margins of society. I argue that theological reflection can initiate a journey that begins with careful attention and moves toward insight, then judgment, and finally to decision: the decision to act so as to help bring about justice.

A congregation situated in a secular society, attentive to the call of the gospel and therefore to the structural gap between the centre and the margins of society, will become aware of a form of alienation somewhat reminiscent of the Exile of the people of God in the Old Testament. A congregation committed to faithfully following the way that leads to the cross will also feel that alienation. I argue that a careful process of theological reflection can help that congregation choose to journey into the hurting world. I maintain that an essential first step toward theological reflection is the minister’s own intentional, attentive, evaluative listening as members of the congregation respond to believable invitations to tell about their experience.

My Ministry in Action will begin a journey toward such a process of theological reflection with a group of people from the congregation. It will attempt to discover whether the minister can use a course of theological reflection to listen carefully enough to the church community to detect similarities and differences between a group of volunteers from Knox Presbyterian Church and the minister regarding our experiences of church and faith. It will ask whether the minister can reach beyond anticipated significant differences to a common experience that can inform ministry in the future. This Ministry in Action will primarily involve careful listening to a group of members of Knox Presbyterian Church, Dunnville. This listening will never be neutral or unbiased; in the case of this researcher, the writings referred to in this chapter are an indication of the frame in which the listening will
occur. Still, if this researcher can listen well enough, it will be possible to hear the voice of God speaking through the gathered believers.
CHAPTER 5

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

Decisions regarding methodology are sometimes a compromise between specific interests of the researcher and the traditions of a discipline. This researcher started out with the initial interest “to learn to be a good minister”, a concern obviously requiring sharper focus. Even after it has been honed to the present question—learning through a process of theological reflection about the experience of people coming to church—that research interest is still highly personal. It is an interest in the experience of a group from one particular congregation in relationship with primarily one minister. That required searching for a tradition of research methodology with sufficient flexibility to allow such a location-specific focus.

The research interest aims at understanding specifically what the experience of people attending Knox Presbyterian Church in Dunnville has been. Further, that experience was then to be placed in conversation with the experience of the researcher. The methodology therefore would have to fit an idiosyncratic situation; it would have to be the researcher’s own methodology. The search was for a tradition that would allow considerable control over the procedure by the researcher, rather than one that tightly prescribed steps to be followed.
Hermeneutic Phenomenology as One Qualitative Research Tradition

The research interest is not restricted to the experience of one particular group of people attending Knox Presbyterian Church, Dunnville without thought to others in the same congregation. The objective is to listen to a particular group of participants to develop a grasp of their experience in the hopes that this insight will make possible a new sense of the experience in general of people who come to church here. Since the intention includes a comparison of the lived experience of people coming to this particular church with the researcher’s own experience, a qualitative research methodology will be most appropriate: a methodology that will enable listening carefully to descriptions of the participants’ lived experience of church and writing up a description of what has been learned about it in relation to the experience of the researcher.

This research should involve listening to the stories of people who have been attending Knox Presbyterian Church, Dunnville. That could have pointed toward a Narrative research methodology. Narrative Research, however, typically focuses on the specific stories of a chosen few people, and therefore will not be appropriate. In this study the researcher has generated data by listening to participants sitting in a group reflecting together on particular aspects of their experience of church. The researcher reflected on that data and compared it with his own experience.

This research has not aimed at developing a theory of the experience of people coming to Knox Presbyterian Church, Dunnville. The goal has been to come to understand and reflect on that lived experience rather than to construct a theory as such, so Grounded

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These comments are made with reference to descriptions of different approaches to qualitative research in John W. Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2007). Creswell works carefully through multiple descriptions of and instructions for the five approaches that are briefly described in this section of the chapter.
Theory would not be the most helpful tradition. People attending Knox Presbyterian Church, Dunnville, do share certain beliefs, certain patterns of behaviour, and even a language to some extent, but they do not comprise a group close enough to be accurately described as an ethnicity; many of them would claim stronger ties with people who do not attend Knox Presbyterian Church, Dunnville than with people who do. So it was concluded that ethnography was not the best tradition to choose. This research has also not aimed at the exploration of a particular issue or problem at Knox Presbyterian Church, Dunnville, so a case study methodology was not chosen.

Since this study was aimed at coming to understand the lived experience of people coming to Knox Presbyterian Church, Dunnville and reflecting on their experience compared with that of the researcher, a phenomenological research methodology seemed most appropriate. The research interest reaches beyond simple description of the lived experience of people and includes interpreting that experience for purposes of forming an understanding of that experience and comparing it with that of the researcher. This research interest seems to fit hermeneutic phenomenology, because that is the tradition that encourages researchers to probe and interpret phenomena being studied.

**Hermeneutic Phenomenology as a Philosophy**

Hermeneutic phenomenology is a philosophy rather than a methodology. That suggests two things. First, hermeneutic phenomenology does not prescribe a rigid set of steps through which each researcher must move. That flexibility meets one criterion for this study’s aim of coming to understand the lived experience of a particular group and

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comparing that with the experience of this researcher. Hermeneutic phenomenology does not prescribe each step. Individual researchers working within the tradition of hermeneutic phenomenology create methodologies that fit their chosen projects while also fitting the philosophical commitments of hermeneutic phenomenology. Secondly, any apology for hermeneutic phenomenology will have to include some statement of philosophy. This chapter depends on Max van Manen’s widely referenced *Researching Lived Experience: Human Science for an Action Sensitive Pedagogy* as he builds on Martin Heidegger’s *Being and Time* and Hans-Georg Gadamer’s *Truth and Method*.

We will not expect to find van Manen, Gadamer, or Heidegger particularly sympathetic to this researcher’s hopes for a Christian ecclesiology. On the other hand, van Manen is deeply concerned with pedagogy, and with methods he has designed to penetrate the surface of an experience to get at the deep meaning of a human event. We will expect him to be able, even without necessarily sharing our interest in ecclesiology, to help us delve beneath surface experiences of the congregation to learn about congregants’ experience of church. Hans-Georg Gadamer is considered an atheist and we will not expect him to have the interest we have in the experience of congregational life. However, he is genuinely interested in interpretive methods; there is much we can learn from him about how to attend and how to interpret. Martin Heidegger shows no more interest than Gadamer in the specific concerns of our study, but he has launched a critical attack on Enlightenment commitments to “objective” truth with its foundation in the distinction between subject and object. These thinkers, starting from foundations very different from ours, can provide support for some of the ways we attempt to distance ourselves from reigning plausibility structures.
Objective Truth or Human Being-in-the-World

Consideration of any qualitative research tradition could begin with the phrase, “merely anecdotal evidence”. This alludes not only to one of the commitments of modern scientific method but also crops up in everyday conversation as a qualifier for a speaker’s opinion. Someone who wants to limit the weight claimed for an expressed opinion because it is not based on peer-reviewed, quantitative research studies, but simply on something somebody heard, might speak of “merely anecdotal evidence”. The assumption is that the weight carried by a statement in an argument depends on the evidence that can be adduced in its support; and, further, that good evidence is “objective” and supported by credible, statistically grounded research. Conversely, a statement based on “merely anecdotal evidence” should carry less weight in an argument than a statement based on a careful, quantitative research study.

That conviction itself may be based on assumptions about objectivity and truth. These assumptions may relate to the division of reality into subjects and objects, or “thinking things” and “extended things”, a division often associated with Rene Descartes. This division makes knowledge a problem by distancing knowing subjects from the objects of their knowledge. “Human science” or hermeneutic phenomenology rejects this Cartesian ontology and looks rather to Martin Heidegger’s philosophical concept of Dasein. For


Heidegger, Dasein is being-in-the-world; it is the way human beings are, a way that incorporates subjective and objective elements of human experience within a world that exists in association with the person. This concept of being-in-the-world replaces a divided reality of subjects and objects, and redefines “objectivity” for discussion of truth.

For Heidegger, human being is always being-in-the-world, and that world which we cannot escape includes the objects of our experience. Existentially speaking, those objects do not have an independent existence over against us, at a distance that we must overcome through some epistemological method. They are objects of our world, the world within which we have our own being. Heidegger’s ontology of Dasein offers to liberate us from an anxious search for objectivity based on a demonstrable distinction between subject and object in our research. Things do appear in independence from human consciousness, but we always only know them as part of the world of our own consciousness. This implies that we can indeed know them; they are not alien to our being, but are perceived as part of the world of our being-in-the-world. He teaches further that our being-in-the-world is always situated within a cultural and social context and historical period. Understanding cannot occur in isolation from one’s context.

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104 Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010/1953), 147. “Meaning is an existential of Dasein, not a property that is attached to beings, which lies “behind” them or floats somewhere as a “realm between.” Only Dasein “has” meaning in that the disclosedness of being-in-the-world can be “fulfilled” through the beings discoverable in it. Thus only Dasein can be meaningful or meaningless.”

Objective Truth or a Strong Orientation to the Object of Study

Heidegger stresses the importance of discourse for articulating our understanding. He sees listening as constitutive of discourse. He identifies care as the mode by which we know things about this world in which we are entangled. He cautions against simplistic assumptions about the nature of care; still, his emphasis on both care and discourse prepares us to listen carefully for people’s lived experience. In fact, Max van Manen references Heidegger as he argues that “phenomenology is the attentive practice of thoughtfulness… a minding, a heeding, a caring attunement… a heedful, mindful wondering about the project of life, of living, of what it means to live a life.”

Modern science, on the other hand, is suspicious of care and aims at a standard of truth that would warn against any contaminating influence leaking into the study from the researcher’s own prejudice. Quantitative research methodologies include sophisticated techniques designed to maintain and demonstrate their objectivity, their ability to successfully eliminate any (subjective) researcher prejudice from the (objectively) true results. Proponents of hermeneutic phenomenology do not disagree that careful technique and precise measurement and reporting are desirable for research in the natural sciences. But in hermeneutic phenomenology, or, as Max van Manen calls it, “human science,” this type of objectivity is both impossible and undesirable.

106 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 163/157. Following common practice, we will use dual pagination for *Being and Time*, the number before the stroke referring to the English translation, the number after the stroke to the original German.


Van Manen embraces the importance of rationality in research but calls for a broadened definition. He therefore offers new definitions for “objectivity” and “subjectivity” in human science. “‘Objectivity’ means the researcher remains true to the object. The researcher becomes… a guardian and a defender of the true nature of the object… wants to show it, describe it, interpret it while remaining faithful to it—aware that one is easily misled.” In this effort to show, describe, and interpret a phenomenon, the scorned “anecdotal evidence” often turns out to be exactly what is needed to help achieve the objectivity desired in human science. Van Manen continues, “‘Subjectivity’ means that one needs to be as perceptive, insightful, and discerning as one can be in order to show or disclose the object in its full richness and in its greatest depth… We [as researching subjects] are strong in our orientation to the object of study in a unique and personal way—while avoiding the danger of becoming arbitrary, self-indulgent, or of getting captivated and carried away by our unreflected preconceptions.” That “strong” orientation is an appropriate subjectivity—a committed one, in which the researcher is dedicated to the object of the research, “animated by the object in a full and human sense.” In fact, “the researcher cannot afford to adopt an attitude of so-called scientific disinterestedness.” A “strong orientation” involves a personal devotion to the chosen phenomenon very different from efforts to ensure that “subjective” researcher prejudice has been sealed out of the “objective” results. Research results actually should be dialogical, reflecting an interaction

109 Ibid., 16.

110 Ibid., 20. (Emphasis in the original.)

111 Ibid., 20. (Emphasis in the original.)

112 Ibid., 33.

113 Ibid., 33.
in which a committed, deeply concerned researcher with a frankly chosen personal perspective is intentionally a part, a part that leaves a strong trace in the work.

Van Manen’s concept of “strong orientation” as he builds on Heidegger’s critique of “objective truth” provides an entry into this research. We will want to learn about the participants’ experience of church in the Ministry-in-Action explained below, but our project will not be modelled on scientific proof. It will look much more like the committed focus and concentrated attention that van Manen calls “a strong orientation”.

**Typical Commitments of Human Science Research**

**Hermeneutic Circle**

Although hermeneutic phenomenology is not strictly speaking a methodology, there are some typical commitments important to human science research in this tradition. One is the hermeneutic circle, a rather polemical phrase in a discussion of research. Circularity is often seen as a damning attribute for the work of a researcher, but human science researchers embrace what we call the hermeneutic circle. Instead of trying to reason from indubitable premises in a straight line from thesis to conclusion, hermeneutic phenomenology has different aims and takes a different approach. The tradition welcomes circularity for two reasons. Gadamer quotes at length from Heidegger:

> [The hermeneutic circle] is not to be reduced to the level of a vicious circle, or even of a circle which is merely tolerated. In the circle is hidden a positive possibility of the most primordial kind of knowing, and we genuinely grasp this possibility only when we have understood that our first, last, and constant task in interpreting is never to allow our fore-having, fore-sight, and fore-conception to be presented to us by fancies and popular conception, but rather to make the scientific theme secure by working out these fore-structures in terms of the things themselves.\(^{114}\)

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Gadamer is arguing for the value of researchers being aware of and embracing their own prejudices rather than risking having these prejudices busy working behind the scenes producing unexamined impacts on the research. Instead of trying to eliminate researcher bias in the study of a text, for example, Gadamer envisions the hermeneutical task as a questioning based on an appreciation of the text’s otherness. Researchers bring their own bias to the text and place their own fore-understanding into conversation with the text in all its “alterity”, or otherness. Heidegger thinks in terms of Dasein projecting its own fore-understanding into this conversation with the text and submitting to the challenging or correcting power of the text. Discourse, that is, movement back and forth between the preconceptions of the researcher and the notions in the text, through a hermeneutic circle, leads to understanding. “Text” becomes a metaphor for any situation the researcher wants to understand. The approach one uses to a text is analogous to the approach one takes to understanding any individual, group, or human situation, respecting and allowing for the “otherness” one encounters.

The second reason for embracing the hermeneutic circle is the reciprocal or circular flow from the parts to the whole and back to the parts, a flow that Gadamer considers essential to true understanding. He sees this as fundamental to learning, as the researcher projects ahead, onto the text to be studied, an anticipation of what will be learned. This projection is then brought into contact with the text itself and corrected—to some extent. The result is not any final understanding, but does tentatively approach a fuller

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115 Gadamer uses this term “fore-understanding” in his discussion of Heidegger and also in explaining his own hermeneutic. His example is of reading the Bible always in terms of one’s “fore-understanding” of the text as the “divine proclamation of salvation.” That fore-understanding is essential for the proper interpretation of the biblical text.
understanding.\footnote{Ibid., 293.} (This fits with another feature of hermeneutic phenomenology, the temporality of truth.\footnote{See below, pp. 80ff.}) The commitment to phenomenological writing typical of human science research will also be reinforced below by a proper understanding of the hermeneutic circle.

Instead of trying to find an indubitable starting point from which one can argue with iron-clad logic to objectively true conclusions, human science researchers adopt an approach that involves beginning in the middle of things and working back and forth in conversation with the “text”. The hermeneutic circle brings a sense of worrying away at the differences between fore-understandings (prejudices) the researcher brings to the study, and the “text”—which, again, could be an actual written text, or some person, group, or experience under consideration.

The project described below will not attempt to compare the reported experience of the participants with any previously published findings or theories. It will not even drive toward the development of a new theory. It will attempt to work back and forth (around and around?) numerous times between the researcher’s (pre-)understanding and the data, in the attempt to reach a phenomenological description of that experience. That circular action is part of the plan.

\textbf{Fusion of Horizons}

A second typical commitment among human science or hermeneutic phenomenology researchers is a fusion of horizons. Heidegger uses the term “horizon” in many complex ways. Time, or temporality, is seen as a fundamental horizon of being-in-the-world. He also
uses “horizon” to indicate the background understandings that a person brings to efforts at fresh interpretation. Gadamer uses “horizon” in that sense: “[E]ssential to the concept of situation is the concept of ‘horizon.’ The horizon is the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point.” He cites the ordinary language expression of “having one’s horizon expanded.” Horizon includes the prejudice each speaker brings to a conversation, or the prejudices and assumptions a reader brings to the text, as well as those that inform the text the reader approaches. The fusion of horizons is the goal of discourse or reading—the goal of hermeneutics. This language imagines movement on both sides of the hermeneutic encounter, which suggests that the very meaning of a text will evolve over the course of repeated readings. Respect and humility are prerequisites for a true fusion of horizons. The goal is not simply a passive reception of the text to be interpreted or the experience to be understood, resulting in mastery. The goal involves movement on both sides; not submission to some new horizon, but a fusion of horizons.

In this project, it has been my intention to work toward a fusion of horizons with the participants in the study. The primary data has been the Faith Conversations and the recordings and transcripts of those Conversations. I was mainly passive throughout the Conversations; they were not conversations between the participants and me in any normal sense.

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119 Ibid., 301.

120 Whitehead, “Enhancing,” 513.

121 Gadamer maintains that “To ask a question means to bring into the open. The openness of what is in question consists in the fact that the answer is not settled…. Every true question requires this openness” (*Truth and Method*, 357). And further, “All questioning and desire to know presupposes a knowledge that one does not know; so much so, indeed, that a particular lack of knowledge leads to a particular question” (359).
sense. There was an element of normal conversation, since the participants have been parishioners in the congregation where I have been the minister for ten years. Further, in preparation for the Faith Conversations, participants read materials I had produced, and listened to sermons I had written and preached. Further, there is naturally a sense of accountability among the participants, including accountability to me. Thus, even in my decision to adopt a largely passive stance in the Faith Conversations, there has been a sense of communication between the participants and me. It has certainly been my hope that communication would occur back and forth in a way that would allow that fusion of horizons—that growing understanding between participants and researcher that would allow learning and movement on both sides.

The Faith Conversations moved naturally from the participants’ experience of Worship in the congregation, through their experience of Communion/Fellowship inside the congregation, to Mission/Outreach by the congregation. The research project itself has been limited to an effort to explore and facilitate a fusion of horizons between the participants and the minister-researcher. However, it would be odd if we never thought about the implications of the concept of “fusion of horizons” beyond this project. Communion within the congregation will require a fusion of horizons among the members of the congregation. They will have to get to know one another. There will have to be “give and take” among them. And Mission will be built upon some generation of desire for a fusion of horizons between our congregation and people living on the margins of our community, and hopefully a fusion of horizons between our congregation, other Christian congregations, and other individuals and groups of good faith in the community.
Discourse

A third typical commitment in hermeneutic phenomenology is to conversation or discourse. For Heidegger, discourse is essential to being-with, which is one important mode of being-in-the-world. “Listening is constitutive for discourse… Listening even constitutes the primary and authentic openness of Dasein for its ownmost possibility of being, as in hearing the voice of the friend [conscience] whom every Dasein carries with it.”¹²²

Gadamer says conversation is based on the art of the question. The question is his symbol for genuine openness to the other person, awareness of the limits of one’s own knowledge and respect for the knowledge of the other. In a hermeneutic exercise with text, the reader wonders what the writer will say and what impact the writer’s knowledge will have on the reader’s own understanding. Correspondingly, in a conversation, one participant wonders what the other will say and what impact that speech will have on the newly shared understanding. In this context, questions are not ploys to advance a planned agenda or to force the conversation into a predetermined path. Questions are genuine and questioners are open to answers. Conversation is dialectic. The energy of genuine openness and exchange generates a creative tension in the air around such a conversation. Conversation partners are seeking truth.¹²³

¹²² Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 163/157ff. “Dasein hears because it understands. As understandingly being-in-the-world with others, Dasein “listens to” … itself and to Dasein-with, and in this listening belongs … to these. Discourse based on listening is part of being-in-the-world; it is essential to being-with. Listening is not something that being-in-the-world ‘ought to’ work at; it is given with the being of Dasein. This is so much the case that Dasein listens to ‘the voice within’ and that experience of listening to oneself forms the paradigm for listening to others. In fact, for Heidegger, the call of conscience is a form of discourse in which Dasein summons itself.” Of course, Heidegger is not naïve. He recognizes the temptation toward the average everydayness of “the they”, which falls prey to idle talk, curiosity, and the resulting ambiguity. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 167/161–176/169.

Van Manen builds on Gadamer’s understanding to incorporate conversation as a crucial tool in human science research. When studying the lived experience of birthing a child, the researcher converses with women who have given birth, asking questions, listening with the openness that Gadamer proposes. The researcher then begins to write a phenomenology of birthing. At a certain point in the process, the researcher returns to those women with the draft text, and a conversation ensues. In a hermeneutic conversation, the researcher asks if the phenomenological description is right—whether it is true to the experience as the interviewees know it. That conversation might become lively and be characterized by creative tension as both researcher and interviewees warm to a topic of intense mutual concern and work toward understanding.

Stories interviewees tell are not treated as “mere anecdotal evidence.” They are the very evidence the researcher needs to reach an understanding of the phenomenon. “The art of the researcher in the hermeneutic interview is to keep the question (of the meaning of the phenomenon), to keep himself or herself and the interviewee open to the substance of the thing being questioned.” Van Manen calls this a “conversational relation” and suggests that in this way of standing with another person, a text, or an experience, we transcend ourselves. In fact, in this experience of “the other” lies the possibility of our openness to God.

Hermeneutic phenomenology will produce a methodology that aims toward interpretation and understanding of the phenomenon. Focused attention to the phenomenon enables phenomenological description. Hermeneutic phenomenology requires an openness

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125 Ibid., 105.
to the text or to the other person, producing genuine questions that reflect the limits of the researcher’s knowledge. The researcher’s attitude toward those questioned will be respectful and will tend to envision them as co-researchers. Discourse or conversation is the model for a respectful, open attitude that approaches text or the person questioned with the sense that there is something important to be shared and learned. Conversation will be a key tool for most hermeneutic phenomenological studies.

In this project, the researcher has focused attention not only on the original Faith Conversations in real time, but also on repeated viewing of and listening to the recordings, and on producing and studying the transcripts of those conversations. There has not been much opportunity for questions back and forth between researcher and participants, but careful listening to their descriptions of their lived experience of congregational life, as well as welcoming them into the production of the actual research report and listening to their responses to the draft, does involve a form of conversation in which there has been a genuine openness to and desire to learn from the participants. The draft was corrected on the basis of that conversation.

Truth as Tentative

A fourth typical commitment of human science research is to the tentative or temporal nature of truth. For Heidegger there is being-in-the-truth, or authentic existence. He also recognizes the kind of truth discovered by scientific inquiry. Heidegger, Being and Time, 227/217. He explains, “The fact that before Newton his laws were neither true nor false cannot mean that the beings which they point out in a discovering way did not previously exist.”

126 Heidegger, Being and Time, 227/217. He explains, “The fact that before Newton his laws were neither true nor false cannot mean that the beings which they point out in a discovering way did not previously exist.”
existential condition in which being-in-the-world discovers beings and things in the world to which Dasein belongs; this truth is “temporal” inasmuch as the being of Dasein is in time. The ontic truth of scientific research is always subject to further, corrective discovery, and is therefore tentative. Newton discovered truth which had not been truth before he discovered it, even though we would not say that “those beings did not previously exist.”

Gadamer explains that the Enlightenment was prejudiced against prejudice, while prejudice actually has positive value for learning and for understanding. We do not approach any issue from an objective rational grounding, but always from within our historical situation or tradition. That tradition forms some of our prejudice. Our effort should not be directed at the elimination of all prejudice, but the elimination of prejudices that are not justified. This is accomplished by means of the hermeneutic circle: “the understanding of the text remains permanently determined by the anticipatory movement of fore-understanding. The circle of whole and part is not dissolved in perfect understanding but… is most fully realized.” He speaks of the “relative closure of a historical event.” And further, he claims, “the discovery of the true meaning of a text or work of art is never finished; it is in fact an infinite process.”

127 Ibid., 62/62. “The foundational context shown for the mode of being-in-the-world constitutive for the knowledge of the world makes the following clear: in knowing, Dasein gains a new perspective of being toward the world always already discovered in Dasein. This new possibility of being can be independently developed. It can become a task, and as scientific knowledge can take over the guidance for being-in-the-world. But knowing neither first creates a ‘commercium’ of the subject with the world, nor does this commercium originate from an effect of the world on a subject. Knowing is a mode of Dasein which is founded in being-in-the-world. Thus, being-in-the-world, as foundational constitution, requires a priori interpretation.”

128 Gadamer, Truth and Method, 293. Gadamer explicating Heidegger with approval.

129 Ibid., 297.

130 Ibid., 298.
For Gadamer, understanding comes through a circular advance as the reader or conversation approaches the text or partner with a package of fore-understandings or prejudices, anticipating what will be learned. Those anticipations are constantly placed into dialogue with the text so as to be confirmed or corrected, and that process is never complete; it can continue forever. Therefore, conclusions having been reached at any particular point along the way will always be tentative, temporal, and subject to further revision. As seen above, this circular motion toward understanding is a process Gadamer calls the “fusion of horizons”.

Van Manen agrees that knowledge is always tentative. “A phenomenological description is always one interpretation, and no single interpretation of human experience will ever exhaust the possibility of yet another complementary, or even potentially richer or deeper description.”¹³¹ A phenomenology is not aimed at any final truth about a situation, but recognizes that whatever is learned is partial and temporary (I Corinthians 13:8, 9). It aims at a description that is true, but makes modest claims for that truth. That truth is always in the middle of a conversation, a conversation that will continue after one’s own particular phenomenological description has been finished.¹³²


¹³² Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 332–336. Gadamer’s example of legal hermeneutics is helpful. The court is charged with the interpretation of the law, which is application. In a case where the decision is to be handed down by the judge, the judge has at hand the more or less black and white content of the law. And yet the interpretation does not drive toward an objective, final truth. Instead it gives an interpretation of the law specific to the case at hand. The judge has discretion to make an interpretation of the law for the specific action of the particular accused. That discretion means there is no one correct interpretation of the law for every situation. And yet, if the judge is wise and skillful, a good lawyer will be able to predict the outcome of the case. The judge must operate within the tradition of the law, including judicial decisions from the past. The decision of the judge is not the final truth about that law, or about that accused; more decisions will be rendered in the future, adding to a rich tradition of interpretation of the law. And, of course, no one can necessarily predict what direction the life of the accused will take in the days and years after the judge’s decision. The truth of the judge’s interpretation is tentative and temporal. Any
In this project, the researcher has not been aiming toward any final description of the experience of the congregation at Knox Presbyterian Church in Dunnville. The aim has not even been to arrive at a definitive statement of the experience of the eight participants. There has been a genuine appreciation of the tentative nature of the conclusions reached, and a recognition of the necessarily limited amount of material any one researcher can discover reflecting the infinite variety and abundance of experience possessed by any eight parishioners from any congregation. There is a sense of truth discovered, but certainly a modest claim for the truth of the phenomenological description created in this research.

In this project, the researcher has started from his own pre-understandings. The tentative nature of truth does not mean that the researcher begins with a blank slate: Chapter Three above shows the pre-understandings or biases with which this researcher begins the study and with which he listens to the experiences of the participants. When the discussion shows little appreciation for the goal of searching for Jesus in the lives of marginalized people in the congregation and in the community, this researcher does not revise his theological position, but experiences disappointment and feels challenged. The “conclusions” the researcher attempts to reach are not necessarily new conclusions about the theory of the church—although such a result is not ruled out—but conclusions about the researcher’s own experience and its relationship to the experience of the participants. Those conclusions will always be tentative, regardless of the firmness of theological convictions held by the researcher.

Phenomenological writing will drive toward a true description of the experience being interpreted, but the researcher will realize that the account will always only be a tentative description of the experience of the group being studied.
Phenomenological Writing

A fifth typical commitment in hermeneutic phenomenology is to the writing of phenomenological texts. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger is interested in language, in expression, and in being-together with others, but says little about writing. That being-together with others articulates itself in discourse and expresses itself in language.\(^{133}\) He argues further that Dasein in itself is essentially being-with.\(^{134}\) This existential definition of human being fits with the placement of a high value on communication. In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer is interested in writing not as a hermeneutic activity, but as the object of hermeneutics.\(^{135}\)

Max van Manen’s *Researching Lived Experience: Human Science for an Action-Sensitive Pedagogy* is fundamentally different from the philosophical works of Heidegger and Gadamer. Van Manen is writing for people who want to do what he calls “human science” or “hermeneutic phenomenological” research. And while he carefully avoids providing a step-by-step guide for researchers to follow mindlessly, his interest is first of all that very process. And for van Manen, writing is the heart of the process of hermeneutical phenomenology.

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\(^{133}\) Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 406/387.

\(^{134}\) Ibid., 120/117.

\(^{135}\) Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 394. He attributes to Hegel (with approval) the idea that literature is a result of a will to hand down. That decision to hand down makes writing different from oral communication. It also severs the text from the writer and gives it a life of its own with a horizon wider than the intentions of either the writer or some alleged intended reader. Therefore, writing is an act of self-alienation in that the writer relinquishes control over the text. This results in the abstract alienness of all texts, and invites hermeneutics into its true calling—overcoming the alienness of the text through interpretation. Because a written text has become alienated from its author, it is free to become contemporaneous with all eras. At the same time, the freedom of the text from the writer gives it pure ideality, “detached from all emotional elements.” On whether this is good or bad Gadamer seems ambivalent. He speaks of the weakness and helplessness of writing, in that it has become detached from the author and awaits the work of hermeneutics to fully exist.
The process van Manen envisions culminates in writing what he calls a phenomenological text. While human science methodology is flexible as to precise design, the whole process does lead up to a written document. It is a textual approach to a phenomenon. It is a bringing to speech of the object of research. The aim of phenomenological writing is “an animating, evocative description (text) of human actions, behaviors, intentions, and experiences as we meet them in the lifeworld.”  

This writing, however, does not lead up to a theory or a conclusion possessing any finality. It maintains a “strong orientation” to the object and intends to bring that object to speech. In a section on the “poetizing” nature of phenomenological research, van Manen says that “as you listen to a presentation of a phenomenological nature, you will listen in vain for the punch-line, the latest information, or the big news. As in poetry, it is inappropriate to ask for a conclusion or a summary.” This arises naturally out of the tentative, temporal nature of human science research. The researcher does not “get to the end” of what is being studied. Human science research does not produce a theory, but “plausible insights that bring us in more direct contact with the world.” It does not envision so much a “problem in need of a solution but a mystery in need of evocative comprehension.” Human science does not problem-solve; phenomenological questions are meaning questions. Van Manen will insist that writing is the climax of a process worthy of

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137 Ibid., 13.

138 Ibid., 9.

139 Ibid. (referencing Gabriel Marcel’s *Mystery of Being*, 1950), 50.

140 Ibid., 23.
the name of human science research. He will maintain that he is not giving a methodology, but opening up methodological considerations. He will warn against trying to use his book as a “how-to” text. And those articles of faith reflect his sense that human science deals with a mystery, a mystery that can only be dealt with through writing and rewriting.

There is a creative tension between insisting on the centrality of writing for human science research, on the one hand, and on the other the realization that the object of study is something that can never be reduced to words. “To do hermeneutic phenomenology is to attempt to accomplish the impossible: to construct a full interpretive description of some aspect of the lifeworld, and yet to remain aware that lived life is always more complex than any explication of meaning can reveal.”141 Human science is approached with a sense of awe, and its results are always only tentative.

In this research, it has been my hope to listen carefully to reports of the experience of eight participants, and to interpret those individual reports into a phenomenological text that gives voice to what it is to be a parishioner at Knox Presbyterian Church in Dunnville. That effort has taken me though a number of research stages, beginning with preparation of the participants to understand what they were asked to talk about. Then I called into session the three different Faith Conversations of two hours each, at which the participants talked with one another about their experiences of the three aspects of congregational life. During those Faith Conversations I was present, watching and listening and trying to understand. Then I spent time watching the video, listening to the audio-recording, and transcribing the proceedings. I went through them numerous times, looking for themes.

141 Ibid., 19.
This search for themes is a way of reaching beyond actual accounts of experiences to thoughtful, reflective ways of understanding what it is that gives a particular account of actual experience its special significance. “Phenomenological research, unlike any other kind of research, makes a distinction between appearance and essence, between the things of our experience and that which grounds the things of our experience.” There is a level of human experience that we tend to miss in our daily living; hermeneutic phenomenology reaches toward a deeper level of experience partly through the process of reflecting on themes essential to the phenomenon. The choice of themes is a crucial and controversial movement in human science research. Again, van Manen would insist that human science is an art, and perceiving themes is not a matter of simply following a set of rules. Selecting themes from the gathered data is a way of simplifying that data so as to begin understanding its essential meaning. The metaphor he uses is “knot”: “Themes are not things, but are more like knots in the web of human experience.” He says that themes point at, allude to, or hint at the meaning of the phenomenon. Formulating themes, he says, is not a rule-bound process but a free act of seeing meaning. This is the stage of the process when the attempt is made to move from accounts of actual experiences toward a discernment of the essence of the phenomenon chosen for study.

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142 Ibid., 32.

143 Heidegger, Being and Time, 167/161 – 177/170. He points to idle talk, curiosity, and ambiguity as typical indicators of this ontic level of human experience.

144 van Manen, Researching, 90.
This whole process was designed to prepare me to write up a phenomenological text in which I would try to capture what it is to be part of this congregation. The preparation of that phenomenological description has been the climax of the research project. The description makes no pretense of offering a conclusion or a theory about the meaning of membership in this congregation. It does not set out to solve a particular problem, nor has it got to the end of the matter. But it hopes to bring to speech the experience of the participants in the study. It hopes to present “plausible insights” that will bring the reader into contact with the world that one would meet when visiting Knox Presbyterian Church in Dunnville.

Van Manen notes that there has been little careful attention to the relationship between research and writing, and goes on to claim, “Yet for the human sciences, and specifically for hermeneutic phenomenological work, writing is closely fused into the research activity and reflection itself… The object of human science research is essentially a linguistic project: to make some aspect of our lived…experience reflectively understandable.” After all, “[c]reating a phenomenological text is the object of the research project.” To write is to show the essence behind the appearance—phenomenology. This type of writing requires rewriting, as we would expect from our

145 By some accounts (for example, Wojnar and Swanson, “Phenomenology,” 172–180) the difference between descriptive phenomenology and hermeneutic phenomenology includes an attempt by descriptive phenomenology to explicate the essence of some phenomenon, while hermeneutic phenomenology works toward interpretations of specific experiences. However, Max van Manen’s description of hermeneutic phenomenology makes it clear that he works toward the essence of a phenomenon. In Researching Lived Experience, 38, he tells of reaching beyond his experience of a particular bike ride with his 7-year-old son to grasp the meaning of “going for a bike ride with my son”. In light of that terminology, I would say that through my experience of the Faith Conversations with the particular eight participants, I am probing for an understanding of what it is to be part of the congregation. I am hoping to end up “knowing more” than simply the experience of these particular eight people.

146 van Manen, Researching, 125f.

147 Ibid., 111.
understanding of the principle of the hermeneutic circle. As a sentence is formed and reformed, the writer of a phenomenological text takes a step back to see that sentence in light of the whole document. From that perspective, rewriting again and again may well be required before the researcher has captured the sought-for essence of the experience itself.

**Personal Theological Reflection as Further Interpretation**

Through this whole process, as part of my attempt to interpret my experience of the Faith Conversations, I have engaged in personal theological reflection on my own experience of church and faith, focusing that experience in this process with the group of participants. To assist my interpretation, I reflected on my experience following a procedure laid out by Killen and deBeer in their book *The Art of Theological Reflection.* They claim no connection with the tradition of hermeneutic phenomenology, but their suggestions lend themselves to a methodology designed within that tradition. They offer a process of personal theological reflection which moves through four stages. First a person “enters” an experience. “Entering” in this context refers to re-entering through a process of intentional reflection an experience from one’s past. This process of re-entering the experience is consistent with van Manen’s emphasis on listening, and Gadamer’s claim that a fusion of horizons requires humility and respect for the text or the conversation partner. As I worked through the recordings and transcripts of the Faith Conversations, I re-entered the experience I had while sitting with and listening carefully to the participants in the group. I re-entered their reports of their experiences of worship, communion, and mission in the congregation. It has been an intriguing experience. I was deeply invested in what I was hearing about the

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experience of a bunch of believers who are part of a congregation where I have been the minister for ten years and for whose experience of church I feel a considerable responsibility. I was sharply aware of ambivalence and uncertainty in my own level of trust in God and in the people of God, and of the ambivalence and uncertainty with which I hold my own doctrinal positions. I was intensely conscious of the pressure on me as a D.Min. student at the Toronto School of Theology, working against the deadlines and attempting to meet the academic standards of that institution within the University of Toronto. It has been for me an engaging and threatening experience—anything but casual or boring. A person (re)entering such an experience is expected to encounter feelings. In my case they have been many, and some of them have been strong. I feel a pressing need to attend to those feelings.

The second stage in Killen and de Beer’s method involves concentrating on the feelings that surface as one re-enters the experience under study. This stage in my theological reflection shifts the focus from the experience of the participants in the Faith Conversations to my experience as an observer of those Conversations. As I attend to feelings evoked by my experience, I have cast about in my mind for some image that might arise from those feelings and symbolize them in such a way as to help me get in touch with the heart of the matter for me. This is complicated by the multiple aspects of the experience I have been re-entering: the three Faith Conversations with the group, on top of my own experiences through several decades as a church member. Killen and de Beer explain that settling on an image will help me to sort through the bewildering complex of feelings arising out of all those events and experiences and zero in on the heart of the matter. I have chosen the image of a “grandfather”, in spite of the considerable difficulty that image could carry in
a congregational context and the negative implications for my own experience of my relationship with the congregation.

The third stage of the theological reflection, as it applies to my research, involves considering, attending to, and questioning that “grandfather” image as it represents the feelings evoked in me by my experience of the Faith Conversations, my experience with these eight members of Knox Presbyterian Church in Dunnville. I also considered the bearing of select elements of the wisdom of my Christian heritage on that experience. What light does that wisdom cast on the experience? What re-examination of that wisdom is indicated by that experience?

The fourth stage begins to invite me beyond the actual intention of this study. I am to ponder what new truths and meaning for living might emerge from the experience of the Faith Conversations and the interaction between them and the wisdom of my Christian heritage. This stage is intended to point me toward relevant action I might undertake in my ministry context here at Knox Presbyterian Church in Dunnville. However, giving that action any final definition, and taking steps toward that action, lie beyond the scope of this study. The final write-up of the results includes my phenomenological description of the experience the group has shared with me in those three Faith Conversations and my description of my own experience of this Ministry-in-Action.

**Conclusion**

We have not necessarily been looking for, nor have we found, methodological thinkers who are specifically sympathetic to our particular pre-understanding and biases as laid out in Chapter Three above. We have found a philosophical position that can support a
methodology we can use in our attempts to launch an investigation inspired by our own theological position. We have found in hermeneutic phenomenology a tradition that invites the sort of study that allows us to address the research question, and have seen five typical commitments of hermeneutic phenomenology: the spiral motion of the hermeneutic circle; the process of working toward a fusion of horizons; the conversational or dialogical or dialectic nature of the research; the notion of truth as tentative; and the central place of writing in a hermeneutic phenomenology process. The research question has turned our attention to the researcher himself, asking whether it is possible for him to learn something about the congregation and about himself using a form of theological reflection.

Hermeneutic phenomenology, with its emphasis on the hermeneutic circle, encourages the reflective action of listening again and again, writing out transcripts and studying them, writing up an interpretation, and returning to the participants for their cooperation with the formulation of the interpretation.

The hermeneutic circle also encourages a return to the experience of the researcher himself, moving back and forth between the experience as reported by the participants and the experience of the researcher himself. This circular motion encourages a move toward the fusion of the horizon of the participants and the horizon of the researcher. Obviously, the emphasis within the tradition of hermeneutic phenomenology on discourse and conversation encourages the attempt to listen carefully to the experience of the participants and then to return to them for confirmation of the interpretation of their experience. The phenomenological description of the experience of these participants is offered as a faithful guide for anyone interested in knowing what it is to be part of Knox Presbyterian Church in Dunnville. At the same time, that claim is a modest one, not alleging any final truth and
always being ready to revise as more information comes in from these participants, or as some of these participants are replaced within the congregation by others. The findings are presented as true, but not in any final or definitive sense; only in a tentative sense. The interpretation itself has been generated as a writing exercise, as called for by van Manen. The results are presented as a phenomenological text arising out of careful attention and multiple edits and rewrites.

In the following chapter, we will see how the actual Ministry-In-Action was designed, set up, and carried out in the Spring of 2012.
CHAPTER 6

THE MINISTRY-IN-ACTION

Arriving at a specific plan for my Ministry-in-Action has been an interesting journey. Right from our first meeting in the spring of 2008, I seemed to know less than others did in my D.Min. cohort about what they wanted to learn. Some appeared to know quite a bit even about how they wanted to learn it. They wanted to learn about Christian education programs in the church, male spirituality, reasons for people leaving the parish, spiritual direction for a particular group. I told the cohort I wanted to learn how to be a minister.

As the program moved along, I tried to refine my research question to the point where I would be able to focus my courses and my studying. At one point, in some frustration, I decided I would study the experience of people coming to church and leaving a partner behind. That topic is interesting, timely, and relevant to our congregation in Dunnville. However, eventually it seemed to be an arbitrary tangent to what I had been hoping to learn in the program.

During the winter semester of 2011, some of our cohort met on campus for our final required course with Professor Mary Ellen Sheehan. As I struggled to draft the theory chapter for this thesis, I worked my way through readings Prof. Sheehan had assigned on theological reflection. I read Killen and de Beer,\textsuperscript{149} Whitehead and Whitehead,\textsuperscript{150} King,\textsuperscript{151}

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\textsuperscript{149} Killen and deBeer, \textit{Theological Reflection}.
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\textsuperscript{151} King, \textquotedblleftTowards a Method,	extquotedblright 33–57.
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and Sheehan.\(^{152}\) Although I did not experience any blinding epiphanies, I did begin to see that theological reflection was a process that could take me closer to my vaguely-worded goal of learning how to be a minister. Each of these authors urged readers to take seriously their own experience, their own cultural setting, and their Christian tradition, and then to place them into conversation with one another. They insisted that such a conversation can have revelatory effect.

I decided to set up and operate a process of theological reflection with people at Knox Presbyterian Church in Dunnville. I met with a group of volunteers consisting of members and adherents of the church. We met three different evenings over the month between March 26 and April 19, 2012, with a final session in May. In March, the congregation was informed that a group of eight volunteers would be sought to participate in three sessions that we decided to call not “Theological Reflections”, but “Faith Conversations”; the term “theological reflection” seemed unnecessarily opaque and intimidating in the context of this congregation. Further, the plan was to create a forum within which the researcher could listen with care to the group’s reflections on their experience of congregational life. Whether such a process of intentional listening could properly be described as theological reflection is arguable. For both reasons it seemed wise to use the simpler phrase “Faith Conversations” to describe what was being asked of the participants.

The congregation was informed that the names of everyone who had been in church five times or more in the previous year and was between eighteen and eighty five years of age would be put in the hat by two members of the Ministry Base Group. The proposed

Faith Conversations were described in some detail in a Sunday morning worship service, including the assurance that anyone was free to opt out of the process, with no negative consequences, before any names had been drawn. There were approximately ninety names from which to draw. Names were drawn by Ministry Base Group members, who then invited those people to participate. As those people were contacted, they were given more extensive information about the process using a script that had been approved by the Ethics Review Board of the University of Toronto. At the same time, people whose names had been drawn were informed that they were completely free to participate or to refuse with no intended negative consequences. They were also informed that by accepting the invitation, they were agreeing to read through a list of preparatory questions, read six short preparatory stories, and be present in four Sunday morning services where sermons would address issues related to the three Faith Conversations.

On March 18, the Sunday morning sermon addressed the process as a whole, inviting the congregation to feel involved in what would be going on with the group of eight participants; it was also designed to help everyone decide whether or not they would want to participate as one of the eight, should they be asked. The criteria for participation were announced again in that service (present five times the previous year, aged 18–85). One active member took serious issue with the upper age limit, and in conversation with her, the researcher realized that using an upper age limit had been unnecessary and that it was hurtful to any alert, involved members over 85. An apology was extended and graciously accepted.

By Sunday, March 25, the eight volunteers had been assembled and were present in church to hear the sermon address the topic of Worship in preparation for the first Faith Conversation, scheduled for March 26. That first Faith Conversation was held with the eight
participants, the researcher/minister, two members of the Ministry Base Group, and one videographer—twelve people. Franklin James, one of the Ministry Base Group members, chaired the three conversations; he carried out his task with considerable skill, a skill that would prove critically important for the success of the research. The group was informed that the researcher would be a “fly on the wall,” a promise that turned out not to be strictly true.

Generally, the researcher did sit quietly and observe, listening carefully. However, the tradition of hermeneutic phenomenology does not provide rigid rules for research, and in fact embraces the active involvement of the researcher in the process; in contrast to the tradition of descriptive phenomenology, there is no attempt to “bracket” all researcher bias out of the process. That meant the researcher was free to “play with” the process as it unfolded. This researcher felt uncertain about when and whether to “interfere” in the process as the chair was inviting people to speak, interacting with them, and inviting them to interact with one another. As it turned out, there was some speaking by the researcher, and the reader can judge from the transcript what the impact of that researcher involvement may have been.153

The first Faith Conversation took place against the background of the preparatory questions, the stories, and the March 25 Sunday sermon on Worship. It also took place against the background of the March 18 sermon setting out the research process with its goals and rationale. By the time participants were ready to begin conversing, there was a certain formality to the atmosphere in the room. This probably reflected some respect and wonder the participants were feeling for the academic process, with all the proper-sounding

153 See Appendices L, M, and N below.
language stipulated by the letters of information and consent approved by the Ethics Review Board of the University of Toronto. Further, this academic process had been unfolding in a more or less public fashion within the congregation over the previous four years; discussions had been held with the Session prior to the researcher’s application to the Doctor of Ministry program. A small congregation in a small town tends to stand in some awe of such advanced degree programs, and these folk had watched their minister head off to the annual two-week intensive sessions at the university for the three years starting in 2008. Announcements had been made periodically in church about the researcher’s progress; on one occasion, upon hearing that the minister/researcher had passed the Comprehensive Examination, the congregation burst into spontaneous applause. There has been a developing sense of the value and degree of difficulty of the D.Min. program. Ordinary church members who agreed to involve themselves in such a program may have felt an unaccustomed solemnity as the first Faith Conversation began.

Further, some group members later said that this type of meeting for the purpose of talking openly about issues of faith, while welcome and enjoyable, was unique in their experience. It is also virtually unknown in the context of this congregation. This newness would be another contributing factor to a tentative and careful approach, and that is what the gatherings were like. The researcher had been cautioned by supervisors in the program to lay down ground rules encouraging a respectful atmosphere in the discussions. In response, lists of what are commonly called “Holy Manners” (rules for conversations among Christian believers, who can on occasion treat each other badly) were sought online, and one such list was downloaded from the Westbank United Church in British Columbia.154 As Chairman

Franklin James was introducing the First Faith Conversation, he expressed some doubt about how much these rules might be needed in our group, and subsequent events proved him right. If anything, the participants were too polite and seemed reluctant to energetically explore differences of opinion that emerged.

The Faith Conversations were video-recorded on a Canon PowerShot S3IS digital camera with an especially capacious 32GB card obtained to avoid running out of space during a session. The camera was powered by a Canon Compact Power Adapter attached to the AC outlet to ensure against battery failure. The Faith Conversations were also recorded on an Olympus WS-321M digital voice recorder to ensure that nothing was lost. The recorder was not set on “voice activation”, so that pauses as well as spoken words would be included. Both digital camera and digital voice recorder worked well. The sessions were transcribed by loading the video onto a desktop computer and playing it while transcribing onto a laptop computer. Good video quality allowed the researcher to watch facial expression and body language as well as some of the group dynamics. The digital audio recording was used for filling in rare moments when excited conversation patterns or group laughter made it difficult to make out the words being spoken. In the end, there were still 2 or 3 words (out of approximately 34 000) that could not be made out.

The participants seemed to quickly get used to the presence of the videographer and the camera. For some still unknown reason, the digital camera would stop the video process after 30 minutes. Fortunately, this (possibly common) idiosyncrasy was discovered prior to the beginning of the first Faith Conversation, so the videographer was ready to warn the chair as time was running out, and the video was quickly restarted (with maybe a one-second pause) without perceptibly distracting the participants.
The second and third Faith Conversations were conducted in similar manner. The initial nervousness in the group seemed to give way somewhat to a growing confidence in the second half of the First and on through the following two Faith Conversations. However, one participant confessed that she felt significant apprehension before each of the three meetings of the group. Further, the “Interpretation” of the Faith Conversations below will call attention to ways in which the group did not ever gain the skills of confrontation and clear articulation of differences that one might hope for in the discussion of such important matters as Worship, Communion, and Mission in a congregational context. There was a level of basic comfort in the group that allowed participants to laugh a lot, cry a bit, and share some important personal feelings. That comfort level did not reach the depth that would allow the working exploration of differences and enable the group to hammer out conclusions. There were important differences of opinion that seemed to be expressed with some conviction, but that seemed to be glossed over rather than sorted out.

The Conversations did engage at least some participants at a fairly deep level. One person spoke of being engrossed “all the way home” in reflecting on the Conversation. Another spoke of topics coming back to mind at various times through the days between meetings. Participants demonstrated the emotional impact of speaking about some of the topics in this context, and sometimes their composure would break. Participants did not appear bored or casual. Some said they expected to feel a new closeness among the members of this group. One noted that even though they were “kind of a group” now, they did not sit together in church, but still sat in their accustomed spots. Adjectives used to describe the experience included “marvellous”, “huge”, “fabulous”, and “interesting”.
The group generally seemed to take the Faith Conversations as a personal experience. Again, there was an expectation that the Conversations would have an impact on the participants as a group, and that their relationships with one another would be different after this. There was even a sense that the experience would have an additional impact spreading into the congregation as a whole, and there was some suggestion about possible mechanisms to facilitate such an effect. Participants listed “helping Mike” as the most common motivation for being part of the project, and at the end, some touching concern was expressed about whether Mike would be able to “get what he needed” from the actual data obtained. The whole experience seemed to be more personal than academic for the participants.

The group was assured that they would be consulted about the description of the Faith Conversations to allow them input into that interpretation. The researcher explained that hermeneutic phenomenology attempts to avoid “using” participants to provide a phony legitimacy for conclusions arrived at prior to the research. They were informed that it is important to this researcher that the analysis of the data ring true in the ears of the participants themselves. They were consulted, and have signed off on the text as it appears in this thesis.
CHAPTER 7

INTERPRETATION OF THREE FAITH CONVERSATIONS

Introduction

As the eight participants approached the series of three Faith Conversations, it seemed their feelings about their own participation ranged from happy and nervous to matter-of-fact. Several said they found the research plan interesting. Five of the eight explained they wanted to “help Mike”. Two more noted that “research needs” participation—which could also reflect a desire particularly to help this researcher. Several anticipated “getting to know” others in the group, and some anticipated a closeness developing and possibly spreading into the broader congregation as a result of these Conversations. The sessions were characterized by frequent laughter, occasional tears, and unbroken kindness. Some originally questioned the necessity for calling the group’s attention to the list of “Holy Manners” prominently posted in the room, and by the end probably all wondered if there had been any real need. Participants were able to express both approval and disapproval of various aspects of their experience in the congregation. The sessions were fun, and participants indicated a thoughtful desire for more of this kind of interaction among church members.

Another window on participant response was the “check-in” time at the beginning of subsequent sessions. Members reported generally positive reflections on previous Conversations; most were pleased. Some found the experience quite challenging, even intimidating; some found it compelling and stimulating. Some reported having thought back

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Transcripts of the three Faith Conversations appear below in Appendices G, H and I.
deeply on the way home about what had been said; others had found thoughts of the experience returning at different times throughout the week. Several seemed surprised and pleased about how things had gone and appreciated the willingness of the other participants to make themselves vulnerable, to be open and honest. Several were intrigued by the opportunity to get to know others in the congregation at a level they had not experienced before. Some had returned feeling embarrassed by their own disclosures of weakness or ignorance. Several seemed eager to support and protect one another; when one appeared vulnerable, another reached out with support.

**Features of the Faith Conversations**

**Ambivalence and Uncertainty**

Throughout the three Faith Conversations, participants expressed ambivalence and uncertainty. A halting style of speaking was typical. People spoke in careful language punctuated by signals of uncertainty such as: “Uh…”, “You know?”, and “Right?” This verbal care, awkwardness, and hesitation could be explained in different ways. It could indicate the group’s lack of familiarity with situations in which they are called upon to talk about their faith. It could indicate genuinely ambivalent feelings and thoughts about faith issues and experiences of church. It could simply indicate a lack of experience with public speaking, or a lack of ease in the presence of the other people in the group. Several participants openly expressed confusion and uncertainty, and talked about feeling at risk. This vulnerability was seen in the group and by the researcher as both positive and negative. As noted above, participants seemed to agree that such Faith Conversations, even if making folks nervous, would be a welcome addition to the normal program of the congregation.
Different Ways of Imagining the Life-World

The Faith Conversations revealed that the participants have different ways of imagining their world. In one view that seemed to emerge, the world is a place where people and God are in relationship. Events in this life include constant two-way communication with God. On the human side, the communication involves frequent prayer, either thanks or requests for help. On God’s side, the communication involves messages about changes God wants to see in us: God is saying, “Be humble, or I will humble you (I Peter 5:6).” If this type of divine challenge does not produce the desired change, the person gets gently smitten; if the desired change is forthcoming, God will move the person along in a positive manner. In this sort of world, God is imagined as a benign and determined father, directing individual believers by means of a series of solemn nudges which they should definitely not ignore.

A slightly different view also emerged in which the world is again an arena of two-way communication with God. In this second view, communication with God includes not only challenge, but also and perhaps especially encouragement. A description of this communication with God involves a list of feelings. God’s communication comes in one’s sadness or anger, feelings of upset or hurt, questioning, happiness, or thankfulness. In this second view, God’s intervention also carries a note of challenge and warning, but more especially of encouragement.

A third view was beginning to emerge partly in response to this very experience in the context of the Faith Conversations. The world had not been imagined in terms of communication with God, but now, in light of this brand-new experience of sitting in serious and thought-provoking conversation with other believers, new possibilities were emerging.
Could it be that these fresh encounters with the explanation of Scripture in the Sunday services were part of God’s effort to push for a change in direction?

In a fourth view, God is constantly speaking in Scripture and even in mysterious experiences of daily life. Still, even when one reads the Bible every day, it may or may not be possible to make out what God is saying.

In a fifth view, God is experienced as an energy drawing us toward certain actions and experiences; the unity experienced in church activities, whether worship or fellowship, is generated by this energy. Even when one is worn down by a demanding schedule, a decision to go ahead and join with others could result in an experience of this positive energy, and an enjoyment of the group. God may use the quiet of the worship service to help us solve our problems.

Another view imagines the world as split into religious and secular sides. Faith is real, but making connections between the religious and secular sides is challenging. Life involves making connections between faith and the secular world within which our lives take place, making an application of the church’s message to the world outside. Too great a degree of comfort is a warning that the countercultural message of Scripture is not having its desired effect; our comfortable, North American lifestyle can lull us away from the challenging message of our faith. Another difficulty is the gap between the expectations of others and the reality of one’s own experience of faith. A genuine feeling of faith could be a rare experience.

Unsurprisingly, these views of the world appear to reflect the individualism of our time. In the views that come out in the Faith Conversations, God appears to be in relationship with individual believers, who are envisioned as standing on their own before
God. The individual believer may experience support, encouragement, and inspiration through the program of the church, but that is support for the individual’s journey. There is little expressed sense of God in relationship with whole societies or whole congregations, or with the universal Church of Jesus Christ. Interestingly, there is no mention of salvation.\footnote{156 See below, p. 143.}

Expression of Negative Opinions

Expression of disapproval was managed, but not easily. The first night, one participant stopped in the middle of one response and asked, “I suppose we are supposed to be brutally honest, right?” before giving a frankly critical review of Presbyterian liturgy. On the second night the conversation about Communion seemed to consist of rather bland praise of a nice congregation until one person said, after a qualifying apology, “I must be honest, I don’t feel the church is the key part of my life; maybe I’m revealing a lot of stuff here…” That brave statement seemed to create the possibility for negative critique. On the third night, there was apparent animated agreement that one of the most important aspects of Christian Mission is the successful avoidance of proselytizing and pressuring others. Then, after some of the most urgent expressions of this commitment to tolerance, one participant boldly reminded the group that the history of Christianity includes assertive telling of the Christian story, and (even) putting away the old gods. That statement was a striking departure from the tone of the conversation to that point and seemed to create a stiff silence. People looked down. The silence did not last long, and perhaps we had seen a faltering start toward a deeper level of engagement which more time and greater trust might produce. Approval and disapproval were present, even though participants were careful of one another’s feelings—perhaps to a fault.
Worship

Emphasis on Scripture

Members of traditional Protestant churches in North America are not typically known for careful attention to Scripture. These Faith Conversations, however, revealed a heartening engagement with and interest in Scripture. The congregation has lived through a certain change in preaching style in recent years.\(^{157}\) Participants in the Faith Conversations saw this development as contributing to a better understanding of Scripture, providing improved contextualization, explanation, and application of the passage so that Scripture “makes sense”. The new style seems to be a different way of communicating that has allowed one participant to “understand [the Scriptures] better”. One person refers to “using the Scriptures and having the mini-sermon” and, while hoping to still have traditional sermons sometimes, “agrees with” the improved explanation and contextualization in the new style. Another participant refers approvingly to the new style as “the little explaining-the-Scriptures” sermons, expressing also the hope for traditional sermons sometimes.

One participant confessed that in spite of committed, lifelong church involvement, she doesn’t know much about the Bible. One expressed a hope for a women’s Bible study. Another noted that many church people do not read the Bible, and hoped that the youth program would teach the next generation of young people to read the Bible for themselves. Another man finds his regular Bible reading to be irritating, and shared his difficulty

\(^{157}\) That change has involved the preacher no longer reading a full manuscript or making use of notes. This has increased eye contact and has apparently improved communication. There has also been a new move to break up the normal sermon time into several smaller homilies. These homilies are used as introductions to three or four Scripture passages, each of which is read immediately after its introducing homily. One intention behind this unconventional style has been to focus attention more closely on the Scripture passages themselves by attending to each passage in its own associated homily and then giving the Scripture passage “the last word” by reading it after the preacher’s associated meditation.
understanding puzzling and violent passages in the Old Testament. One woman told about sitting with friends not from this church and discussing “some Bible story”. For a conversation in a traditional Protestant church, when the Bible had not even been one of the announced topics, there was a heartening awareness of and interest in the Scripture.

Preaching Style

One of the group’s most consistent expressions of approval was directed to the change in preaching style referred to above. We have seen that participants experience the new style as helpful for understanding and making sense of Scripture. Several also approve of the way it fits the congregation’s attention span by requiring a shorter amount of focused listening at one time, and more frequent breaks. This is seen as a superior style of communication, more easily understood by and more enjoyable for the congregation.

Participants perceive this style as more demanding for the preacher, and one commented that this additional work is evidence of love for the congregation. One said it seemed an impossible feat of memory. The group was liberal in its praise for various aspects of this preaching style.

Music

Balancing this approval was general disappointment with the music in church, and particularly with the choices of hymns. One person was willing to absolve leaders for hymn choices, suggesting that choosing different hymns might upset older people. The discussion remained cordial; there was nothing nasty or vindictive, but disappointment with the music was general in the group. This ability to criticize one important aspect of the church’s program and to do so without rancour was evidence of the group’s maturity and trust.
Appreciation of Worship

Several participants did express appreciation of various elements of the worship service. Comments about preaching have been mentioned. Prayers were singled out as helpful. In spite of the general critique of music, several mentioned the music as an important positive element in the service. The “children’s time” was specially noted as a positive experience for adults. Still, with all these considerable expressions of appreciation, an awareness of worship as a shared sense of awe before the majesty and mystery of God was not so much in evidence. This is not surprising in a traditional Protestant congregation, in a particular stream known more for right thinking than for strong religious feeling and experience, and especially in our age of information and evidence. It is nonetheless noteworthy.

An exception to this lack of a sense of awe in our Presbyterian tradition came out in one comment about worship. This participant said, with evident feeling, “sermons, sometimes they catch me. And the prayers, they just floor me sometimes and I get feelings like, the air, God’s just knocking the air right out of me, trying to tell me something, but I don’t always know what it is.” In this view, experience of the service can sometimes exert a power that is mysterious and strong.

Worship outside church also emerged as a theme. One person spoke of the unexpected and awe-inspiring experience of seeing a fox running freely down the beach. Putting that experience together with New Testament stories, he imagined Jesus spending time in lonely places. One person spoke of conversations with small children who ask questions about experiences in church, and described these conversations themselves as experiences of worship. Others spoke of interactions at work. One spoke of the mysterious
experience of assisting at the birth of a baby and sensing God in that event. Some mentioned the power of music outside as well as inside the worship service. One mentioned decisions about family finances as an instance of worship.

**Communion**

“Understood and Cared About”

In preparatory materials for the second Faith Conversation, participants were invited to reflect on whether or not they felt understood and cared about in this congregation. Several said they felt cared about, but not particularly understood. One shared his own “bipolar” diagnosis with the group, and suggested that in light of this distinctive problem, it is probable that no one really understands him but God. Others echoed the conviction that they are cared about, but not necessarily understood. Out of these reflections, people seemed to work instinctively toward an awareness of two levels of intimacy: understanding seems to require a deeper level of intimacy than caring does, and relationships that depend on “one hour of contact per week” probably do not produce the level of intimacy required for real understanding. Participants agreed on this.

**Giving and Receiving Help**

Group members talked about whether or not their congregational involvement had provided them opportunity to give and to receive help from others. This seemed to function as a gauge of levels of communion. Most people thought they had given help, although there was a perhaps predictable modesty that came out in comments such as “I hope I have been helpful.” Incidentally, some who made comments like this are people who have been outstandingly helpful. Others said they could not imagine how to be helpful. Several
participants who acknowledged receiving concrete help from others in the congregation
gave examples from five or ten years ago. That could indicate that as our congregation
changes in age and other demographics, examples of concrete help are becoming less
frequent and harder to find. Or it could simply mean that those examples came first to mind.

One of the liveliest discussions to come out of that issue centred on the difficulty
people have in receiving help from others. There seemed to emerge a shared conviction that
we “ought” to be able and willing to receive help without any thought of reciprocating; there
should be no attempt to repay the helper. Participants expressed frustration that people they
want to help try to extend some more or less equal help in their turn. Participants in this
discussion also seemed honest and open about their own difficulty receiving help from
others. They may have been unaware of the complex implications for community living of
receiving help from someone in whose proximity you will be living for a long period of
time.\footnote{158 This perhaps simplistic approach to a complex issue relating to communion may
reflect the fact that this group is unused to meeting and talking together, and were perhaps
unable to hammer out a richer articulation of communion in the time they spent together.}

Abrasive Personalities

Another difficult issue raised was the problem of people in the community with
notably “abrasive” personalities. Again, the group was not able to put into words any
particularly profound level of understanding of this important and common problem. Of
course this congregation does have people with abrasive personalities. This was

\footnote{158 Giving and receiving help could be seen to tie into more complex issues of genuine good
will for others. Should I accept this help, or direct the willing giver to someone in greater need?
What are my authentic reasons for accepting help in this situation? What are the normal implications
within ongoing community life of accepting help in this situation? That none of these issues entered
the discussion could reflect the level of intimacy achievable by such a group in the time allowed}
acknowledged, and it was tacitly agreed that such people must be allowed their personality quirks. The complex issues such as how to respect and love them without allowing them to hold the rest of the community hostage were not addressed to any extent. Again, that could be a function of the level of intimacy possible in such a group being together for such a short time.

“The Faith You Share”

A misunderstanding arose in the second Faith Conversation because of the ambiguous wording of one of the questions in the preparatory materials. The question asked participants to reflect on whether or not they sense a connection between a bond they might experience with other members of the congregation and “the faith you share”. The reader will immediately recognize the ambiguity in the phrase “the faith you share”: the researcher intended to ask about a shared faith within the community of believers, i.e., “the faith you all hold in common”, whereas most participants took the phrase to mean “the faith you talk about with others (share)”. This steered a conversation intended to focus on Communion into some of the questions around Mission that were to be addressed the following week. Furthermore, in a typical traditional Protestant congregation, talking with others about one’s faith is regarded as at least difficult and probably socially inappropriate. The resulting comments were interesting, but pushed the conversation away from the topic of communion or fellowship into the area of outreach. The conversation centred on the common difficulty associated with speaking with others about faith.

159 Appendix F, Question # 7 below.
Strengthening Bonds

In discussing the bond within the congregation, several participants said that working together on some project or other is a good way to overcome the shallow relationship levels typical of one-hour-a-week association and strengthen bonds of communion. Various projects from past decades were cited as occasions of strengthening the bond inside the congregation. A production of the play “A Christmas Carol” in the 1990s was one of these. Working together on committees, Session, or the Board of Managers was also mentioned, as was singing in the choir. On the other hand, someone claimed that the level of communion induced by that sort of “working” association will probably be different from that induced by a women’s Bible study, or a women’s craft and devotional group. This possibility was not challenged or defended, but it could be that a group in which our shared faith is openly embraced as one of the main reasons for getting together could engender a deeper bond than one where that shared faith competes for our attention with some objective that might seem more immediately pressing.

Bonds of caring became an issue within the group itself in the form of a tendency for people to step in protectively when someone seemed especially vulnerable. That tendency could be evidence of the very caring communion up for discussion. It could also demonstrate the fear of feelings that is characteristic of groups in which trust levels have not had a chance to mature. This protective urge came out whenever some form of weakness became apparent.
Mission

Is Faith Confession Necessarily Part of Mission?

The third topic was Mission, and it uncovered some differences in the group. Participants agreed that they find it virtually impossible to talk about our faith, but were not sure how to interpret that difficulty. A variety of positions emerged and seemed to be able to more or less coexist in the group. The preparatory sermon had suggested that an “objective, uninvolved observer” of our congregation might admire the good and helpful activities we accomplish in the community and around the world, and yet criticize us for lacking a transparent confession of our faith, a clear word of explanation to go along with the good things we do. This suggestion stimulated some of the liveliest discussion in the third Faith Conversation, and several different ideas emerged.

1. Some maintained that a clear word of Christian confession is required—not necessarily right up front, but at some point—if helpful actions for others are to qualify as mission.

2. Some disagreed with that: you don’t always have to talk about why you do mission activities. What you do is more important than how you explain what you are doing.

3. Another position was that any helpful action, whether by a church or by any other non-governmental organization, is mission.

4. Another position was that while helping is good, the whole concept of evangelizing, or proselytizing, is too much like telling people they are required to believe what I believe.

The tone of the discussion was cordial and agreeable, even though an examination of the positions being expressed reveals wide differences. The group seemed ambivalent about
talking with others about Jesus; they were not sure whether mission is necessarily tied to Jesus or not. They did not, in fact, reach any clear definition of mission. One reason a discussion with such widely diverging opinions could remain calm and cordial is the general sense of uncertainty and hesitancy that characterized the Faith Conversations as a whole. Positions were expressed in a tentative manner. Opinions were expressed by people who were somewhat unused to talking about topics such as these. In fact, widely dissimilar positions were expressed by the same person, claiming on the one hand that “everything is mission” and then, as people were agreeing how impolite it is to proselytize, this same person reminded the group that somebody must have told the story [of Jesus] because otherwise we would not be here. “The history of Christianity is telling the story, and sometimes it is saving the soul, and sometimes it is putting away the old gods, the old idols.” One thing this group agreed on, with the possible exception of the previous quote, is that proselytizing is not good. On the other hand, the word “proselytizing” itself was never actually defined in the conversation.

Motivation for Mission

The group worked around the topic of mission, but did not feel a need to explicitly articulate a definition of mission. The collective assumption seemed to be that mission is doing something helpful for someone, probably someone in need. One participant raised the question of motivation for mission, urging that it was a key ingredient: why is it that you do that helpful thing? He went on to clarify that the correct motivation for mission is one’s relationship with God. A definition of that relationship did not enter the discussion. No logical connection was drawn between a particular quality or type of relationship with God and acts of mission. No one spelled out a relationship between any particular theological
understanding of God and acts of mission. Nor did anyone ask about such a connection. However, this suggestion of the importance of motivation was picked up by another member, who questioned the first participant for clarification and seemed supportive. No clearly alternative position was offered that might have led to clarifying debate; the group seemed not to be ready for discussion at that depth.

While no one challenged the idea of motivation, some implied that one appropriate motivation could be self-actualization or personal satisfaction: people talked about “enjoying” doing things for others. No one spelled out the idea that helpful actions for others, or mission, might be motivated by what could be called a “journey toward the world in search of Jesus.”

Initiating the Conversation or Waiting for the Opportunity

A related variation within the group emerged. One set of participants expressed the intention to talk to others about their faith, whether they actually manage to do that or not. Another set believed that initiating conversation with others about one’s faith is inappropriate. The second group is divided further between people who do not wish to talk about their faith in any way that might imply that someone else should change, and those who hope to be ready if asked to provide a rationale for their noticeably “different” helpful actions even though they would not initiate the conversation. “Proselytizing” is not approved of, even though it is not explicitly defined.

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160 Fensham, Missional Christian Spirituality. Note especially in chapter 3 of the unpublished manuscript, on page 5, Fensham sides with Barth against Tillich and finds that “Ultimately, we can only know who we are in the light of encountering the ‘other’ in the man Jesus the Messiah.” And perhaps more pointedly on the following page: “Encounter with the Messiah – the Son of Man – is mediated through our loving and serving encounter with the marginalised in society. To know God, to know Jesus, is to know and love our neighbour in their most vulnerable state. We find who we are through encounter in love with our neighbour and thus we encounter the Messiah - God.”
Does the Group Understand the Question?

One possibility is that the uncertainty in this group is not simply limited to what to say to others. It could be that these participants have never clarified in their own minds and hearts what connection they do experience between their confessed faith and particular actions they do or do not take. It could be that they have never clarified in their own minds what the purpose of an assertive Christian confession would be. The assumption that helping people is a good thing was never challenged, and seemed understandably to be taken for granted. The group did not work toward any criteria that could be used to divide those who should be helped from those who should not. Given that the group is not clear about what the purpose of a Christian confession might be, it is not surprising that they were vague about the appropriate motivation for helping others and divided on whether that help should include a clear word of Christian confession. One participant spoke of a radical, positive change in her life which now relates to her sense that she should be sharing the news of Jesus with those she is trying to help. Another spoke of relationship with God as motivation for mission without any elaboration, or expressed interest from others, about what that relationship might look like or what advantage there might be for someone who would choose to have that relationship. We are left with many possible motivations for accompanying helpful actions with Christian confession. Again, that could be due to the relatively low level of trust that can develop in a group unfamiliar with one another and with this sort of Faith Conversation. Time limitations are probably also involved. In any case, it

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161 They might range all the way from Christian confession as marketing tool designed to strengthen the local congregation, to Christian confession as an effort to ensure the eternal good of the hearers, to Christian confession as an effort to ensure eternal good for the speaker, to Christian confession as a kind offer of a new and more positive and rewarding direction for the lives of the hearers, and no doubt many other possibilities. This broad and (to me) interesting range of motivations was not part of the discussion.
seems possible that the variety of opinions about the necessity and desirability of a clear Christian confession to accompany helpful outreach could reflect a lack of clear thinking and firm commitment among the participants. It may be that they have never worked out in their own minds why they feel the impulse to help, and what that impulse may have to do with our Christian faith.

Self-Preservation or Self-Sacrifice?

In the discussion of giving and receiving help, everyone seemed to agree that it is more difficult to receive help than to give it. One participant suggested that the issue here might be levels of intimacy: people with whom one shares a certain depth of intimacy might be people from whom one would be more willing to receive help. The following week, the conversation about mission opened up one participant’s experience of a mission trip to El Salvador, which she told us she had found overwhelming. From that experience she learned that, for her, mission needs to be personal; anything more organized or complex has tended to leave her feeling overwhelmed. Another participant was reminded of an experience of burn-out, and spoke of the need to place careful boundaries around her commitments in order to avoid such burn-out. This issue opened out into a lively discussion, with participants encouraging one another to remember the great importance of protecting oneself and not becoming overwhelmed or burned out. Interestingly, no one raised the issue of the Christian principle of self-sacrifice (Philippians 2:5–11). The discussion focused on the importance of self-care and self-preservation, and did not seem to produce any question about a possible tension between self-care and self-sacrifice.
Different Kinds of Mission

Conversation about mission included a suggestion from one participant that one could think of two types: mission far away and mission close to home. Two participants described their places of work as mission fields. Someone else appreciated the distinction between two types of mission and suggested that in the past she had seen mission as a narrowly defined aspect of the church’s program, but that this discussion had led her to begin thinking of mission as a much broader thing than before.

Conclusion

On the final evening, some people were saying that it would be good if Faith Conversations like these could continue in the congregation in some form or other. Participants had got to know one another better, had been able to be vulnerable and to lift one another up. There was a sense of having jelled into a group whose members noted one another’s presence in the (mandatory!) church service that week. For some it had been seriously challenging to sit and converse with other believers, even to face the group, to formulate thoughts about faith and to speak publicly on personal issues. Most enjoyed having a window opened for them into the lives of others in the group, and having the opportunity to share. For some, the whole process had been almost over-stimulating: one was pleased to have “survived”, and another referred to it as a “huge” event.
CHAPTER 8
PERSONAL THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION FOLLOWING THREE FAITH CONVERSATIONS

Introduction

The three Faith Conversations stretched over a period of four weeks in the spring of 2012 and provided me with an important moment in my own experience of faith and church. That experience of listening to several hours of theological reflection by a group from this congregation raises the question of the meaning it all has for me in my role as minister here. The experience of those Faith Conversations begs for interpretation.

One element in the interpretation will be the task set for me in the research question: comparison and contrast between the participants’ experience and mine. Further, the research question anticipated that I would find a significant difference. In order to come to an understanding of the meaning of the experience of those three evenings of listening to eight members of Knox Presbyterian Church in Dunnville, I have engaged in a process of personal theological reflection. For this reflection, I have followed a method described by Patricia O’Connell Killen and John de Beer.162 Those authors envision various styles of theological reflection, some with a group and some personal. It was not my intention to sit with the eight participants to try to arrive at the meaning the event had for me as minister, although that could be tried. I wanted to sit alone and listen to the recordings of their Faith Conversations from a relatively detached position, and then step back and ask myself what that experience meant and continues to mean to me as a person of faith and as a minister.

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162 Killen and deBeer, Theological Reflection, 88–89.
Killen and de Beer envision a variety of starting points for theological reflection. One such starting point would be one’s reading of a piece of the tradition, such as a Scripture passage. Another would begin from a cultural text, such as a short story. And a third would be from within some life situation. I chose to begin my theological reflection with a life situation: my experience of these three Faith Conversations.

Killen and de Beer lay out the process in four steps. The first is to re-enter the experience, noticing feelings that originally attended it. The second is to attend to those feelings, allowing some image to percolate from them to the surface of one’s mind. The authors assure us that this image will provide guidance to what they call “the heart of the matter”. Once the heart of the matter has emerged, one is able, thirdly, to put it “in conversation with the wisdom of the Christian tradition”. From this conversation, one may gain new insight, and Killen and de Beer intend that our new insight will lead to new action. My personal theological reflection will hopefully lead to action in my ministry here in Dunnville, but identifying that action will be beyond the reach of this study.

**Stages in Theological Reflection**

Re-enter the Experience and Note the Feelings

In writing my “Interpretation of the Faith Conversations” above I have re-entered the experience. As I move back through those events, I can again call up feelings they evoked at the time. In this personal theological reflection, as I reflect on what I heard, let me begin with what I did not hear, and the reason I was not surprised by that silence. As we sat together and the participants reflected on their experience of aspects of congregational life, they did not speak of salvation: what it means, how it might be attained, or whether they feel

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163 Ibid., 74.
included in it, interested in it, or eager to share it. I will suggest later that there is at Knox Presbyterian Church in Dunnville an underlying paralyzing tension between vestiges of two different views of salvation, similar to the views informing the great debates between evangelicals and non-evangelicals inside and outside the WCC. This tension at Knox Presbyterian Church in Dunnville means that neither of these views can be openly articulated, perhaps out of a fear of stirring up conflict that would result in more destruction than it would be worth. This issue did not come to my attention as the theological conversations were beginning, probably because I have come to assume that a conversation in this congregation would probably never raise questions specifically relating to salvation.

As the conversations begin, other issues occupy my attention. I feel a considerable anxiety in trying to ensure that all details in an unaccustomed activity are anticipated. I am nervous about a multitude of possible problems that could short-circuit the whole process. The one that immediately nags at me is the recording technology, which I have never used in any such extensive way. I have tried to be prepared, but I do not know if it will all work out or not. I am prepared with three different systems for recording, so I hope at least one of them works, but I am nervous. Conversely, I feel a positive energy generated by a group of people who probably have the good feeling of being “the chosen” and yet are uncertain whether they will be able to produce whatever it is that this researcher is seeking—and to whom that sought-for thing remains somewhat unclear as the process gets under way. I feel some apprehension in the group related to their uncertainty. None of them has been through this before. I feel my own anxiety to such an extent, though, that it is hard for me to appreciate theirs. I feel a considerable affection for these people who seem eager to help me

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164 Besides the digital camera and the digital voice recorder, I was originally set up to record also on my MacBook laptop computer, but moving the computer in such a way as to keep the speaker onscreen turned out to be too challenging, and unnecessary.
with my big project. I have a significant history with each of them, more with some than with others. I have known most of them for almost ten years. In all of this, the dominant feeling is responsibility and anxious uncertainty.

Allow an Image to Emerge from the Feelings

The image that surfaces from my re-entry into my feelings in this research situation is Grandfather. This grandfather image emerges not from psychological or sociological studies. It emerges from my own experience of being a grandfather, and from my reflection on my experience with the Faith Conversations. As such, this image is personal and idiosyncratic rather than academic or generalized. It is my image. It arises out of my experience. But even though I am reflecting on my own experience, that experience will not be completely different from some of the reflections on aging that are available in the literature. I will first articulate my image in some detail, and then explain its relevance to my research.

I am a grandfather. As of 2012, my wife and I have thirteen grandchildren. Six months after these Faith Conversations she and I returned from China, where we had gone to accompany our son and his family as they claimed our thirteenth grandchild, Wu Ming. My experience as a grandfather stretches back almost two decades and involves important interaction with all thirteen of our grandchildren. I imagine my experience has much in common with that of other grandfathers, but my attempt here will be to unpack my own image of grandfather and explain why it seems an appropriate reflection on my involvement in the Faith Conversations of this research.
As I reflect on this image, several aspects emerge. First is an element of affection and admiration that the grandfather feels for his own grandchildren. I am irresistibly drawn toward these strange, lively, younger people with whom I share this important connection. I embrace that connection; I enjoy it. I am deeply interested in their welfare. I hope for their good. I yearn for their presence. I care about them.

A second element in the relationship is distance. That distance is complex. My experience has always included geographic distance: our closest grandchildren live 400 km away. That means visits are not frequent and casual; they are rare and they involve planning. On any visit, the situation in our children’s family is “abnormal” and so is the situation in ours. This contributes to distance in the relationship.

There is more to that distance. As a grandfather, I am aware that my grandchildren live as part of a system including their immediate family, their schools and community activities, their traditions and mores, and so forth, all of which shape their lives. I see that system and recognize some of its imperfections. I feel that I could offer some helpful critique. But I am also aware of the distance between my grandchildren and me. I wonder how well I understand what is really going on in the system I observe. Is the contribution I have to offer worth the upheaval that would result if I were to speak up? Am I certain enough about what I have to offer to risk that upheaval and rock that boat? Knowing that I am to some extent outside a system that is functioning more or less smoothly increases in me the grandfather’s sense of distance from the grandchildren.

That distance from the more or less stable system of which my grandchildren are integral parts relates to another difference: the difference between the power and control I as the grandfather have in the lives of the grandchildren, and the control I remember having
over my own family when our children were growing up. When I am with our grandchildren, some of those same old urges to control reappear in my mind and my gut, but I realize the situation has changed. I am then uncertain and a little anxious. First of all, I now question the control I exercised in our family years ago; I am not sure how helpful it was at the time. Further, I know that I do hold some power in this extended family, but what is the nature of that power? How is it properly exercised? I am uncertain. And it seems that visits to children and grandchildren are never long enough to settle into a comfortable routine which would support answers to some of these questions and produce a new level of comfort.

The distance the grandfather feels is not all bad. It also famously includes a new level of freedom with respect to the difficulties faced by the younger family. We grandfathers joke about the advantages of “loving them and leaving them” as we enjoy the freedom of the distance that characterizes the relationship.

Still, complex elements of distance in the relationship can produce significant uncertainty and anxiety in the grandfather as he relates to grandchildren. That uncertainty and anxiety can be an important and ongoing feature of the relationship. In our day, technology has become a significant contributor to that uncertainty and anxiety. We hear that in some traditional societies, old age was a time when elders were respected and listened to. In our society, rapidly developing technology has left people over a certain age asking their children and grandchildren to show them how to get along with technological systems. We live in a youth culture where it is more and more difficult to convince ourselves of the advantages of aging. Our grandchildren know all sorts of things about people and sectors of society and computers that grandfathers eventually despair of understanding. This
contributes an important factor to my anxiety and uncertainty in my experience as a
grandfather. Sometimes it seems to a grandfather that while grandchildren might be eager to
laugh at his jokes and spend time with him, they do not expect him to have anything
important to tell them about how to live in today’s world.

Another obvious element in the image of grandfather is the paternalism referred to
above. Especially when the grandchildren are small, but to a certain extent later and perhaps
always, grandfathers have a sense of superior experience. Their expectations for their
grandchildren’s performance and achievement are reduced by such a paternalistic stance;
paternalism easily blinds the grandfather to real aspects of expertise and even wisdom in the
grandchildren. It can constitute an important blind spot in the grandfather, one which he will
need to recognize if he is to have a good relationship with his grandchildren.

Finally, that uncertainty and anxiety are increased by my awareness of negative
elements in my own personality that threaten to erupt in important mistakes of the kind that
grandfathers fear. Suffice it to say that many grandfathers probably have enough anger
stored up from years of ordinary life frustrations that it could easily erupt and create
unfortunate incidents.

For me, then, being a grandfather is a mainly positive experience of joy and
affection, and still that joy always exists against a darker background shaped by several
factors: the distance between me and my grandchildren, questions about power and control,
a growing awareness of the dangers of paternalism in myself, awareness of the possibility of
important mistakes, and the resulting anxiety and uncertainty these factors produce.
We have referred to Erik Erikson’s theories about stages of personal development.\footnote{165} He was busy working out his stages of human development when he was in his mid-fifties, in the years before his 1959 publication. For Erikson, the final stage of life is identified in terms of a tension between integrity and despair. “It is the acceptance of one’s own and only life cycle and of the people who have become significant to it as something that had to be and that, by necessity, permitted of no substitutions. It thus means a new different love of one’s parents, free of the wish that they should have been different, and an acceptance of the fact that one’s life is one’s own responsibility.”\footnote{166} To me, this description of the final stage in the life cycle sounds idealized. I am curious about how real people in their seventies and eighties would compare their own experience with Erikson’s idealized description of their stage of life. My suggestion is that anyone who has lived reflectively into late adulthood will almost certainly agree that despair and integrity constitute an important tension, and that the way such a tension works itself out depends to some extent on the degree of success one has had in forming one’s identity in the earlier stages. One does struggle with despair as one compares actual accomplishments with those once hoped for. Most of us hope to experience a growing integration, or integrity, but real integration in an actual person is probably far from perfect; despair continues to nip at our heels. Erikson’s characterization is of limited help when one is honestly facing the strengths and weaknesses with which one meets the challenges of daily living as an old person—in the image of a grandfather. Anyone anticipating a life stage in which despair is triumphantly superseded by powerful integrity is looking for an experience significantly different from mine.

\footnote{165}Above, Chapter Three.

\footnote{166}Erikson, \textit{Identity}, 104.
Others have found Erikson’s work stimulating. Also following Carl Jung, Richard Rohr draws a distinction between the first and second halves of life that catches my attention as I reflect on my image of the grandfather. Sometimes, Rohr sounds as if he believes he has the second half of life all figured out, and that too would be very different from my experience. “[T]he journey itself led me to a deepening sense of what the church calls holiness, what Americans call freedom, and what psychology calls wholeness.”

At the same time, he is not so naïve as to settle back into some sense of having arrived. He seems unsure about how much of his own vulnerability to share. In a section called “Anxiety and Doubt” he refers to some of his own doubts, but then criticizes believers who seem to prefer a “magic wand kind of God … to a God who works secretly and humbly, and who includes us in the process and the conclusion.” That strikes me as a small attempt to articulate some of the ambiguity that I also feel in the grandfather experience, but somehow it sounds like a much more benign form of doubt than mine.

In an earlier book, written when he was in his middle forties, Rohr includes a section on the grandfather. However, he is not talking about an actual grandfather, as he signals by breaking the word in two, “grand father.” Again, the picture seems idealized: “The joyful acceptance of a limited world, of which I am only a small and limited part…” He was in his forties, we recall. I realize Rohr’s work is designed for pedagogical purposes: he leads

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169 Ibid.


171 Ibid., 174. (Italics in original.)
workshops for men, and publishes materials related to the workshops. When hoping to help others begin to understand, it may seem appropriate to draw contrasts more starkly than we find them in the real world. Rohr’s work, like Erikson’s, is helpful for articulating some of the tensions involved in aging, but leaves me sensing an important gap between his formulations and my own experience as a real grandfather.

Interestingly, in his more recent book, written in his sixties, Rohr’s references to Erikson almost exclusively mention generativity, half of the “generativity/stagnation” polarity typical of the second-last, not the last, of the stages into which Erikson has divided the human life cycle. There is no apparent interest in the last stage of life, which Erikson characterized as the time of integrity versus despair.

Eugene Bianchi has the courage to offer a more clear-eyed view of old age. Without sounding depressed or depressing he seems more willing to face reality. He criticizes Daniel Levinson for failing to “sufficiently pursue ways of dealing with destructive uses of power in middle age.”172 In a section entitled “Challenges of Elderhood”, Bianchi notes, “we are not neutral about becoming aged. In fact, we consciously or unconsciously abhor it.”173

Daniel Levinson himself speaks respectfully of Erikson’s work with stages of personal development. He spells out the task of “mid-life individuation” in terms of four polarities, one of which is “creativity/destructiveness.”174 Levinson seems almost ready to acknowledge some of the negative potential I feel in my own grandfather image. Levinson


173 Ibid., 130.

was in his fifties when he published *The Seasons of a Man’s Life*. Like Richard Rohr and Erik Erikson, he is much more interested in the beginning and middle of a man’s life than in the last stage. Most of what he has to say about “old” is in terms of one of the polarities he finds to be typical of every season of a man’s life. Young/old is just such a polarity, and he works to convince us that “old” is a factor in each developmental stage. He makes brief reference to late adulthood, but has little to say about it. Erikson defined each different stage of human development in terms of one typical tension, but Levinson chose to follow the same set of tensions through the different stages he identified in a man’s life cycle.  

Levinson admits, “In middle adulthood a man can come to know, more than ever before, that powerful forces of destructiveness and of creativity coexist in the human soul— in my soul!— and can integrate them in new ways.”  

Ironically, in the very attempt to accept personal ownership for destructive forces, he calmly moves on into integrating them in new ways. His articulation is much more civilized and controlled than my own experience of destructive forces in myself in the image of grandfather.

Both Rohr and Levinson do recognize and criticize the possibility of negative and destructive features in the personality of the old man. One could infer from this recognition that the old man can have destructive interactions with the world and with other people. Neither of them appears to be terribly interested in this possibility except to explain that it is not the goal, nor, in their opinion, necessary.

As I sat with this group of eight parishioners and listened to their reflections on Worship, Communion, and Mission as three key aspects of congregational life, I was not

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175 Ibid., 323n.

176 Ibid., 197.
consciously imagining myself as a grandfather. Neither was I thinking in terms of the authors mentioned above or their theories. Only on later reflection did I realize that the feelings that shaped my listening do correspond to the grandfather feelings with which I am familiar. The relationships of grandfather and minister are far from identical, but there is enough similarity of feeling for “grandfather” to be an apt image in my case.

As a grandfather feels part of an earlier time, and wonders about his relevance to these rapidly growing and changing young people and the nature of their attachment to him, so the minister wonders about his relevance and the applicability and attractiveness of what he has to offer parishioners in a rapidly changing society. That uncertainty can reinforce the minister’s own experience of the reigning plausibility structure in our world, and is in tension with the clear claims of Scripture and of the gospel. Aging congregations and declining attendance provide eloquent support for personal feelings of irrelevance and insecurity. Those feelings do not necessarily determine any conclusions. They are part of an ongoing struggle within the minister to believe that the insights and truth he has to offer are indeed founded on “words of eternal life” (John 6:68).

In the first Faith Conversation, Angie mentions that her experience of Presbyterian worship services has been “just a bunch of words that you go through, just read all these things and go home (Appendix G).” This articulates one of the minister’s fears—that it is all just a bunch of words, and at the end, we all just go home. The minister feels the responsibility to somehow “juice it up” or make it more meaningful or more relevant so that it will really catch the people, make sense to them, hit them hard. Like the grandfather, the

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177 Throughout this section, I will use the masculine pronoun for the minister because what I am saying is wrapped up so much in my own experience as a grandfather and as a male minister. I believe that many of the insights I offer will “travel” into relationships that female ministers experience, but the image itself is specifically and consciously male, so I will use the masculine pronoun through this section.
The minister is afraid that what he has to offer simply doesn’t make sense to people in this day and age.

Grandchildren in good families are eager to enjoy the grandfather’s jokes and his generosity. They enjoy his presence without looking to him for the sort of genuine wisdom (information?) they hope to find from their peers, their parents, their pop culture heroes, and their best teachers. In the same way, parishioners in peaceful congregations enjoy the minister’s presence. They hope he will create some warm, positive, hopeful feelings in the group on occasions such as Sunday mornings. If they are lucky, he will even have a sense of humour and make them laugh, like the best grandfathers do. But in many traditional Protestant churches, parishioners’ expectation that ministers will have helpful guidance for them in the sorts of real-world issues that in fact matter has been greatly reduced in the past 50 years. Parishioners can find an array of paid experts to provide guidance for their physical and mental health, their banking and investing, important purchases, and even personal relationships. Trusted ministers are sometimes invited into parishioners’ personal relationship issues, but parishioners’ expectations do not often include getting much specifically useful guidance. The goal of such conversation is usually comfort, and if guidance is wanted, parishioners these days will often consult a counselor or other professional such as a doctor—or, at a certain point, even a lawyer.

Indirectly, a comment Lysianne makes in the first Faith Conversation (p. 283 below) fits with this fear. She is married to a minister herself, and recalls that she fell in love with him but did not want to be married to a minister. She was able to go ahead and marry him because of a plan he had that was extraneous to ministry as such, his adventurous plan to become a foreign missionary. That would enable her to enjoy the excitement of seeing the
world, and partly make up for the painful reality of his job as minister. She had no sense at the time that his being a minister put him in touch with any reality that might prove important for her own life. It was first of all a problem, a problem overcome by the prospect of attendant travel, and also by her being in love with him. The grandfather and the minister are hopefully nice people, but they have little in particular to offer that is intrinsic to their calling as such.

On the contrary, Katie claims, “I always find something, uh, Mike’s comments that I didn’t even think affected my life, but somehow … something’s happened, either in the past, or later on in the week that it helps … me realize that … I’m not in control of necessarily of what I’m doing, there is a greater force that is directing me…” This claim goes against that sense of irrelevance shared by some ministers and grandfathers.

The grandfather questions decisions he made years ago as the father in his own family, and feels uncertain about what may have seemed like successful parenting at the time. In the same way, ministers question methods and techniques available to help congregations succeed. Ministers are aware that programs and approaches that “worked” years ago may have had more to do with the social dynamics of the time than the faithful proclamation of the gospel and the identifiable work of the Holy Spirit. This awareness undermines the commitment ministers feel to those programs and approaches of years ago. And just as grandfathers question the goodness of some of the people and technologies that excite their grandchildren today, ministers may feel reluctant for a number of reasons to jump into the various success-oriented programs advocated by church-growth experts these days. Ministers can feel caught between old routines and new marketing ploys.

178 Appendix G.
An example of this can be found in the lengthy discussion of the music in our church. There were disparaging comments about the hymns chosen for worship. There was disagreement in the group, with some participants defending the old hymns as the best. But there was a strong current of desire for music different from what is now being used. Henry explains that he is the one who types the words of the hymns into the computer, and says that “every week, there’s at least two or three songs that aren’t in our list, which means there are two or three new songs…”179 The desire seems to be for music that is familiar. The group certainly did not articulate any clear, positive definition of what desired music would be; maybe just familiarity was the main feature looked for.

This whole perennial discussion makes me quite tired. I wonder to what extent people want a contemporary “praise team” up front—although nobody suggested that. The contemporary consensus seems to be that praise teams with repetitive praise choruses are the most marketable. At the same time, like a grandfather who has his own questions about the old ways and a critique of the currently popular ways, the minister is not necessarily willing to defend the entire canon of old hymns as the best solution to the problem. Nor is he willing to jump on the bandwagon of the new approach. In many small churches without the required complement of instrumental and vocal musicians, he would not even be able, if indeed he were willing.

The grandfather senses destructive potential within his own personality; so does the minister. A ministry colleague who recently retired confided to me that he had always hoped to make it all the way to retirement before committing “the big blunder”. While he did not define “the big blunder”, it is not hard for most ministers to imagine. We have all heard of grandfathers who hurt their grandchildren; we have all seen examples of ministers who get

179 Ibid., 306.
mired in scandals involving money, sex, or anger, and less spectacularly, ministers who just make important mistakes that leave an ugly pall over ministry in that congregation. My own fear would be of my anger getting the better of me so that I would lose control and start shouting in some congregational setting. I never felt that losing control was any imminent possibility during the Faith Conversations. Still, when Angie says, “Some of the old, old hymns, some of them are just (grimaces)”\textsuperscript{180} I feel a flash of anger at the criticism. And especially as one after another of the participants join in on the issue of unsatisfactory music, my anger grows. Realizing that the anger is a response to a complex frustration that has been building over the years does not make my old fear of making “the big blunder” automatically go away. That fear is clear and present.

The grandfather notices the contrast between the distance separating himself and his grandchildren on the one hand, and on the other the closeness he may have experienced with his own children when they were at home.\textsuperscript{181} Similarly, I am aware of a distance in my relationship with the congregation. Some of that distance may be related to the reduction in authority not only in the ministry but also in many other offices in our society: those of teacher, doctor, politician, for example. That reduction in authority comes from a suspicion, often healthy, that many have of people in authority. Inside the church, that suspicion can have positive effects, such as an improved accountability from church leaders. But suspicion obviously creates distance in relationships, which then become generally less satisfying for

\footnote{\textsuperscript{180} p. 280 below.}

\footnote{\textsuperscript{181} My thoughts about relative closeness would contrast with those of other grandfathers. It is common for some grandfathers to notice that they were so busy and preoccupied with work that they missed out on much of their own children’s experiences. Some such grandfathers find a greater closeness with their grandchildren than they experienced with their own children. This has not been my experience; I loved the closeness I experienced with our own children, I miss that degree of closeness with my grandchildren, and geography probably has been one important factor.}
both sides. I could cite an example, but as I sift through the transcripts, I have to admit I am more struck by the closeness they reflect and invite than by distance or suspicion. I do find that distance and suspicion are built into the role of minister for me, and I could give examples from other interactions with congregants. But it would be a stretch for me to pick an example from the transcripts of the Faith Conversations. And that observation leads naturally into the following thoughts.

The grandfather may remember a time when his own children were small and he exercised considerable control in the home. He may see situations today in which it feels to him as if some of that old control could be just what is called for. Similarly, I know there was a time in our culture when the minister held considerable power, not only in the congregation but also in the broader community. We referred in Chapter Three above to the minister worrying about that loss of power. On the one hand, that sense of reduced power simply reflects a new cultural reality. On the other hand, it reflects a misunderstanding of the true nature of what “pastoral power” has always properly been. Pastoral power is not properly the right or ability to force others to bend to one’s will. Donald Capps refers to “the paradox of pastoral power”. In a short epilogue pointedly called “The Art of Holding On Loosely”, he describes three arts of pastoral counseling, and goes on to explain that a minister’s power is rooted in freedom, access/accessibility, and knowledge. Although these features of the task do not look like the money, influence, and prestige we have come to associate with traditional forms of power, Capps claims they represent real power that can be exercised for good or for ill in the congregation. This is analogous to the role of

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grandfather in the extended family: the grandfather will not properly aspire to giving orders, and that very “loose hold” Capps identifies can give him much greater influence in the family than attempts at control ever could.

The grandfather’s role can still be very satisfying in spite of all the uncertainty and insecurity that seem almost built into a contemporary, long-distance grandfather relationship like mine. There can be trust and affection, shared interests, and frequent communication by email. One of my granddaughters has a partly facetious way of calling me “The Pastor”. In the religious culture in which her family lives, the minister is referred to as “Pastor”. She treats that ascribed role as having two sides: on the one side, she will call me to account if some aspect of my behaviour falls short of the standards she believes apply to The Pastor, and on the other side, she will ask me difficult questions about her faith at age 10, apparently hoping for support for some of the unorthodox views held by her parents. She recently asked me questions about hell. In their religious culture it is considered a kindness to frighten children with hell so that they will have the opportunity to make the changes to their lifestyle and beliefs which (leaders in that context teach) will keep them from eternal damnation. We had a good conversation on the phone at a distance of 1400 km. Interactions can be very rewarding to a grandfather and can strongly, if momentarily, displace the uncertainty and insecurity typical of my experience of the contemporary relationship. By the same token, some of the relationships and interactions in the life of the minister can displace the uncertainty and insecurity typical of the contemporary position of ministry in the traditional Protestant church. These can be times of great trust and joy.

\[183\] We are using the image of grandfather, but Capps’ definition of power held loosely is often as good or better a description of a grandmother’s role. Certainly in our family, the grandmother with whom I spend most of my time comes more naturally to a paradoxical form of loosely held power than I do.
Mining the Grandfather Image for the Heart of the Matter

Killen and de Beer recommend a series of questions to be addressed to this image as part of the process of personal theological reflection. These questions invite us to reflect on ways in which God may be present and using that image to call to us. This can be done in several steps: “Consider what existence is like from within the image. Notice what is broken and sorrowing in the image. What possibilities for newness and for healing are present or implied?” The uncertainty and insecurity threaten to overshadow the love, hope, and connection in my image of grandfather. That seems broken and sorrowing. And yet we have also seen possibilities for newness and healing in the image. Communication can help overcome the distance that seems built into the relationship of minister and congregation as I experience it. Some of the reasons for that distance were spelled out above, where I explained that I am not “from here.” I am not from Ontario, or from the Presbyterian Church in Canada. My background, many of my interests, and my level of education create the possibility of distance in the relationship I have with the congregation. And all of that is on top of the traditional gap between minister and congregation symbolized by the convention that makes the minister a member of and answerable to the presbytery rather than to the congregation. Yet trust and affection can still push their way to the fore to overcome all those distance factors.

Killen and de Beer intend that the image provide access to the heart of the matter. I believe this grandfather image can help me access the heart of the matter for me, not only in the experience of the Faith Conversations, but more generally as minister in this

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185 Cf. p. 8 above.
congregation. The uncertainty and insecurity threatening the love, hope, and connection I have sketched out as part of my understanding of the role of a grandfather point to the heart of the matter for me in ministry. God is present and calling to me from that image. If that image has arisen from an accurate interpretation of feelings evoked in me during the group theological reflection we are calling Faith Conversations, it is certainly revealing the presence and call of God to me—God’s presence in that group of gathered believers, and God’s call to me as I carry on my task in this ministry context. The evidence of real commitment and hope among the participants, and their genuine concern for me, challenge my preoccupation with anxieties and insecurities and invite me to experience the love of God and a realistic expectation for faithful congregational life here.

The heart of the matter for me is the paralyzing ambivalence holding me in tension between love and insecurity. As I watched the video of the three Faith Conversations, I made a discovery about my ministry: there are certain people and certain topics to which I react in ways that make clear thinking unlikely. I noted while watching the video that certain things were said in the conversation that I had heard, but of which I had been unaware. A simple example is one participant’s criticism, on several occasions, of the questions that had been handed out ahead of the Faith Conversation meetings, pointing out that they called for answers of “yes” or “no”. My mind went into a kind of buzz, and my ability to listen to what she was saying was impaired. I wanted to answer her back! I wanted to suggest that “yes” and “no” questions leave a lot of freedom for the one answering! I wanted to teach her about questions! My own defensive feeling—I had composed the questions—and my desire to answer such objections stopped my ability to hear what she had to say behind her somewhat facetious critique of my questions. I am still not sure, but I think she was expressing her
uncertainty about what she was expected to say. As I watched the video, it became painfully clear to me that this is a typical reaction of mine in one-on-one and in group interactions. My ability to hear is seriously weakened by a defensive feeling that is fairly common for me.

Another example is one participant’s speaking in sentences that are unconventional and incomplete. I got distracted by the idiosyncratic English formations, and again my hearing ability was impaired. The problem is exacerbated by the fact that this participant and I occupy slightly different spots on the theological spectrum, and my responses are also coloured by my awareness of that difference. It was very helpful to watch and listen to the Faith Conversations over and over again to hear more and more of what had been said when I was given that step back from the immediacy of the personal presence that heightened the challenge of social and theological differences.

A further example is provided by the above-mentioned criticism of the music in the Sunday worship services. I felt impatient and frustrated as the Conversation unfolded and participant after participant piled on to this growing critique of music selection—for which, I was assuming, they held me responsible. I wanted to explain! I wanted to answer them! I had some good explanations for those feelings! I think about the problem of music a lot! So it was a helpful exercise for me to sit quietly and let the participants express themselves to one another, to me, and to the chair of the session. But it was difficult for me to hear.

Watching the video several times opened for me the possibility of listening for what they

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186 When the group of participants was reviewing my interpretation of the Faith Conversations, they discovered that I felt they were blaming me for the choice of hymns that they found disappointing. They strongly objected to the suggestion that they were blaming me. I was forced to admit to myself and to them that I was holding them responsible for some of my own “baggage” about this long-time frustration of mine—my personal responsibility to make sure that the music in the congregation is good.
may have been saying in not so many words: they do not like to feel inept during the service. They do not like feeling that the congregation is failing at the singing. No one wants to find themselves in effect singing a solo, especially when it is a song they have never heard before. If I can step back from my defensive explanations—considerably easier for me to do while watching the video—I can actually hear some thoughts and feelings and ideas that make sense to me and do not seem motivated by any desire to hurt or diminish me.

The main learning for me is that this type of reaction is a tendency of mine. I own it. I do tend to get defensive, and that shuts down not only my mind but also my ability to listen to the genuine concerns of people who are speaking. It short-circuits the love I have for the people involved. That is a valuable lesson. As long as I am paralyzed by the tension between love and insecurity, I will be unable to listen well; if the love can overcome the insecurity, my ability to listen will be enhanced, and the possibility of responding appropriately to people’s real concerns will be increased. God was present in the Faith Conversations. My perception of God’s presence was much clearer as I watched the video than it had been as the event was actually happening. Defensiveness is not listed among the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22f). Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom (II Cor. 3:17). I needed a sober second viewing to perceive the presence of God. The call of God was there for me, too. God is not necessarily calling me to carry my digital camera around with me as I move through the congregation. But perhaps God is calling me to work toward being able to identify within myself that spirit of defensiveness as it is arising, so that I can learn to listen more carefully and critically in the moment. Maybe I can become critically aware of the fears within myself that turn off the listening, turn off the love, and turn on the buzz of alarm and internal reaction.
Killen and de Beer want me to reflect on what life is like as defined by that image, including what is broken and sorrowing, and what possibilities there are in that image for healing and newness. I have concluded that the grandfather image points toward the heart of the matter for this minister. It contains the brokenness of distance, uncertainty, and insecurity. Broken in the grandfather image is also the directness or closeness dearly remembered from the parenting relationship. When my children were at home, I was an involved parent—probably to the point of being overprotective; I had a hand in much of what my children did, and had strong feelings about what ought to be happening. My closest grandchildren are now hundreds of kilometres away, and I see them seldom. When I do see them, I have a somewhat tentative relationship with them. There seems to be little expectation that I will have anything particularly important to say about their lives other than that benign approval grandparents are supposed to exude. With some of them, I do not even feel free to touch them; while some are quite affectionate, others are standoffish. When my children were at home, there was lots of hugging, kissing, horsing around, and sitting close for reading. I do not get in on that very much as a grandfather. I have also become a grandfather in a time of heightened alertness about dangers posed by some grandfathers. Will the old man interfere with the children? I have never detected any hint of that from my grandchildren or their parents, but it is still “in the air” these days, and I think about it when I am with them. I see that my children trust me with their children, and I don’t take that for granted; I notice it. Similarly, I am very careful about touching parishioners, and especially children. And similarly, I notice and appreciate the trust that is afforded me. Again, as a minister, I am more afraid of my anger than of difficulties related to inappropriate touching.
The image of grandfather also anticipates the healing brought by hope and love and connection. “Grandfather” means connection and concern. It is (often) a blood relationship. It can involve reaching out to help the younger family, which may have more pressing financial needs than the grandparents do; the ability to help is a wonderful freedom. Again, grandfathers chuckle about the freedom of spending defined amounts of time with grandchildren and then leaving to the parents such possibly tangled tasks as bedtime. Many grandfathers are able to relax with their grandchildren much more than they did with their own children when they felt so keenly the responsibility for raising them and faced career pressures at the same time. Grandfathers sometimes feel wonderfully free compared to the parents: they can see all sorts of potential in those grandchildren who seem so smart and energetic, so polite and accomplished. Grandfathers are not nearly as worried about negative outcomes as they were when raising their own children. Grandfathers can look forward with such hope.

Can I find a balance between an awesome responsibility for the faith and growth of the congregation and a relaxed (grandfatherly) enjoyment of the group and its individual members? Theologically, I know full well that these folks are God’s people for whom God has accepted final responsibility. That is an invitation for me to lighten up and take pleasure in the richness and beauty of people temporarily entrusted to my care as their minister. Psychologically, much will depend on that healthy ego identity formation that did or did not evolve during my adolescent stage facilitating (or not) the formation of a healthy pastoral identity. The grandfather image is bursting with positive potential. Depending on my level of appropriate emotional intelligence and mature faith, I can pray for a rich, ongoing attachment.
The Heart of the Matter in Conversation with the Faith Tradition

There has already been some hint at conversation between the Christian tradition and the heart of the matter as seen in the image of grandfather. Killen and de Beer have warned against standpoints of certitude and self-assurance. The “standpoint of certitude” stresses tradition at the expense of personal experience. The “standpoint of self-assurance” stresses one’s personal experience to the neglect of the tradition. They urge what they call a “standpoint of exploration” which involves probing one’s feelings in a particular experience to get at the heart of the matter, and then assertively putting that newly discovered “heart of the matter” into conversation with the Christian tradition. We will now look for elements of Christian tradition to put into conversation with the heart of the matter as identified above.

Mission Motivation Sparks Little Interest

We noted that, in the Faith Conversation on Mission, one participant emphasized the key importance of our motivation for understanding and embracing our mission. We saw this suggestion spark little response. Further, that same person claimed that proper motivation for mission is “one’s relationship with God”. That relationship was not defined; nothing was said about what sort or quality of relationship with God would produce the right motivation for mission. In fairness, the discussion had provided nothing beyond a vague definition of mission. Again, another participant had even claimed that any helpful action by

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188 Ibid., 9–10.

189 Ibid., 16–18.
anyone for any reason constitutes mission. With such a definition, a claim that the key element in mission is its motivation should get points for being fairly radical in itself, even without further explanation.

It should not be surprising if a Faith Conversation in a traditional Protestant congregation does not get beyond a vague notion of the motivation for mission. I will contend that there are two unspoken and unresolved issues blocking clear thinking about Worship, Communion, and Mission in small, small-town, socially conservative congregations like ours: death and power. Why might we might expect an unwillingness and inability to think about these things? I will suggest that years of theological drift in large portions of our traditional Protestant religious culture have left congregations unchallenged and unable to think theologically in general. Further, I will suggest that our position of relative privilege in the world has left us unwilling to examine the advantages that come to us from our social location. The readiness of ministers to encourage an individualistic interpretation of the Bible has given us an “out” as far as facing issues of social location and power. Our understanding of sin is restricted to personal morality. My own uncertainty and insecurity reflect my complicity in this theological drift.

Issues of death and power come together in the theological concept of salvation. I will use the issue of salvation to highlight the results of what I have called a theological drift. First, I will sketch a tension I perceive in our congregation here at Knox Presbyterian Church in Dunnville. I will look at how several theologians have struggled with the issue; we will see that the issue has produced no simple answers, but indeed a struggle. We will examine briefly the issue of social power and location. And we will return to our reflection on Faith Conversations at Knox Presbyterian Church in Dunnville.
Salvation

I have suggested that death and power are issues blocking clear thinking in our congregation. These issues can be covered under the concept of salvation, which has returned several times in this study. We could find vestiges of two traditions about salvation at Knox Presbyterian Church in Dunnville. One tradition would find that salvation is an extremely important issue. It would claim that the beliefs and actions of individual people will result in a division of humanity at the end of the age on Judgment Day. True Christians will be received into the blessed rejoicing of heaven, that is, they will receive salvation, while everyone else will be cast into a hell of fire and punishment, that is, they will not receive salvation. The other tradition holds that salvation is not an important idea because a God of love would not do anything painful to anyone; in other words, a “superficial liberal dismissal of the reality of divine judgment”.¹⁹⁰

Vestiges of both traditions, while remaining vestiges, are relatively strong here. There seems to be a tacit agreement not to talk about the issue of salvation. There is a feeling that unknown consequences would result from a strong repudiation or a strong assertion of either of these two positions. No one ever stands up and warns of the reality of hell in our church. No one ever stands up and casually claims God’s final judgment is simply a myth. The tension between these two positions means that the motivation for mission cannot be easily spelled out in such a social and theological context. Is mission designed to save people from divine judgment and damnation? Or is mission primarily designed to elevate people’s economic and social living standards? Could we trust that

God’s judgment will be characterized by grace rather than simply punishment? Is there some other position? It is not clear.

We are not the only ones who carefully phrase their comments about salvation. In fact, there is a vast history of Christian mission theory in the twentieth century\(^{191}\) in which a related question continued to play itself out in and around the world mission movement: is mission primarily aimed at saving souls, or ought mission to be aimed rather at alleviating suffering among the world’s poor? Does mission necessarily entail Christian proclamation, or will Christian mission seek to understand and work alongside other faiths? Contributions to this discussion can be found in writers who represent quite different camps. We will listen to several contemporary theologians. As we listen, we are aware that these writers represent some of the hopes and presuppositions with which I approach any interaction with the congregation. Precisely how these ideas shape my own living and my own listening to members of this congregation is not entirely clear to me. These theological ideas battle within my heart too, struggling against many of the elements of our secular society, its plausibility structure, and its powerful inducements to buy into its view of reality.

To provide ourselves additional nuance for the thinking of Letty Russell, we will listen to three other students of mission, since issues of salvation and the role of the church are addressed under the heading of Mission. David Bosch, Lesslie Newbigin, and Charles Fensham help us think through some of the theological background that can guide our reflection on what we hear from members of the congregation. The South African, Reformed missiologist David Bosch sorts carefully through issues around church and salvation in his key work on mission paradigms. He asserts, “It therefore makes sense that in

\(^{191}\) Yates, *Christian Mission*. These question swirl throughout the book, but see especially the sections on “Conservative Evangelicals and the WCC” and “Lausanne”, 194–209.
missionary circles today … the mediating of ‘comprehensive’, ‘integral’, ‘total’, or ‘universal’ salvation is increasingly identified as the purpose of mission, in this way overcoming the inherent dualism in the traditional and more recent models … [so] … we should … minister to people in their total need, … we should involve individual as well as society, soul and body, present and future in our ministry of salvation.”  

And further, “Salvation is as coherent, broad, and deep as the needs and exigencies of human existence.”

Bosch raises the controversial question of “whether other religions save”, and complains that those who address that question usually have a narrow, otherworldly view of salvation. He objects to that view, and then does not spell out any precise alternative answer. He does tie salvation to the church:

A Christian … is a person who accepts the responsibility to serve God in this life and promote God’s reign in all its forms. Conversion involves personal cleansing, forgiveness, reconciliation, and renewal in order to become a participant in the mighty acts of God… The believer is, after all, a member of the church, which is a sign of God’s reign, sacramentum mundi, symbol of God’s new world, and anticipation of what God intends all creation to be.

The believer is a member of the church. For David Bosch, salvation is not narrowly otherworldly, but neither can it be reduced to any vague, generic wholeness in human life. “[S]alvation and well-being, even if closely interlocked, do not coincide completely. The Christian faith is a critical factor, the reign of God a critical category, and the Christian

\[192\] Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 399.
\[193\] Ibid., 400.
\[194\] Ibid., 488.
\[195\] Ibid.
gospel not identical with the agenda of modern emancipation and liberation
movements…”196

Explaining an evolving understanding of the church-world relationship, Bosch identifies views of church at opposite ends of a spectrum. “At one end … the church perceives itself to be the sole bearer of a message of salvation on which it has a monopoly; at the other end, the church views itself, at most, as an illustration … [of] God’s involvement with the world.”197 He finds this dualism a “Creative Tension” and pleads for a both/and approach. Bosch will not resolve the tension. “It follows that the church can be missionary only if its being-in-the-world is, at the same time, a being-different-from-the-world… Precisely for the sake of the world the church has to be unique, in the world without being of the world…”198

For Bosch, the line between church and world is not a simple one. He says that mission is God’s “yes” to the world, meaning that the world is the object and the theatre of God’s action.199 God cares deeply about the world. The church is called to participate in God’s mission to the world, and therefore is positively oriented to the world and alert to evidence in the world of God’s saving activity taking place either inside or outside the church. And yet, Bosch also says mission is God’s “no” to the world, meaning that our understanding of God’s agenda in and for the world can never be reduced to particular developments that we can find within the world. Mission must always be “an expression of

196 Ibid., 398.
197 Ibid., 381.
198 Ibid., 386.
199 Ibid., 10.
our opposition to and engagement with the world.” The church has no agenda outside of
or apart from the world, but the church’s mission is always a call beyond particular social or
political programs we find in the world. The line between the church and the world could be
seen to run through the church and through the world, and any attempt to draw that line
requires sensitivity to the work of the Spirit of God wherever that Spirit freely and often
surprisingly chooses to work. This interesting and complex line between church and world
accounts for Bosch’s resort to creative tension in his definition of salvation above.

Letty Russell turns around Bosch’s scriptural allusion (“in the world but not of the
world”) and accuses the church of the double sin of being “of the world but not in the
world”. After asking why “the white male-dominated mainline churches … have such a
difficult time joining in solidarity with those who are poor and marginalized”, she refers
to “structures of sin that hold the churches in a pattern of indifference to the world.” She
charges the church with having bought into the world’s plausibility structure (“structures of
sin that hold the churches in a pattern of indifference”) and thus having become “of the
world”. She further charges the church with failing to engage and address the world (“being
indifferent to the world”) and thus not even being “in the world”.

Russell gives Cyprian of Carthage direct credit for that famous quote (“Extra ecclesium nulla salus”) and suggests that historically it really has indicated “God’s
preferential option for the church”—dispenser of salvation. She proposes a fifth sign of the

200 Ibid., 11.

201 Russell, Church in the Round, 123.

202 Ibid.

203 “No salvation outside the church.”
church, placing “justice” alongside “one, holy, catholic and apostolic”. Provocatively referencing Edward Schillebeeckx’ “no salvation outside the world” she gives her own reformulation, “no salvation outside the poor.”

While she would see things quite differently from Bryan Stone, her inflammatory “no salvation outside the poor” gives Russell’s critique a strange confluence with Stone’s vision of a church actually being an alternative community, with its own baptismal politics and its own Eucharistic economics.

David Bosch would not disagree. He quotes with approval Jurgen Moltmann’s description of a new theology for the laity: “It will be directed not only toward divine service in the church, but also toward divine service in the everyday life of the world. It … will include preaching and worship, pastoral duties, and Christian community, but also socialization, democratization, education toward self-reliance and political life.” As the whole community of the church envisions God’s call as including not only “religious activities” but solidarity with the poor (“education for self-reliance”), we will see more baptismal politics and Eucharistic economics characterizing the congregation.

We hear a similar note from Lesslie Newbigin, Scottish Presbyterian missionary, theologian, and missiologist, who served for years on the mission field in India. Returning to Britain, he realized that England had “become” a mission field. He struggled with the problem of communicating the gospel to people in urban England in the 1980s, and decided

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204 Russell, *Church in the Round*, 135.
205 Ibid., 122.
206 Ibid., 119.
that the only hermeneutic of the gospel is “… a congregation that believes it”. 208 He envisions a congregation whose primary concern is not its own continuing survival, but the world God loves. However, Newbigin also seems unwilling to resolve the creative tension between “religious” and “secular” emphases in the church’s mission:

Evangelism is the telling of good news, but what changes people’s minds and converts their wills is always a mysterious work of the sovereign Holy Spirit, and we are not permitted to know more than a little of his secret working. But—and this is the point—the Holy Spirit is present in the believing congregation both gathered for praise and the offering up of spiritual sacrifice, and scattered throughout the community to bear the love of God into every secular happening and meeting. It is they who scatter the seeds of hope around, and even if the greater part falls on barren ground, there will be a few that begin to germinate, to create at least a questing and a seeking, and perhaps to lead someone to inquire about the source from which these germs of hope came. 209

Newbigin emphasizes the “secular” responsibility of the congregation in the community, but can hardly finish a sentence about that secular responsibility without appending a clause about the Holy Spirit and the cultic work of the church. With this understanding of call he makes his claim: the only hermeneutic of the gospel is a congregation that believes it.

Charles Fensham is thinking about these issues today and works at understanding the impact of a culture of technology on our contemporary faith journey. He situates the church’s call to mission within a joyful, passionate piety shaped by communal habits that move us along a journey of mutual formation. He will probably be generally supportive of the radical and integral thinking that underlies views of salvation and church such as those above, but he pushes the discussion to a new level, challenging us to face more specifically


209 Ibid.
and realistically what Russell called “structures of sin that hold the churches in a pattern”.\textsuperscript{210} He signals this intention, saying that “Marginalizations and power differentials in the relationship between the churches and their peripheries require serious attention to masks of subjugation. Mission is essential to the church but requires further unpacking.”\textsuperscript{211} And more particularly, “To understand the church’s mission today one must first describe shifts in consciousness that are occurring, and then identify the impact of those shifts on contemporary culture and people.”\textsuperscript{212}

Fensham shares our interest in salvation, affirming that “Christianity is a salvific faith”\textsuperscript{213} despite liberal Christianity’s discomfort with “salvation” language. In his definition, “religious” and “secular” sides of salvation merge, not as disparate elements glued together, but in an integrated movement toward God. He insists that salvation includes social justice, and appends a caution about identifying our efforts with the Kingdom of God. He affirms Russell’s notion of “no salvation outside the poor”, since praise of the Trinity includes encountering fellow human beings, especially in hospitality toward the stranger.

Salvation includes liberative, justice-seeking, resisting and world-changing tasks for wholeness. It is also a journey characterized by suffering, pain, travail and wordless sighing in waiting…. Salvation is doxological. The slow and painful journey towards wholeness of life in God grows out of the praise of the Trinity. Before this argument for doxology appears too otherworldly, it must be emphasized … that the praise of the Trinity grows out of community and the praise of the Other cannot be divorced from encountering the other—our fellow human beings.\textsuperscript{214}

\textsuperscript{210} Fensham, \textit{Emerging}, 163.

\textsuperscript{211} Ibid., 58.

\textsuperscript{212} Ibid., 82

\textsuperscript{213} Ibid., 162.

\textsuperscript{214} Ibid., 164.
Fensham grounds the definition of salvation in his key concept of *doxology*. He affirms Bosch’s decision to manage the tension between theory and practice with the concept of *poiesis*. But for the church, Fensham fine-tunes *poiesis* into “doxology.” He is willing to claim, “the local Christian community that does not create doxological *poiesis* in the midst of its struggle for liberation and justice, dialogue, preaching, resistance, and Bible study is not an authentic Christian community. Doxology is radical hospitality to the other…”

David Bosch turned to aesthetics (poetry, artistic work) to “deal with” the intellectual tension between “religious” and “worldly” aspects of salvation. Fensham zeroes in on the aesthetics of the weekly (and daily) experience of praise in the community of faith. The phenomenon of doxology can hold together notions that could otherwise seem dissimilar and even conflicted when viewed primarily as ideas in a system of thought.

Fensham goes on to position his thinking on both church and salvation in terms of that doxology, of that encounter with “the other”:

The larger context of salvation is the journey in and towards the self-giving Trinity that draws humankind and creation into God’s self-giving

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215 *Poiesis* – “doing”, “working”, “work, creation as in artistic creation” (William F. Arndt and F. Willbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, Grand Rapids, University of Chicago Press, 1963.) The definition suggests that the poet is making a meaning that would not be there without that creative work. *Poiesis* can suggest that the poet works at the edge of meaning, even that art is required for true hermeneutics. This hermeneutical art reaches beyond a rational reduction of the rich meaning of life that would force humanity and the living creation into manageable categories of logical thought. It reaches to the edge of such rationality and beyond toward the mystery at the centre of our experience. Fensham’s language of *poiesis* and “doxology” and “giving” and “drawing” and “impulse” calls to mind Mark Burrows’ quotation of Anne Carson (*Eros*) about poetics as “a reaching out of the present condition or beyond what [we] already know” and “a movement that carries yearning hearts from over here to over there…”. Mark S. Burrows, “Raiding the Inarticulate: Mysticism, Poetics, and the Unlanguageable,” *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality* 4:2 (2004), 173–194.

love that brings wholeness and is life. This journey begins in the doxological praise of the Trinity and breaks open into many dimensions. These are an explicit dimension of the poiesis of hymn, art and life, and an implicit dimension where self-giving relationship with others and commitment to justice and the good of the other conveys full life even where the impulse towards God’s reign is not fully understood.  

This is the life of the church. The community of believers journeys (without full understanding!) towards the self-giving Trinity. That journey leads us closer to mutual love, overflowing in mission to the world, a mission determined to bring wholeness and life. That journey opens in many dimensions, including directions inward as the internal life of the praising congregation, and outward (in purposeful cooperation with the mission of God) to reach beyond the intentional community to the stranger and the marginalized. This reaching imitates God by taking the form of self-giving relationship. Connecting “Eucharist” etymologically with “doxology,” Fensham adds, “The Eucharist suggests a radical ethic and hospitality. This unconditional welcoming and embrace of the stranger is our call to be monastic pilgrim communities of evangelists-stewards as Christian communities.”

In description of and prescription for the church, Fensham maintains those inward and outward dimensions. He urges the growing of Christian communities that welcome the stranger, maintain a monastic discipline of work and prayer, see life as mission pilgrimage, and care for the earth, for the other, and for the church itself as a human institution with healthy leadership. He employs the ancient concept of perichoresis in ways that I find a

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217 Ibid., 163f.

218 Ibid., 168.

219 This vision is spelled out in greater detail in Fensham’s new book A Missional Christian Spirituality for the Emerging Church: The Journey to the Nations and for the Earth. Here, and especially in the manuscript Chapter 5, “Send”, he takes seriously the gap between theological thinking in the academy and reality in the congregation. He describes the local Christian community as a seminary, a seedbed of apostolic formation. Even as I am starting to object, “But what if the
deeply moving invitation to re-imagine God. As a writer of sermons and a preacher, I worry about congregants’ images of God, but my own image of God wanders back toward the monarchical and judgmental. Fensham references Harold Wells and John of Damascus for the idea of perichoresis, and I find his use of the concept comforting; it threatens my world and offers to reshape it. It threatens and offers to reshape the grandfatherly uncertainty and insecurity that interfere with my love for the congregation. I am enchanted with the thought that God is “a loving communion who overflows in self-giving mission towards creation.” And yet this marvellous theological prose, while inspiring, has a questionable connection with congregations I know about “on the ground”. It is hard to imagine any short-term connection between perichoresis or even fresh and creative doxology, and the very human push and shove of congregational life in meetings of the Session or of the Board of Managers. In the traditional Protestant churches I have known, the “salvation” that responsible members would find most appealing would involve first of all attendance and revenue. How can our academic theology touch that harsh reality?

In his more recent work, Fensham again refers to salvation, but uses the word less frequently in outlining a missional Christian spirituality for the emerging church. He does give this explanation: “Christian spirituality is indeed about salvation. However… not an

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220 The mutual, loving indwelling of the three Persons of the Trinity.


222 It will be important in our congregations to rehabilitate and hold on to such distinctive words as “salvation”. Traditional Protestant churches, in an attempt perhaps to communicate with outsiders, perhaps to distance ourselves from the despised religious right, have attempted to translate our vocabulary in ways that have eliminated much of our “God-talk”. We have lost more than a few words. We have lost our grasp of some of the import of the message of sacred Scripture.
attenuated ‘me and my God’ salvation; it is a broad vision of bringing together—reconciliation—of all things in God’s wonderful creation…. never in isolation from the great stories in which our individual call rests.”223 This pleasing statement will appeal to lively groups in churches with energetic younger people. In some traditional Protestant churches, such clear articulation of our calling will have a harder time getting a hearing among frightened elderly people who fear being responsible for the closure that seems to threaten so many of our congregations.

Charles Fensham is committed to the preparation of church leaders and addresses the issue of Christian formation. In this effort, he has thought through questions of epistemology and has not simply accepted a rationalistic notion of knowledge. He is critical of “Enlightenment arrogance”.224 His vocabulary of knowledge goes beyond the “mind” to embrace much more of the person. He does speak of “understanding”, “grasping”, “growing to understand”, and having a “sense of who we are”, and goes further to speak of “walking with others on their journey of discovery, growth and sending into active leadership”.225 He writes of “what spirituality means” and “different forms of awareness”.226 He refers to “discerning”, “getting formation for Christian spirituality right”, and “establishing identity

223 Fensham, *Missional Christian Spirituality*, p. 14 in Chapter 1 of the manuscript.

224 Fensham, *Missional Christian Spirituality*, p. 2 in Prelude in the manuscript.

225 Ibid., Prelude, pp. 3, 4.

226 Ibid.
and hope” that help to “tell us who we are”. He writes of our ability to “imagine”. He finds in the Genesis stories a foundation for “critique” of our society.

All of this emphasis on knowing and sensing and understanding is not naïve. Fensham recognizes “doubt” and “male resistance to the call of God”. He notes the importance of “acknowledging our own limitations, our own possible misunderstandings”, and notices that God’s call “evokes fear” in us. He claims that “all of creation is called forth in the face of chaos and the dark void…” He raises, if then flatly rejecting, the possibility that key theological ideas might be “too complex and mind boggling to be of practical use.” But raising that possibility at all suggests that he is aware of a problem with theological ideas in our world.

The emphasis on poetry or poesis in his earlier book comes back in this later one as Fensham works with the problem of grasping the essentially ecological task of spirituality and Christian worship. This reference to Genesis poetry is tacit acknowledgment of

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227 Ibid., Ch.1, pp. 3, 7, 9.

228 Ibid., Ch. 1, p. 10.

229 Ibid., Ch. 1, pp 3, 4.

230 Ibid., Prelude, p. 5.

231 Ibid., Ch. 2, p. 17.

232 Ibid., Ch. 1, p. 8.

233 Ibid., Ch. 2, 4.

234 Fensham, Emerging, 35. Fensham follows David Bosch, who suggests poesis, “the imaginative creation or representation of evocative images” as a way around or through the tension between theory and practice. Cf. Bosch, Transforming, 431.

235 Fensham, Missional Christian Spirituality, p. 15. Chapter 1 in the manuscript.
tension between what we have to know about our location as creatures in God’s world, and the difficulties presented at least by our own resistance and fear.

And that is where I find my quandary with *Missional Spirituality*. As I read, I feel pleased, I feel myself soaring, I am convinced, I am buying in to what Fensham is saying about a Christian spirituality that takes seriously both the beauty and the brokenness of the world. He presents important, timely specifics of that evolving world in the context of which we find our calling. But if I am to read the Bible in the present,\(^{236}\) I have to read it in the actual circumstances in which I find myself in the congregation. Is this picture of Christian spirituality for the journey going to be helpful for me, or for us at Knox Presbyterian Church in Dunnville?

Fensham uses Paul’s words in Philippians 2:12–13 as the salvation theme of this book, with direct references to those verses in four of the book’s five chapters.\(^{237}\) Those verses have been catching my attention for fifty years; my problem is with the apparent assumption of both Charles Fensham and the writer to the Philippians, that the people we are writing for or talking with want to work out their salvation. Are the folks in the congregation interested in salvation and what it might take to attain or receive it? If they are, those verses will be enlightening and encouraging in the extreme. Fensham is in good company when he makes the same assumption as the Apostle Paul! But if we are to read the Bible in the present, perhaps we have to call into question that assumption in our day. It feels to me as if the ground has shifted and now the congregation is more interested in finding support for their existing lifestyle than in anything resembling a traditional view of salvation. Some in the congregation are frantically trying to make it in a busy, competitive world, while others

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\(^{236}\) Ibid., Ch. 1, p. 18.

\(^{237}\) Ibid., Ch. 2, p. 19; Ch. 3, p. 17; Ch. 4, p. 10; Ch. 5, p. 5.
are concerned about making it to their medical appointments without hearing news that is too terrible. Most days, including most Sundays, I am afraid that salvation, either of the individualistic afterlife type or the present world-mending type, is not on the map. I wish that we—and I include myself—would actually address Abraham’s agonized question to God, “Sovereign Lord, how am I to know?”238

We return to the vestiges of two salvation traditions at Knox Presbyterian Church in Dunnville having found that we are not alone. The theologians we have been listening to have wonderful, helpful thoughts which still have not forced us to come down clearly on one side or the other of our tension: salvation as a crucial determiner of eternal destiny versus salvation as unimportant in the face of a loving, grandfatherly God. At Knox Presbyterian Church in Dunnville, vestiges of those two views of salvation remain, both of them strong enough to keep proponents of either from controlling the discourse. This maintains a tension under which a cautious leader avoids speaking to the issue. More seriously, this tension can maintain a silence around important questions of death and dying that give urgency to discussions of salvation. A grandfather self-image on the part of the minister, with its uncertainty and insecurity, can play into the paralyzed equilibrium of silence in which those two theological vestiges coexist. The love and confidence that arise from having significant contributions to make—the other side of the grandfather image—will be required if the minister is to have the courage to speak plainly on the important issue of salvation.

A clear articulation of the meaning of salvation, and of the danger it provides salvation from, logically precedes genuine conversation and intelligent listening not only around mission, but also around worship and communion/fellowship in the congregation. We will need to work toward a new conversation in which the understanding of salvation

238 Ibid., Ch. 2, p. 9, quoting Genesis 15:8.
avoids two dangers. One danger is a focus on the afterlife and a medieval view of hell that seems designed more to enforce control over a gullible constituency than to encourage a loving response to the overflowing love of God for the world and for us. The other danger is a reduction of salvation to improved social conditions in the world that is difficult to distinguish from the (admirable) programs of socialist political parties. The doctrine of salvation requires a profound appreciation of the important concerns of human life that include subtle issues of spiritual direction, the doctrine of the resurrection of the body, personal morality, communal responsibility, social dynamics, and global politics and economics. At this time, in our situation, it makes sense to me to follow Bill Phipps and John Paul II, and raise serious questions about the existence of hell. A discussion of the reality of salvation can be a key focus for finding renewed forms of worship, communion/fellowship, and mission. That discussion, however, will not be possible without reference to social location and power.

Social Location and Power

In the mission discussions of the last century, the tension in the definition of salvation is a tension not only between “this-worldly” and “other-worldly” emphases, but also between salvation for the individual and salvation for the world. This tension calls for a careful understanding of the line between church and world. We have seen that churches and ministers are affected by reigning plausibility structures that push them toward individualism. These structures also push us toward a “realistic” assessment of the place of the church with respect to powerful institutions in our society. We have found that a grandfather, sensing that his grandchildren are part of a more or less stable system, hesitates to “interfere”; the minister feels the same reluctance to rock the congregation’s boat.
Recognizing these realities, we can further our understanding of the lack of energy to define motivation for mission as noted in the Faith Conversation.

An individualistic view of salvation will fit much more simply and nicely into our society’s reigning plausibility structures. In fact, some might suggest that Western governments have bought the silence of the churches with the offer of “religious freedom”—and, specifically in North America, with the valuable charitable donation receipt for income tax purposes. It could be seen as a deal: the government will protect your right to worship as you please, and even allow you a tax break for donations to your churches, provided churches remain silent on important public issues such as environmental reviews and human rights. This notion of a deal between the government and the churches may have seemed far-fetched before the rise to power of the Conservative Party of Canada under Stephen Harper. The Harper government has targeted especially environmental groups with trash talk (shifting the conversation from the value of what critics are saying to accusing them of having foreign funding\textsuperscript{239}) and threats of revoking their charitable status. Kairos\textsuperscript{240} has famously lost its Canadian International Development Agency funding,\textsuperscript{241} and since the (temporary?) defeat in the United States of the Keystone XL Pipeline, Canadian environmental groups have been learning to be very careful.\textsuperscript{242} David Suzuki quit the board

\textsuperscript{239} “PMO Accused of Threatening Environmental Group.”

\textsuperscript{240} A Canadian coalition of eleven churches and religious organizations united for ecological justice and human rights, according to the Kairos website; http://www.kairosCanada.org/who-we-are/ accessed May 11, 2012.

\textsuperscript{241} “Timeline: Oda and the Kairo Funding,”

\textsuperscript{242} Any number of news items could be cited. For example: Steve Rennie, “Which Charities Get Most Foreign Cash? Not those on Tory hit list.” \textit{The Globe and Mail}.  

of the Suzuki Foundation to avoid jeopardizing its charitable status by his continuing advocacy for environment issues. In what could be seen as an attempt to stifle dissent, the Canadian government is (helpfully) reminding churches that the financial arrangements we had come to take for granted as simply our right are actually the terms of a deal defined by the (evolving) laws of Canada. We have absorbed the reigning plausibility structure that assigns to the church a place as a private voluntary association with whatever rights the state may decide to allow. That is the way the system looks to us today.

Congregations in traditional Protestant churches are often made up of aging, middle class people. Some of these might not be interested in thinking critically about changes to a system on which they believe they depend. Nothing reinforces the reigning plausibility structure like the perception that society as it presently exists is my only comfort in life and in death. Preaching texts in which Jesus claims that to “save your life you have to lose it” has a nice, edgy ring as long as you are not seriously suggesting actual changes to anyone’s income stream. There is an easy fit between a conservative, individualistic religion and the existing economic and political structures in North America. The particular instance of conservative, individualistic religion can be of either the evangelical or the traditional Protestant stream. Something has created “filters” on the ears of those in the congregation,


244 The one “subordinate standard” of the Presbyterian Church in Canada that rings most strangely in the ears of a typical congregation is the Declaration of Faith Concerning Church and Nation passed by the General Assembly in 1954. The idea that the church might draw boundaries between an area of authority properly belonging to the church as distinct from an area of authority properly belonging to the state seems far-fetched nowadays. Any thought that the church might actually claim to limit the authority of the state is foreign to the thinking of many Presbyterians.
including the minister. Those filters create a situation in which we can listen calmly to the most radical Old Testament prophecy (Ezekiel 34) or to the most (at the time) infuriating statement of Jesus’ program (Luke 4) or the most inspiring theological publication, in the quiet assurance that none of us here in this congregation is actually serious about any structural social change. Those filters on our ears mean that the Scripture and the sermon and any theological formulations will somehow be heard as calling simply for slight adjustments in levels of individual, personal niceness in the community.

Niceness is deceiving, though. There’s something less believable about a desire to be nice when it comes from people who are sitting atop the hierarchy of privilege. That hierarchy is part of a system that seems well designed to hold the world’s poorest people hostage to the continuing comfort and wealth of people like the North American middle classes. People in congregations in Canada live in a mixture of guilty knowledge and innocent ignorance. Many in our churches demonstrate little understanding of macro-economic arrangements through the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, and the effect those arrangements have on standards of living in poor countries. Many church people make happy comments about WalMart and the “low prices” it provides for us with no apparent awareness of the pressures those low prices continue to put on the entire supply chain, pressure on poor farmers and factory workers around the world to produce goods for less and less return. These are large power arrangements that have very much to do with who gets to eat and who does not, who gets health care or education and who does not. These power arrangements have a big impact on levels of what the Scripture calls justice and righteousness. We seem unaware of connections between our lifestyle and the lifestyles

of the poor. We seem ignorant. And yet at the same time, there is a strange, quiet
determination among many church people to keep any mention of politics or economics out
of sermons and other messages from the church. It is not simply our lack of awareness that
gives us that strong sense of what is and is not appropriate for the church to say on economic
and political and social issues. It is rather that toxic mixture of benign ignorance and a
willful determination to maintain our comfortable position in Canadian society.

It is not surprising if participants in a Faith Conversation in a conservative,
traditional Protestant congregation do not respond to a suggestion that motivation will
always be a defining factor for our sense of mission. In discussing whether Christian
confession would need to accompany helpful actions in order for those actions to qualify as
“mission,” such a group would probably not be aware of the history of that issue. It would
probably not be aware of the debates throughout the last century between Ecumenicals and
Evangelicals. Its members would probably not think of Carl F. H. Henry’s famous 1947
change of heart. We would think pragmatically rather than theologically. We would think
individualistically rather than consciously as part of the catholic church of Jesus Christ. The
individualism in many small traditional Protestant churches today has little to do with any
conscious theological position. It is probably often rooted in a deep, unconscious
commitment to our society’s plausibility structure and its unspoken economic and political
implications for us personally. “Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also”
(Matthew 16:21).

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Carl F. H. Henry, *The Uneasy Conscience of Fundamentalism* (Grand Rapids: William B.
described fundamentalist, publicly changed his position on the argument between evangelicals and
ecumenicals when he felt his conscience pushing him to look at the pain that goes unaddressed when
Christian people are able to keep their attention strictly focused on “religious” issues, and ignore
“social” issues like poverty and injustice.
It is relatively easy to feel critical of a local church by comparing the untidy reality of life in that congregation with some abstract statement of where we should be. It is more difficult to imagine a route from where we are to where we are called to go. That is the beauty of the “journey” metaphor so common in the Christian imagination over the centuries and so firmly rooted in Scripture. The journey metaphor is less concerned with picking holes in a particular group of people and more concerned with reminding us of our goal and pointing us all toward “Jesus, who both began and finished the race we’re in” (Heb. 12:2, The Message).

If our church can decide to journey toward Jesus, we will need to reevaluate ourselves and our programs. As we become aware of the plausibility structure that shapes our thinking, we will begin to become critical of those social structures that seem “given” but are really chosen by our society from among other available options. To a certain limited extent, small groups such as our congregation can learn to make conscious choices about whether or not to buy into those options. We can become critical of individualistic standards by which we now make decisions, and begin to ask questions about our world’s power arrangements that offer us options among which we now choose. We will develop a new awareness of the important implications of our own social location.

If this dawning awareness is ever to be more than simply abstract and interesting (or threatening) new information, we will have to awaken to the presence of power differentials inside the congregation. Charity begins at home. The presence of high- and low-status people inside the small society of our own congregation is a reality quite clear to low-status

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247 For example, John Bunyan, Pilgrim’s Progress (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, 2003). Originally published as The Pilgrim’s Progress from This World to that which is to Come, (London: Nath. Ponder, 1678). For a contemporary statement of the “journey” metaphor, see Fensham, Missional Christian Spirituality.
members themselves, but a new and surprising notion to those with high status. As we become sensitive to these dynamics inside the congregation, we will be encouraged to use those same categories in our observation of the world outside and come to a new understanding of references in Ephesians, Colossians, and I Corinthians to a contest between God and “the powers”. Inspired by Jesus’ statement of the goal of his ministry in Luke 4 and his description of the judgment in Matthew 25, we will determine to move toward the margins of our society, looking for Jesus himself in “the least of these”.

These thoughts about power and death, salvation and social location, run through my mind as I reflect on the experience of listening and watching the three Faith Conversations held at Knox Presbyterian Church in Dunnville in the spring of 2012. There is a tension between my immediate, conscious sense of what is going on in the group of eight participants at the time, and my more reflective sense of what is going on as I sit in my quiet study at home, watching the group on the video, listening with care, reading over the transcripts. As I review the proceedings, I realize some of the extent to which my above-mentioned fears and insecurities impair my hearing of what is being shared verbally as well as in other cues such as the laughter, tears, and halting, careful speech. I reflect on the probability that those insecurities of mine are operating on a daily basis as I move through the congregation on Sundays and through the intervening weeks. My fears and uncertainty tend to assign the congregation to a category of those whose commitment is casual at best. In careful review, I find a group of committed, caring, hopeful believers who challenge my assumptions about myself and about them.

This realization does not mean that as a congregation or as a group of participants in a research project we have arrived. This realization does not mean that as a minister I have
arrived. We have not arrived, because we are on a journey. We stand in need of *metanoia*, of conversion. We must change our minds about who we are and figure out what it means to be on a journey. Our choice is not about whether or not to journey; our choice is only about where we want to go. We need to turn around and journey toward God and toward the world in actions that are life-giving and liberating. Is this a cruel assessment of the congregation, to say that we stand in need of conversion? No. To understand conversion, we need to see sin as a state rather than an action. Sin is the “natural” state of human existence, as Paul Tillich shows in his sermon “You Are Accepted.” Tillich argues that it is in the recognition of sin as separation, separation from others, from ourselves, and from God, it is in that very experience of sin that grace appears. This recognition of God’s grace is not to be immediately acted upon, but first of all accepted. Accept the gracious reality that you are accepted. The very realization of grace forms the possibility of a journey toward God.

When trying to address the question of whether Christian confession will necessarily accompany acts that qualify as mission, the group of participants virtually overlooked the call from one member to focus on the motivation for mission. Behind the lack of response to that call may have been a lack of clear thinking about the mission of God and the mission of the church. In addition to that, or behind that, could be a lack of clear thinking about

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salvation. Is mission simply any attempt to help? Is mission a synonym for charity? Is mission subordinate to evangelism? What is the relation between mission and salvation? To address those questions, and related questions about worship and communion, we will need to see who we are. We will need to envision ourselves on a journey. The journey is not optional or supplementary to what our lives are about. It is constitutive of our lives as followers of Jesus. We can only be ourselves “in encounter with the other”, and we encounter the other in Jesus. “This is what makes Jesus’ parable of the Great Judgment in Matthew 25:31ff. such a seminal story. In this passage, Jesus refuses to divorce love and care for the neighbor, particularly the neighbor that is most vulnerable and reviled, from the ultimate redemptive embrace of God.”

This theological insight offers to clarify for members of our congregation the question of whether Christian confession must always accompany acts of mission. It will become obvious that the specific words we say as we reach out to the least of these is a consideration secondary to what is in our hearts as we do it. In our hearts, we may envision ourselves as “giving back to the community” from which we are thankful to have been able to exploit great wealth. Or we may be seeking Jesus, having listened carefully to his words in Matthew 25, and realizing that our best hope of finding and spending time with Jesus is by journeying toward people on the margins of our own society. In the latter case, speaking words of Christian confession will be natural, if judicious. We will be able to make strategic decisions about times when such a word is indicated, and times when it may not be. But that word of Christian confession must always be clear in our own hearts and minds. We will

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understand what we are doing as our response to the deepest call of God, essential to any realization of who we are as human beings. We, minister and congregation, will reach out to one another in our search for Jesus.

**The Minister’s Role Revisited**

Will this happen? Will we understand? How can we come to understand? What is my role as minister? The place for me to start is with *metanoia* in my own life. Anyone who observes and thinks carefully can imagine personal and institutional fine-tuning to tighten up the congregation’s operation and make things work better. But one important change will precede any of that for me. I will have to identify myself consistently and intentionally as a follower of Jesus and as a servant of the Word. In that dual capacity, I will be seeking Jesus. I will continue to feel all of the uncertainty and insecurity suggested by the image of the grandfather. I will continue to feel the nearly irresistible appeal of the plausibility structure of the world in which I have been shaped. I will recognize all of that as part of the sin from which I need to have my mind transformed.253 I will realize that repentance from that sin will never be merely a mental exercise, but will always be grounded in actions of outreach that are part of that journey toward the other.

My research question anticipates a significant difference between the participants’ experience and my own, and wonders whether a fusion of horizons will be possible. In fact, though, despite dissimilarity in education, life experience, and vocabulary, the difference between my experience and that of the participants is not as great as anticipated. The similarity in our social location as privileged members of the middle class in North America

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253 Ibid., Ch. 2, p. 16. Fensham refers to Paul’s instructions in Romans 12:1–2.
has a powerful impact on our “horizons”. The participants and I have much to lose from any threat to the generous provision of the economic, political, and social systems that structure our lives. We share a powerful inducement to resist transformation. We share an investment in keeping any recommendation for repentance safely in the sphere of individual morality or personal growth, and out of the frightening realm of social structural change. Sermons and other aspects of the church’s program that nudge the congregation further along on a journey searching for Jesus among those on the margins of society will not make sense unless concrete examples are available. Concrete examples could enable congregants to imagine stepping outside safe routines and onto a path that could faithfully be called discipleship.

Ministers who want congregations to move in this direction will need to accept the paradoxical nature of pastoral power and work toward a fusion of horizons with their congregations and with others of good faith within the community. Ministers who are humble and see the need for repentance in their own lives will not be eager to tell congregations how to live, but will encourage dialogue and discourse, sharing perspectives in ways that could be described as fusion of horizons. That goal of the fusion of horizons will take seriously the congregation’s calling and wisdom, and will envision a role for the minister that has more in common with a patient and hopeful, admiring and helpful grandparent than with a busy, demanding, controlling father-figure.
Chapter 9
CONCLUSION

Did I mention that I was a school teacher for 24 years before being ordained as a Minister of Word and Sacraments in the Presbyterian Church in Canada? Many people who knew me were surprised at the move from teaching into ministry. Many of them had only ever known me as a person of the school. By 1996, when I was ordained, I had been in school full-time without missing a year, either studying or teaching, for 46 years since starting Grade 1. A person of the school.

After I was ordained and had begun ministering in Kingston, people who met me again asked one of two questions. Most commonly their first question was “How big is your church?” These were usually people of Christian faith, as are most of my acquaintances. And still their first question concerned quantifiable measures of my success as leader of a (competitive?) enterprise—a church. That has seemed both strangely sad, and perfectly normal. We are people of our culture; we are naturally interested in worldly success and its normal measurement. But it is sad that those whose professed intention is to follow the Man whose life here ended in society’s ultimate censure—judicial execution—should naturally expect one another to end up praised and rewarded for our efforts, happily working in churches that are rapidly and gratifyingly growing.

The second most frequent question I have been asked is “How are things going in the church?” And, carrying on the partly facetious cynicism of my own father, I have most commonly replied, “I don’t know. The minister is the last one to know how things are going
in the church." This reply is only partly facetious; only partly cynical. It is notoriously
difficult to perceive the mysterious movements of the Spirit. Ministers hope to somehow
invite and cooperate with the quickening movement of the Holy Spirit. There are no clever
techniques that ensure mastery over the Holy Spirit of God. There are not even any
foolproof measurements of the Spirit’s movement. It is in tacit recognition of that truth that
we in the church so often fall back on those most obvious worldly measures of how things
are going in the church—attendance and revenue. On the surface, I am suggesting a more
agnostic response to the question. We do not and cannot know how things are going in a
church. We cannot always perceive and we cannot ever accurately measure the activity of
the Spirit. On the other hand, we can be interested in it as the hoped-for and often
imperceptible “result” of our work in ministry. We can look for it. We can listen for it,
remembering that “you can hear its sound” even though “you cannot tell where it comes
from or where it is going” (John 3:8).

In this situation that resists efforts to measure “success”, how does a minister feel
about how she or he is doing? For me, there have been two yardsticks that come out on a
Thursday afternoon when questions of meaning start to pester. One is how the sermon for
next Sunday seems to be coming along. It is usually written by Thursday afternoon, and
ready for a few hours of honing and absorbing. By then, I have a sense of what I am working
with as I head toward Sunday morning. The other gauge is my perception of my ongoing
program of visitation. How is the visitation going? Have I been to see the shut-ins? Have I
been to see anyone on my list of the people who scare me? Have I been in touch with the
congregation? Have I had any good visits during the week?
A good visit is one in which the people being visited and I were able to get down to a certain indefinable level of intimacy, a level at which some of the genuine concerns of that person or that couple were allowed to surface. We got past social niceties and down to a level at which spiritual concerns were introduced. The people being visited were able to speak about some genuine hopes, some real fears, some of their important doubts, the faith that sustains them through the actual challenges they have to face. When that happens, my agnosticism about how things are going in the church dissolves and I allow myself to feel like a pastor. “Let me listen to some of the things that are truly important to you.” There is some truth in the old proverb, “The voice of the people is the voice of God.” The voice of the people is not the voice of God, but for an intentional, attentive, evaluative listener, a person of faith, the voice of the people can help reveal the voice of God. That careful listener can discern in the voice of the congregation important parts of what God is saying. The voice of the people, rightly discerned, brings me the call of God. That is why one of the ways I try to figure out how things are going in the church is to ask myself a few questions about my program of visitation, the main program through which I ask questions of members of the congregation.

In this study I have set up a process of theological reflection within the congregation. That process had two stages. In the first, three Faith Conversations (theological reflections) were held with the eight participants. They were invited to reflect on three aspects of congregational life: Worship, Communion, and Mission. I sat and listened as Franklin James, a member of the Ministry Base Group, chaired those reflections, and afterwards I studied the videos of those Faith Conversations. Then, secondly, I sat back and reflected on my own. I did a personal theological reflection following the method spelled out by Patricia
Killen and John de Beer. That personal theological reflection was designed to help me listen more attentively to what participants in the Faith Conversations had been saying, and ask myself questions about comparisons and contrasts between what I was hearing from them and what I was experiencing myself. Instead of finding a big difference between their experience and mine, I found that our experiences are actually quite similar. I do not discount the differences we bring to our relationship as minister and parishioners—differences of education, specific calling, and life experience. But the social location we share—comfortable, middle class, mainly white people—means that our experiences are rather similar. The impatience I feel with them week after week mirrors the impatience I feel about my own struggle to live as a person of faith in our materialistic society in our secular age. The similarities are greater than the differences.

As long as I myself feel stuck in a tension between radical Christian confession and the powerful patterns of a life of relative ease and compromise, I should probably not have high expectations for congregants to find my presence moving them to bold changes of direction on their journey of faith. Rhetoric is not as persuasive as good modelling. As long as I am disappointed by the difference between my lifestyle and the exciting words of Lesslie Newbigin, Letty Russell, Charles Fensham, and Bryan Stone, I might not find the congregation making radical decisions about following Jesus either. On the other hand, I should be ready for them to respond in exciting ways to the prompting of the Holy Spirit and provide a helpful example for me.

This study offers some contribution to theology and to the church. Our theologians have understandably and perhaps rightly paid more attention to listening to sacred Scripture than to listening to the voices of the people of faith in the congregation. This study,
following the tradition of hermeneutic phenomenology, offers the church a suggestion for increased emphasis on listening to the voices of the people in our attempts to make out God’s call. Ministers can ask themselves how they usually put together their answers to that common question, “How are things going in the church?” We all know better than to put stock in quantitative results, but statistics have a powerful pull on our imaginations. This study invites ministers to create safe spaces in which congregants can be invited to speak, so that their speech can be listened to carefully and sensitively by ministers who genuinely want to know what is happening in the lives of the people. That careful listening can lead to a fusion of horizons between ministers and congregations in which ministers shift toward concrete, grounded proposals, and congregations and their ministers begin to live out their faith in more satisfying actions.

My study has limitations. It was not designed to reach conclusions about all churches or all church members. It was not even designed to reach final conclusions about the whole congregation at Knox Presbyterian Church in Dunnville. As a phenomenological study, it seeks to generate data on the experience of eight people at Knox Presbyterian Church, Dunnville. It finds considerable variation in their experience. Conclusions that can be reached from this data about people beyond the group are obviously limited. Ministers in situations similar to mine will be interested in what was learned about the experience of these people, while realizing that conclusions for their own situations will only be drawn with care.

Some directions for further study present themselves. The most obvious to me is where I will go with these findings in my future ministry here at Knox Presbyterian Church in Dunnville. The study produced unintended consequences. Beyond allowing me to listen
to reports of the experience of the participants, the study itself induced significant new experiences among the participants and indicated new directions within the lives of individuals and of the congregation. The participants suggested that it would be good to find ways to incorporate the type of activity we did for this study into the regular program of the church. Some concrete suggestions came out of that discussion, as you can see in Appendix I below. One direction for further study for me will be to design ways to allow my findings about the actual experience of these participants to inform my work with them and with other members of the congregation. The method used above for the personal theological reflection specifically insists that the end of theological reflection is never inside someone’s head, but is always in some form of action, some change in the life of the one doing the reflecting. Having stipulated that such action falls outside the range of this study per se, I am nonetheless aware that my theological reflection calls out to me for action as I finish the study.

My personal theological reflection also offered me the image of grandfather. This image is one of great warmth for me. It invites me to face some of the ways I experience my role within the congregation, including ambivalence and insecurity as well as closeness and commitment. In the paternalism we noted above, the image also invites ongoing reflection on the nature of pastoral power. The grandfather often wields power within the family, but it is at a distance and different from that appropriate to parents themselves. That extra distance in the grandparent relationship is a helpful inspiration to the minister to remember both the real power involved in the role, and what Donald Capps calls the paradoxical nature of that power. If the minister can maintain that “loose hold” on power, it will be possible to focus
calling-related hopes in ways that are integral to an enterprise of faith and salvation rather than to one of control and success.

I also invite other ministers, whether or not involved in academic programs, to design similar situations for intentional listening to members of their congregations. The benefits are not restricted to the findings made by the minister. We have seen that participants in this study found the impact they experienced to be “huge.”
Appendix 1 March 11 Sermon
Introducing the Research Project to the Congregation

I got some exciting news on Tuesday night. I’d been checking my email several times a day, and Tuesday night I got a letter of approval from the Ethics Review Board at the University of Toronto, telling me that I’m free to proceed with the research I’ve planned to do in the congregation. I did expect them to approve my application, but I did not know how many times it would go back and forth with them telling me more little things I needed to change. So I was pleased and excited to get that letter. I am very eager to get started.

The next step will be putting together a group of eight participants—and that means 8 of you, please. Actually, the NEXT step is a formal request for permission from the session to conduct this research within the congregation. I asked the Session four years ago what they thought of me doing this whole course of study, and they have been very supportive through the whole process. But it is important to ask them for permission to do the research within the congregation, as a courtesy, but also the Ethics Review Board at the University insists on it, and they insisted on seeing the letter I will give the Session today, asking for their permission.

Then I will ask Franklin James and Amy Laroche to draw 8 names out of a hat. I mentioned before that you will have two opportunities to opt out of participation in this project if you do not wish to be involved in the three 2 hour Faith Conversations. You can speak to Franklin or Amy today, and ask to have your name taken out before they draw the 8. Or, you can wait to see if your name is drawn. If your name is drawn, you will be
approached by Amy or Franklin with more information about just what’s involved in participating. At that point, you have another opportunity to say, “Oh, now that I see what’s really involved, I think I would not like to be involved.” You are perfectly free to opt out. You will not need to give any reason. Nobody will look at you funny if you opt out.

So we will start with a list of members and adherents. You know what members are. Adherents are people who always come to church here, but who have never become members. Some of our best “members” are actually adherents. We took the list, and scratched off anybody who is younger than 18 or older than 85, anybody who has not been coming to church in the past year at least five times. We were left with about 90 names.

*What’s Involved:* Amy and Franklin will pick 8 names, approach those people, and if seven say yes and one says no, they will draw one more name, and so on, until we have our eight eager volunteer participants. These 8 would be agreeing to be present after church next Sunday for a quick meeting after church to figure out the best times to meet. They would be agreeing to be present in church on March 25, April 1, and April 15 when sermons will be preached on the three topics up for discussion in the three Faith Conversations. They would, of course, be agreeing to be present for each of the three 2 hour Faith Conversations that will be held some time during the weeks of March 25, April 1, and April 15. And they would be agreeing to be present for one follow-up meeting. When I get my interpretation of what I’ve heard written up, the group will be given a copy of what I’ve written so they can read it and decide whether or not I’ve got it right. That follow-up meeting will allow the group to tell me if I’ve got it right.

*Last Sunday after church,* Corrine and I headed down to Pittsburgh. Corrine has one sister in Pittsburgh, and another sister way out west in Idaho. The sister from out west was
visiting the sister in Pittsburgh, so it was a rare opportunity for the three women to be
together—and it was the birthday of the Pittsburgh sister. One evening when I was visiting
my father, the three women were sitting around with Corrine’s two brothers-in-law, both of
whom are deeply involved in their churches. Somebody asked Corrine about my studies, and
she described this research project with the three Faith Conversations about Worship,
Fellowship or Communion, and Mission or Outreach. They both indicated that they thought
that sounds like a very interesting activity. I agree.

Here’s how it will work: After all these details have been worked out, and we have
the eight participants all signed up, we will sit down in a room. Eight of you will be there.
Franklin will be there. Jenny Mason will be there to video the whole event so that I have it
all on video and can go over and over what the eight of you have said.

By the time we all sit down for the first Faith Conversation, all eight of you will have
heard a sermon on March 25 on the topic of worship in the congregation, you will have read
through two short little stories describing a couple peoples’ experiences of worship, you will
have reviewed a short list of questions about worship, and you will have received a list of
Holy Manners. Many congregations have put together lists of rules for appropriate
interaction among church people. We have one such list, and you will get it before the first
Faith Conversation.

But, with all this preparation, what we’re really after when we all sit down is your
experience of worship at Knox. Not your ideas about worship. Not your opinions about what
worship should be. But your experience. So, obviously, there will not be right or wrong
answers. It’s not like a quiz or a test. So, that will be easy, and it should be fun. To get to
talk about yourself, your own experience of worship, and to get to hear about the experience of others in your congregation.

One of the Holy Manners is: “Encourage input from others.” Franklin will chair the Conversation. He will explain how things are to go. He will have a way to make sure that everyone gets a fair chance to speak.

In the first Faith Conversation about worship, what will people say? Of course, I do not know. That’s why I’m doing this research. I’m trying to find out what your experience of worship is. For example, I was quite surprised. A woman and her husband whom I know were visiting our congregation one Sunday. That was the Sunday that I mentioned during the sermon that Anne Perry, the mystery author, one of my favourite authors, and, it turns out, one of her favorite author, I mentioned that Anne Perry was convicted of murder herself when she was a teen ager. I figured that several in the congregation would know Anne Perry, and would be interested in this important piece of gossip about her life. A few months later, I was talking with that woman who had been in our church that morning, and she told me that she had been so shocked by that information that she had not heard anything else in the service. I was surprised! I had no idea. I thought it would capture your attention if I told you that, and you would be listening to whatever I said next. I had no idea what her experience was that day, until our conversation months later.

So, what will I hear when you begin to speak about your experience of worship? Someone might tell the group, “I always get drowsy during the service and I drift off to sleep.” That’s your experience. Somebody else might say, “I often cry during the service. It might be a hymn, it might be a prayer, but often I find myself crying during the service. Someone else might say, “Often, when I come into church, someone will make a rude
comment to me, and I feel so upset I don’t really hear very much after that.” That’s your experience. Someone might say, “The service is so inspiring to me that I leave trying to figure out who I can talk with about the service.”

And probably your experience of worship is different from anything I could guess. You may feel that God is very close to you as you sit in the service. You may come month after month and really not think about God at all. I will talk more about this on March 25.

Then on April 1, I will talk about what I mean by your experience of communion or fellowship in our church. Maybe you’re on a committee and when you sit with the other committee members, you feel a strong bond with them. You can just feel the fellowship. On April 15, I will talk more about experience of outreach or mission in preparation for our Faith Conversation that week.

I am working against a deadline, of course. It’s always that way in school. My advisor has informed me that he will go on Sabbatical leave on June 1, so the pressure is on me to get an awful lot of work done by that time.

It should be fun. Ministers always do a lot of guessing about how people in the pews experience worship and fellowship and mission. I will always do a lot of guessing about you. But this research project seems like a golden opportunity for me to listen to what your experience has been. It’s a great opportunity for me, and it should be fun for you, and helpful as well.
Appendix 2  March 26, 2012 Sermon
In Preparation for Faith Conversation I on Worship

You have been promised a meditation on worship today, and, Lord willing, that’s exactly what you are going to get. But it hit me that worship is an unfamiliar idea. Because worship is a posture, and a feeling, and a bodily action that is generally frowned on in our society. Let’s think about that.

The posture is a submissive posture, such as a bowed head, or even a bent knee. Submission is not a popular idea in our society. The feeling is that we are less than the one who is receiving our worship who is more than and even better than we are. That’s not a popular idea. The bodily actions include the heartfelt and enthusiastic reading together of at least a psalm, and maybe a couple prayers and responses. It includes the joyful singing of praise to God. And it includes a silent, submissive waiting for a word of call and instruction as the scriptures are read and explained.

We are called to all of this in the middle of our busy lives in a culture that has been stressing for centuries the value of skepticism. We are encouraged to ask hard questions and to think for ourselves. we are encouraged to see ourselves as just as good as anybody else. What happens to worship in a society committed to equality? What room is there for faith in a society that stresses proof, and evidence and logical argument as the source of truth? What room is there for stopping, sitting down, being quiet, listening in submission for a word from a god we have never seen? No wonder worship is an unfamiliar idea.

And that means we will feel pressured to redefine our worship services. Not think of them as services of worship to the triune God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. But as something else, like motivational session, or social events, or planning times for helpful
outreach into the community. Not that there’s anything wrong with any of that. There’s not. That’s all good. But none of that is necessarily worship. None of that is necessarily the main reason for living. Our main reason for living is to bring praise and thanksgiving and glory to God. Worship. “Praise and thanksgiving let everyone bring unto our Father for every good thing. Altogether joyfully sing.”

Let’s look at the parts of our Sunday morning worship service. Technically, it starts off with the Call to Worship. The Call to Worship is a boundary line between the ordinary things we do throughout the week, and the intentional, public, communal offering of worship to God in this hour on Sunday morning.

Then we sing a song of praise to God, something like “Great is thy faithfulness” or “There is a redeemer.” Then we join our hearts in a Prayer of Adoration. Adoration is just another word for worship. In this prayer, we remind ourselves why we do worship God. And that’s because God created us—and when we say that, we are not talking about issues related to geological or biological science, we are talking about our faith confession. God is our Creator. And God is our Redeemer. God is struggling against all that is wrong in our world, and God has promised that in the end, all that is wrong will be overcome and all will be made right. That’s why we worship God.

As soon as we remember that, we become aware of an embarrassing gap between what we were called to be and do last week, and what we actually did. So we confess our sins and ask God to forgive us. Then we are assured that, Yes, Good friends, believe the gospel. In Jesus Christ, we are forgiven.

Hearing that good news, we feel forgiven and reconciled to God, and we are eager to hear that word of call and instruction from God in the Scripture. After the children’s time,
we take time out to remember that Jesus was particularly concerned about little ones. We hear more scripture, and the preacher explains what that word means for us today, here and now. When we hear that, sitting here altogether, we are all eager and excited to get back to living in faith and obedience.

We join our hearts and minds in another prayer. A prayer of thanksgiving for all God’s gifts, and then a prayer of Intercession in which we lay before God the needs of our congregation, our community and our world. After that prayer, we are eager to respond. So we participate in a symbolic response, in which we give ourselves and all that we have back to God. We have the offering.

We sing a couple more songs of praise. We receive a charge to live faithfully—Go out into the world in peace to love and serve the Lord. And we receive the blessing of God. And the service ends.

Other normal parts of the service are the sacraments. In the Lord’s Supper, we publicly identify as part of the Body of Christ. We reach out in bodily action to take the bread and wine. We receive the benefits of the sacrifice of Jesus as we receive the body and blood of the Lord. Baptism is an exchange of promises between a person (or the person’s parents) and God. The exchange of promises initiates the person into the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church, the community of faith, the congregation of believers.

So, we have a sort of logical and neat structure to the worship service, which we experience as a body, as a group, bound by the commitments and love that make us one. At the same time, we experience it not only as that committed group, but also as unique individual people. Each person’s experience is different from that of anyone else, no matter how firm our commitment is.
One will come in, sit down, and barely notice one particular part of the service—maybe one of the prayers while someone sitting nearby is brought to tears by that same prayer.

Some of us are women and some are men, and that gender difference will be an important factor for some, while others are not even thinking of it.

Some will love the singing; others will wait for it to end.

Some will marvel at the beauty of this room and feel pulled into the artwork of the windows and the stories they stand for. Others will walk in and mainly notice the people here and the events of the service.

Some will spend the service time feeling powerful implications of what is being sung and prayed and read about on decisions they need to make in the next couple weeks. Others will really make little or no connection between the events of the service and things they need to do in the next little while.

Some will find the traditional Presbyterian worship style comfortable and helpful and others will miss the Anglican liturgy, the Catholic mass, or the Pentecostal spirit. Some will have come to this congregation from a different background, and will feel that difference as a lack of something important, or as a marvelous improvement.

Some will find the sacrament of communion deeply moving and get a powerful sense of the presence of God and the love of Jesus. Others will find the sacrament of communion just baffling and confusing, and will wonder what it’s really supposed to be about. Some will be disappointed and feel the sacrament has been oversold, that the actual event doesn’t live up to the rhetoric.
Some will feel frustrated by their desire to be texting and talking on the phone, while others will find the service time a wonderful relief from constant demands.

Some will feel drawn closer to others in the room; some will just be irritated by the way others in the room behave.

Some will feel liberated and inspired by the Word from Scripture. Others will feel their freedom restricted too much by the tradition.

Some will be constantly bothered by hearing things that seem very hard to believe. Such as the constant claim that God is present here with us, and that God loves you—like the way you are. Others will find those claims just normal.

Some of these differences go back to your earlier experience in life. Not only the religious tradition you come from but other aspects of your life as a child. You might ask yourself some questions about that. Like, who wielded the authority in your home of origin, where you grew up? Was the way authority was used in your home good for you, or was it mainly just painful? Was art noticed and appreciated in your home of origin? Were your parents people of integrity, or were you bothered by the gap between the way they talked and the way they lived? Did your parents listen to you, and care what you thought and felt? Or not so much? Your ability to trust and worship God is probably profoundly influenced by factors like those from your younger life.

Does it seem strange to hear that worship is the most important thing we are supposed to do in our lives? Can that be true? What does it mean? Does it mean that what you do in the room is more important than what you do all week at work? Or at home? No. What it means is that if you are here for worship, and if you get it, then what happens here as part of the life of this congregation of faith, will focus and shape everything else in your
That’s what it means to claim that our reason for being here is to bring praise and glory to God.

To God the Father, God the Son, and to God the Holy Spirit be all praise and glory and honor, now and always. AMEN
Appendix 3 April 1, 2012 Sermon
In Preparation for Faith Conversation II on Communion


You were promised a meditation on Communion/ Fellowship today, and, Lord willing, that’s exactly what you will get. Last Sunday, we said that Worship is an unfamiliar concept. That very unfamiliarity creates pressure on us to redefine our worship service, to see them not actually as services of worship of the Triune God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, but as something else: maybe as motivational sessions, or education, or social events, or planning times for helpful outreach into the community. Worship is unfamiliar because the posture of submission, and the feeling of being less than are not the sorts of things we like.

But this week, we get a topic that at first blush seems more comfortable. Fellowship? We know fellowship. Isn’t that the warm feeling you get when you’re with a group of people you’ve known for a long time? Old friends getting together to play cards over cookies and tea, and you share some of the local news? We know fellowship. Of course, realistically, when old friends get together, there’s more going on than the warm fuzzy feelings. Every group has its dynamics.

Well, fellowship within the Christian communion is not naïve. In the church, fellowship is not a simple notion. Maybe it’s not so much more user friendly than worship. We start with Paul’s teaching about the body of Christ. That’s a metaphor. It’s a word picture to help us think about the church. You are the Body of Christ. That’s a picture of unity in diversity. You’ve got this one thing, one body, made up of a lot of different parts. To get it, we need to think about a body. Let’s think about the body of Nathan Horton, all decked out in his Boston Bruins hockey gear, gliding gracefully up the ice. It all works
together nicely. One body, including many different parts. He’s got ears. He’s got eyes. But
the beauty of it is how efficiently and effectively those parts all work together as he skates
powerfully up the ice. You are the body of Christ.

The parts of your body really care about one another. If you come at me with a
hammer, and my hand is sitting on this oak desk, my brain is never going to say, Oh, that’s
no problem. He’s not going to hit me. He’s going to hit that hand. No. My brain always
cares just as much about the threat to the hand as it does about a threat to the brain. The
brain screams at the hand to get out of the way. It’s going to hurt my whole body if that
hammer hits my hand.

Yesterday, in Sanford FL, The Rev. Al Sharpton (OK, I have my questions about this
guy and the way he pays taxes, but anyway) he and Jesse Jackson led a rally to protest the
killing of Trayvon Martin. Al Sharpton made a speech, and he said, “If you hit US (he meant
black people) in Sanford, we feel it in Chicago, we feel it in Boston. He’s making the same
point. We are a body, he was saying. We are different, but we are all part of one body, and if
you hurt us in one part, we all hurt.

The second thing is the doctrine of the Trinity. God is three and yet God is one. God
is love and the love is just flowing around within God. The Father loves the Son, the Son
loves the Holy Spirit, the Holy Spirit loves the Father, and on and on. What’s more, there is
so MUCH love within God that there’s just too much. It cannot all be contained in God. It
overflows. And that overflow of love from God IS the creation. That’s what creation is: the
spilled over love. There was too much love. And we are the image of God, which means
love will be flowing all around through our congregation.
That all sounds quite sweet. All that unity in the Body of Christ. All that Love in the world. But if you watch the evening news, it doesn’t seem all that sweet. And if you look at the average Christian congregation, you wonder. The typical congregation is not so much known for overflowing love as for quarrelling and power games.

It’s all there in that embarrassing little story about James and John. They were huge admirers of Jesus. They thought Jesus was a real winner. They thought that when the story of Jesus would be written up, it would be a success story. Oh, yes, they knew there were some difficulties and problems right now. But with hard work and determination, it will all come out in success and recognition, power and wealth and glory and fame. They wanted to hitch their wagon to this star. They thought Jesus was the real deal.

And if you are lucky enough to be close with somebody who is headed on up to greater things, what do you do? Well, you probably try to get in on a bit of the glory. Try to nail down a position with the great one before others do. So, James and John try to do that. They sneak up and ask Jesus for a talk. And they ask him not to say anything to the others. And they say, Jesus, we can see you are fated for greater things that what’s happening right now. Could we just ask, would it be too much to ask (and don’t tell the other guys, but could we sit, one on your right and the other on your left when you finally break through into glory, when you’re on your throne in glory?

And of course the other guys find out and of course they’re mad, and the communion in the group is broken, and Jesus has to try to pull things together, so he calls them over, and has a little talk with them. He says, I know how you’re thinking, and in a way I don’t blame you, because that is the way people think. In heathen organizations, among the Gentiles, that’s what happens. Their rulers lord it over their underlings, and there’s that sort of power
arrangement. But that’s not how it is with us. The Son of Man (that’s me) came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.

The Apostles’ Creed says the church is the Communion of Saints. Saints are not people a cut above. Saints are forgiven sinners. Do you ever apologize to other people? Is that in your repertoire? Say, “I’m sorry. I was wrong?” because if you do—some do and some don’t—if you do, you know the warm feeling you get when you say, “I’m sorry” and the person smiles at you as if it’s OK. That’s a great feeling of reconciliation.

That’s what happens in church, if you stay with the program. We join our hearts in a prayer of confession, sometimes we speak together, sometimes I speak and you listen. And if you do listen and if you do think of the things you’ve done wrong in the past week, and then you hear the minister say, Good friends, believe the good news: In Jesus Christ we are forgiven! Then you know that warm glow! And that’s important for communion/fellowship in the congregation.

If that person over there drives me up a wall, and if I got that prayer of confession last Sunday, then I will look at her and say, I think she’s a sinner. Then I will remember, Oh, yeah, I’m a sinner too. And I imagine God loves her as much as God loves me. Oh, I feel a little better about her.

There are two mistakes we make: 1) is thinking that our church is fine. We’re fine. Because when we slip into that mistake, then we are blind to our own sins, and we fall out of the daily habit of repentance and confession of sin, and then we lose that good effect on our experience of communion.

2) is letting our hope in the return of the Lord slip onto the back burner. Just not think about it that often. Forget about it. Because then we start to think that what you see is
what you get. We only go around once, we confess, so grab for all the gusto you can get. 

And then our hope is gone and we get cynical. Do you ever get cynical? I do. Next time we’re feeling cynical, check how your hope about the return of the Lord is holding up. The Lord will return and make all things right.

There are some obstacles to communion and fellowship in the congregation. First is forgetting Paul’s teaching that we are the Body of Christ. Then I might forget that you are supposed to be different from me, and that difference reflects the different gifts you have received from the Holy Spirit. It’s not just to bug me. We are supposed to be working smoothly and well together like Nathan Horton’s body works on the ice.

Second is forgetting the Trinity, and all that love flowing around in the Trinity, Father to Son, Son to Holy Spirit, Holy Spirit to Father, and on. We are made in the image of God; there should be a lot of love flowing around in our congregation.

Third is fear. Fear is a big problem. Lots of people in congregations are afraid of other people in their congregations. People are afraid to do what they believe they should do for fear of other people. There are maybe two kinds of people in a congregation: those who are afraid and so do what they think others want them to do, and those who can smell that fear and move in to enforce their will on the fearful ones. Of course, what we’re talking about is the bullied and the bullies. Bullies are afraid too. They are usually people who are feeling pushed around in some other part of their lives, and want to push you around here. Those who are being bullied usually know it. They know who they’re afraid of, and what they do that they don’t want to do. I’m not sure about bullies. They probably know what they are doing, but in some cases, they may not. If you are not sure, watch yourself for a
month or so, and see if you can become aware of enforcing your will on others. If you are doing that, Quit it.

If you are being bullied, you need to quit that as well. Maybe just naming it as bullying will give you the strength to resist and get your life back. Maybe you will have to call out to God for help. Maybe you will need somebody to help you. You can come to me, and I will try to help. Maybe you and I can pray. Maybe you and I can sit down with the bully.

That cycle of fear is really hard on the communion in the body. But scripture says, Perfect love casts out fear. If you can realize that the bully is probably afraid too, maybe you can feel more love. Or, maybe it has to start with love of yourself and of others who are being bullied.

The fourth thing is being unsure what we are supposed to be doing as a congregation. I’m starting to trespass on the topic for two weeks from now: Mission. But often people in congregations do not know what we are called to do; what we are supposed to be doing. When that happens, it’s easier to get at one another’s throats. Sometimes, leaders in organizations create artificial projects—let’s build a room on!—just to get the unifying effect of working together on something you have decided to do together. That’s one good effect of putting on a Ukrainian Dinner. But we really need to figure out what we are supposed to be doing. Working together on something we believe in can have a wonderful effect on communion/fellowship.

And there’s all sorts of little obstacles to communion:

Always assuming my way is better than yours.

Assuming I know what you think without asking you.
Expecting you to get out of my way, rather than me getting out of your way.

Expecting you to always be at your best, while allowing myself to have off days.

Talking to a third party about what you’ve done wrong instead of talking with you.

Assuming you are just weird instead of trying to figure out your special gift from God.

Assuming fellowship means spending time around people like me, instead of being open to everyone in the congregation.

It goes on and on.

I like what Paul says: Your life in Christ makes you strong, and his love comforts you. You have fellowship with the Spirit, and you have kindness and compassion for one another.
Appendix 4  Sermon April 15
In preparation for Faith Conversation III on Mission.

This is the third of three sermons in support of the Faith Conversations being held as part of my research project at the Toronto School of Theology. The first was at the end of March; it was on worship and it walked us through the steps in a typical Sunday morning worship service. The second—on communion or fellowship—was two weeks ago. It suggested that IF we can imagine ourselves more as the Body of Christ, and IF we can imagine God more as a trinity of love, flowing and overflowing, and IF we can reduce the level of fear in the congregation—mainly fear of one another, the fear that arranges us in a hierarchy of more powerful and less powerful people, the fear that produces and network of bullying inside most organizations—we can improve the quality of communion, fellowship in our congregation.

You have been promised a meditation on Mission today, and, Lord willing, that’s exactly what you will get. Mission is a tricky word in a church context. Like communion is a tricky word. I discovered that “communion” does not automatically convey the idea I wanted it to convey. Communion is the warm bond that exists among people who share faith in Jesus Christ in common. “Common” and “Communion” are related words.

To understand “mission” let me tell you about a television program from a few years (decades) ago, 1966 to 1973 called, helpfully, MISSION: Impossible. The main character was called Jim Phelps and he headed the IMF, the Impossible Missions Force. At the top of each hour, Jim Phelps would be directed to some obscure location where he would find a cassette tape which he would pop into a tape player and listen to. It always contained the words, “Your mission, Jim, should you choose to accept it, is…” and then would follow the description of the impossible task or job the higher-ups were assigning to the IMF. Should
you choose to accept it! That’s what a mission is: a job or task assigned to someone. As members of the Church of Jesus Christ, we have been assigned a mission.

To take another step toward understanding “mission” let me tell you four traditional definitions of the mission of the church which are inadequate:

1. The mission of the church is to save people from eternal damnation in hell.
2. The mission of the church is to enhance the power, influence of the church in society.
3. The mission of the church is to share blessings of Western culture with other cultures.
4. The mission of the church is to turn the world into the Kingdom of God.

You can hear a kernel of truth in each of these definitions. But they are inadequate. (If you listened carefully to us, you would probably think that our choice would be #2: The mission of Knox is to enhance the power and influence of Knox within Dunnville?)

A minute ago, in connection with the lesson from Acts, I said the foundation of what we do is what we are. Those members of the early church shared all their possessions in common BECAUSE they were of one heart and one soul. There was not a needy person among them. How’s that for unity based on shared energy—the Holy Spirit? The apostles gave powerful testimony to the resurrection. They told their story; their story included something about the risen Christ. And great grace was upon all of them.

What you do reflects who you are. As followers of Jesus, we are the image of God. God is a Trinity of love, flowing, flowing, overflowing. God’s overflowing love is not only God’s creation, but also, God has a mission to the world, a redeeming mission. We are
called to participate in God’s mission to the world. Jesus said: As the Father sends me, so I send you.

I see two problems: one small, one big. The small problem is figuring out what difference it makes that we are to do mission in the 21st C, while the stories we read in the Bible are from the 1st C. When the apostles told their story, a story that included some reference to the risen Christ, people in their time did think that they were nuts. But they did not think: Oh, no. Not this tired, old story about the resurrection. When we tell our story, if our story is more than that we were born somewhere, went to school, got a job, got married, had a family, etc., etc., If our story actually includes something about the risen Christ, people we are talking to will already have heard a story that sounds a little bit like that, and maybe they will have heard it from some greasy, self-centered TV preacher who is manipulative and guilty of all sorts of moral failings. That’s a problem we have in our time that the apostles did not have in theirs. We watched The Big Bang Theory on TV the other night. The main character is this brilliant physicist who is socially awkward, and his mother comes for a visit, and she’s a Christian. They have lots of fun with that. They imagine that she believes the world is flat, and she comes out with all sorts of stupid, prejudiced statements about other races and so on. There’s the popular view of Christians: they’re idiots. Our son, Marcus, went off to university in Ottawa, and his new friends were puzzled. They said, What is this, Marcus. You seem OK, but you say you’re a Christian. And you’re not an idiot. We don’t get it!

The small problem is figuring out what it means that we live in the 21st C, when the models we have in the Bible stories were living 2000 years ago. It’s a problem.
The big problem is that we are torn between two commitments. We ARE committed to Jesus Christ. We are followers of Jesus. We see in Jesus a man who reveals God more clearly than anyone else ever has. We confess along with Thomas: My Lord and my God! But. But. We want to be realistic. We don’t want to do anything that threatens our comfort. We don’t want to do anything that jeopardizes our security. So, when Jesus says, If you want to gain your live, you’ll have to lose your life, uh oh. And, I’m embarrassed to say that we do not have very many models in Dunnville of people who drop everything to follow Jesus on the path that leads to the cross. We don’t have many models of people who drop everything to walk the journey toward meekness (really? Meekness?) and mercy (which is a decision that instead of laughing at weak and foolish people, we will try to help them) and peacemaking (which involves working really hard—while telling the truth—to get along with people, AND to help other people get along with each other) and justice (which will involve us in speaking out against careful public policy designed to protect the privileges of the comfortable classes on the backs of the underclass). We WANT those privileges!

When we GET IT, when we catch on to the idea that God is into the kind of tough love that will threaten our privileges, and when we decide to participate in God’s mission to the world, then we’re ready to struggle together to understand and embrace our mission.

Your mission, Knox, should you choose to accept it…

So, are we strangers to mission? No. Knox is a church with a long history of mission. I wrote about this in one of those long papers I had to hand in at TST. We would start with the Dr. Margaret Strang Women’s Missionary Society with a long history of holding mission education events and raising money for mission projects of the PCC. Then the Mission and Outreach Team which has traveled to poor countries in Central America to help
people there AND carried out similar projects in this local community. We used to run a Vacation Bible School every year.

Now we have a Youth Group with more people who are not Knox members than that are. We jumped enthusiastically into the project to bring the Lotshaka family from Namibia to Canada. We run a Community Kitchen with education in meal planning, shopping, cooking, and social opportunities for developmentally delayed adults. They take several meals home to their freezers after each meeting. We have an active commitment to Meals on Wheels. We are involved with the Anna Melick Snack program. We have a small commitment to the Salvation Army Food Bank. We have always encouraged an active community chaplaincy by the minister at Knox. I’m leaving out lots.

As I list these things, you can see that some of them are “in full swing”—like Meals on Wheels and the Community Kitchen—while others have died out, like the Vacation Bible School, and others are in decline, such as the Anna Melick Snack program where we used to have people there on location two days a week, and now we just give the $500 each year. And what would we say about the Mission/Outreach Team? It’s not dead; is it alive? What would we say?

So, where are we at? How are we doing? We are not strangers to Mission at Knox. Whenever I list it off, I find it to be a good number of activities, some past, some present. That’s good. Shall we be honest with ourselves? If an objective, uninvolved person visited us for 3 or 4 weeks and gave us an honest opinion, they might make two critical comments: 1. Is our tendency NOT to have a clear word of explanation to go along with the good things we do. We haven’t sorted out that difference between mission in the 1st C and mission in the 21st C. We have not become comfortable with confessing our faith. Confessing it. As part of
our story. And, 2. It would probably be the sense of this objective observer that we are not passionate about mission. We have people who are, but as a congregation, we are not passionate about mission. Which probably relates to being torn between two commitments.

So. Hey. There’s a wake up call. For you. For me. For us. We will have to relax those tightly curled fingers gripping that comfort, that security, those routines, if we are to step up more securely onto that path leading to the cross. If we are to take that next, scary step into that swollen River Jordan.

Have you noticed that I never actually say what that next scary step is? Why do you think that is? Because I don’t know what it is? That’s right. No one can tell a congregation what they are called to do. They can only find out by an honest struggle to understand and to embrace that calling.

But, hey. I’ll drop a couple hints about what we could do to move closer to understanding and embracing our calling into mission. Mission is moving outside the walls, but the first hint I’ll drop is for INSIDE the walls. 1. Put more umph into the Sunday morning service. When in doubt, choose to attend rather than that other thing you could do on Sunday morning. When we drew names out of the hat for the group of participants in the research project, we had 90 names of people over 18 who are somewhat regularly involved here at Knox. As you’ve noticed, we don’t often have 90 people here. So, nudge Sunday church attendance a little higher on your priority list. And when you are here, get into it as much as you can. Read a little louder, sing a little more enthusiastically, and get into it. Like some of the folks at St. Paul’s get into the sacrament on Good Friday. That’s good mission prep. 2. There’s a significant group of people in Dunnville who should be here at Knox on Sunday and are not. That group is made up of two smaller groups: people who have moved
into town in the past 5 or 10 years, are inclined to church attendance, and are not attending anywhere. And people who used to come here and don’t any longer. Some of them have definitely made up their minds; some have not. From that combined group, there are people who would come here if they found out that we really care if they do or not. Not for our sake, not to make our church stronger, but for their sake. If we were convinced that their lives would be better if they were here on Sunday morning hearing the Good News of God’s love, their lives would be better. If we convinced them that we cared, a number of them would join us. And 3. Start a new income stream. If each of us would start giving $5 or $10 a month to the Benevolent Fund, and lobbying the Session to inspire the Benevolent Committee to look for a good destination for this significant, small, regular amount of money to head out of Knox toward some people in need—the obvious, safe suggestion would be the Salvation Army Food Bank—that would be a possible way to move closer to understanding and embracing our mission.

In conclusion: There is a problem in Ontario education that we should import into our congregation. The problem is standardized testing that makes teachers “teach to the test.” Smart, committed teachers are distracted from their good ideas about what kids need to know for their lives ahead so they can get them ready for the literacy test. That’s a bad thing. But what if we started studying toward the test? The test is described in Matthew 25. The nations drawn up before the Son of Man and tested/judged on the basis of what priority they’d given to reaching out toward the margins of society: to the poor, the blind the lame, the widows and orphans, the little people. If we started studying toward that test, it would propel us toward our mission.
God loves the world. God loves you, and me. God wants us to communicate God’s love to the world, and especially to the people who are on the margins of society.
Appendix 5 Questions and Stories
Used in Preparation for Faith Conversations I, II, and III

Worship Questions

1. What does the word “worship” mean to you?
2. Do you think worship is a likely experience if God seems far away from you?
3. Do you experience worship as part of your participation in church?
5. In your mind, is the experience of worship connected with anything that happens during other times of the week?
6. Is the experience of worship connected with certain things that you think or believe? …or is worship unrelated to thought and belief?
7. Do you find that worship is important for you? …for our congregation?
8. Are there things about our society (such as our sense that everybody is just as good as everybody else) that you think might make “worship” a strange idea?
9. Do you ever imagine changes in church services that might improve your experience of worship?

Stories in Preparation for Faith Conversations

Worship: 1. During the hymn after the sermon, Joanne was standing half way back in the middle section. It was #358 “There is a redeemer” and suddenly she began to feel emotional. It was when we were all singing the refrain, “Thank you, O my Father, for giving us your Son, and leaving your Spirit till your work on earth is done.” It wasn’t just the words of the refrain, which she thought later were actually pretty meaningful—seeing God as a father-figure who had given something important to her and to us. And it wasn’t just the music, which is the kind of music Joanne prefers. And it certainly wasn’t that the congregation was doing such a marvelous job of singing. But somehow, the whole experience, within the context of things that had been going on in her life in the past month and a half—trouble at work, some really great stuff with a couple of her children, good stuff and bad. Somehow the whole experience of standing there with the congregation, singing that wonderful hymn, having just heard a sermon that spoke to her personally, it just suddenly overwhelmed her. And part of it was a powerful feeling of connection with God, and that connection being important and good. I guess it was an experience of worship.
Worship: 2. Archie was surprised to discover as he was walking out of church that he had been distracted through the whole service. This morning was the first chance in about three weeks for him to sit still without having to do anything. He found his mind racing over a whole series of problems he has been facing over the past months: problems at work, problems with teenaged children, problems with aging parents, and a couple possibly serious health issues of his own. As he reached the sidewalk outside the church, he tried to remember what hymns they had sung, what passages had been read, what the sermon had been about. He drew a complete blank. He began to wonder if he should have just stayed home where he could have at least got some work done. Was this an experience of worship?

Communion or Fellowship Questions for Faith Conversation II

1. What does the word “communion” mean to you?
2. Do you feel welcomed and at home in the congregation?
3. Do you feel understood and cared about?
4. Have you had occasion to receive concrete help from others in the congregation?
5. Have you been able to offer concrete help to others?
6. Do you feel a special bond with others in the congregation?
7. Do you feel a connection between that bond and the faith you share with others?
8. Do you feel that there are adequate occasions provided for you to meet with others?
9. Are these occasions set up in a way that encourages sharing and fellowship?
10. What changes have occurred in the congregation that you think improve your sense of communion with others? …or undermine that communion?
11. What changes can you imagine in congregational life that might increase your experience of communion and shared faith?
Stories in Preparation for Faith Conversations II

Fellowship Story 1: Frank is really pleased with the new round of Fellowship Potluck Dinners at Knox. For one thing, there seems to be a sort of good natured competition among participants, and Frank thinks friendly competition reaches to a level of engagement deeper than most of what goes on at church. Secondly, Frank thinks of himself as a bit of an amateur cook, and he likes to dream up dishes that others might enjoy. He also likes to think against the grain a bit, and so when they announce a vegetarian meal, he likes to take a bold beef roast swimming in gravy, and just sit back and watch reactions. There’s more he likes about them. The Community Kitchen people are invited and there are always a few of them present, and that adds an element that’s often missing from the fellowship offered by a small congregation of mainly middle class people like us. He likes to sit with some of the community kitchen folk and shoot the breeze and get their perspective on things. And, those dinners give an opportunity to sit and talk in ways that there is usually no real chance for in other church activities. He’s had occasion to find out that some of the people who look kind of stuffy are really pretty interesting and have senses of humor that Frank enjoys quite a bit. Once Frank was asked to be on the cleanup team, and he found that was quite a bit of fun, too, and they were finished by 8:30 or so. He has become quite a fan of the fellowship pot luck dinners. They seem like the best possibility for beating the problem of people in the congregation not knowing one another very well. They seem like the best possibility for, well, fellowship.

Fellowship Story 2: Jill is having a problem with the whole idea of fellowship in this congregation. Her main problem is a guy named Hank. Hank is a great guy; he’s done a lot for the congregation. He’s been very helpful in sorting out the congregation’s finances. He used to work in a bank, and before he came, the finances were a constant low grade panic for anybody who was actually willing to look at them. But Hank was able to get the financial statements to make sense, and now things are much calmer at Annual General Meetings. That’s all great, but Jill has noticed
that Hank gets all worked up about little repair needs around the church. He will see a burned out bulb and go ballistic. He will rush up to some member of the board of managers or rush up to the minister five minutes before the service, and he’s all worked up about this burned out bulb, or a piece of carpet that needs to be tacked down, or paint chipped off the wall. And all of a sudden, what was a nice, calm Sunday morning is full of tension and anger. Jill has watched one of these Hank-attacks on several occasions, and now, whenever she comes into church, she tries to avoid Hank for fear that she’s going to witness another scolding. It really undermines her efforts to help create an attitude of fellowship in the congregation. She’s wondering if she can find a way to slip one of those copies of “Holy Manners” into his shirt pocket without being noticed. Fat chance, she’s thinking.

III Mission or Outreach Questions

1 What does the word “mission” mean to you?
2 Do you see mission as part of what our church does?
3 In what ways does the congregation reach out to the community and the world?
4 Are you personally involved in any of these efforts to reach out?
5 Do these outreach efforts seem related to your faith experience or commitment?
6 Do these outreach efforts involve verbal communication of a message about Jesus?
7 Do the outreach efforts provide adequate opportunity for your Christian mission?
8 What changes have you seen in the church’s mission efforts through the time you have been part of the congregation?
9 Do you think of yourself as being strongly in favor of mission? …strongly opposed? Do you ever imagine changes that would make mission more satisfying for you?

Stories in Preparation for Faith Conversations III

Mission/Outreach: 1. It was while Jim was standing around downstairs at coffee time that he realized how much it meant to him to be at the community kitchen last week. Several folks were laughing over coffee about a couple things that happened last Monday while the cooking was going on. Jim found himself remembering how good it had been working alongside Roxy preparing meatballs for one of the meals that would be going home with the “clients.” It has been bothering Frank for a couple years that his whole life seems geared to his own comfort and his own security. He has been seeing the world more and more as a fairly scary place with dangerous trends in
international politics and economics. That sense of danger has made him more and more concerned
with his own life, and a couple months ago, it just hit him that he’s become pretty ego-centric. He’s
been wondering if he any good to anybody but himself. He’s been thinking that his life is shaped
more by his fears than by the faith he has always confessed in God. Then he heard about the
community kitchen where members of the church gather once a month to plan menus, shop for food,
and then get together again to cook meals, and share a lunch together with the “clients” as they call
the developmentally delayed adults for whom the community kitchen is run. He’s been part of that
program for a few months now, and it has been helping to fill that big gap in his life, making him
feel like there’s more to him that looking out for #1.

**Mission/Outreach: 2.** Olive is a little bothered by constant references to the Lotshaka
family in Namibia. Olive is seventeen, and impressed with the Dream Program that runs through the
high school in Dunnville. They take kids on trips to third world countries, and work toward doing
something about important issues here at home. It seems to Olive as if the church is always “too
little, too late” as far as outreach is concerned. She can’t tell that the people in the church really care
about anything beyond the walls of “their” church and the congregation. They do a few little things,
but there’s no passion in it. It just seems like they do a couple things to be able to say they have an
outreach program, but if she was looking for a way to reach out to people less fortunate than herself
and her family, she would be more likely to go to the Salvation Army or to the Dream program than
look for anything in our congregation. Some of the stuff that’s talked about at church sounds good,
but it’s just not convincing because it’s not backed up by anything really passionate. It’s like not
very many people at church really care about outreach enough to reach beyond their own comfort
zones. Not that I’m really any better myself, Olive is thinking…
Appendix 6 Faith Conversation I (Transcribed)

Franklin: Probably a number of you noticed that we have a new person tonight, Roxanne Jonas. Is there anybody here that you don’t know, Roxanne?

Roxanne: Indicates the man to her right.

Franklin: Sam Marple

Roxanne: (laughs) Hi, Sam.

Franklin: Anybody else, Roxanne?

Roxanne: That’s it!

Franklin: I thought if you said yes, we’d just have gone around … but that’s fine, that’s good. And I will remind you as Amy or I told you and it was mentioned in Mike’s letter, If you feel uncomfortable, or if at any time during the process, (someone interrupts—“how about now?”), and someone else, (…so we all leave!) (General laughter…)

Henry: Somehow that might not be good…

Amy: That’s why Mike’s sitting in front of the door.

Mike: No, that’s important. That’s important that you know that you are free; like if this turns out to be something that you just say (gestures discomfort “Ooh!”) you can leave. And there’ll be nobody looking at you funny.

Franklin: You have that right at any time. You can just leave. Keep that in mind.

Karen: and then would you add somebody else?

Franklin: Uh, we’d have to have that…

Mike: …cross that bridge…

Franklin: And the other thing: tonight we are going to be videotaped, and audio recorded in the middle there, as well as the two cameras, and hopefully, we’ll get used to
that very quickly and it won’t be a problem. The Holy Manners are up on the end wall there, and I’m sure you’ve all had a look at them, and there’ll not be anything that will be surprising, or be difficult, or that I’ll have to enforce, or anything like that. And can everybody speak up so we are sure to get your voice. OK?

Mike: (to Franklin) And that includes you, Buddy!

Franklin: OK!

Mike: I’ll just be a fly on the wall.

Franklin: Yeah, the fly’s talking! He’s a fly on the wall until I need him. OK, as I explained a week ago, we will start with a sort of a little warm up, and if you just like to take a minute or two and say how you feel about the research, why you agreed to take part in it, what you think will come out of it maybe, just some kind of a general statement about how you feel about what we’re doing here, and I think we’d start with Henry and go around the circle this way.

Henry: Why’s I participate… Partly because I didn’t have a decent reason not to. The problem with surveys is if you just say no, they just go on, and you just go through everybody, all the people, uh, I was also interested in where it goes, what’s going to happen with it. I’m trying to think what was the next question…

Franklin: …it doesn’t matter, what do you think will come out of it, er…

Henry: Uh, basically from the mandate … what I read, is to try and understand what this community is about, and what makes it tick, and try to make that go forward.

Franklin: OK. Thank you. Angie?

Angie: OK. Why did I say I’d participate? I’m not really sure. I think by the end of this, the group will be closer and will certainly know each other better, which will be
helpful. It’s part of participating in the congregation and maybe helping the congregation to grow closer to God and to each other. And it’s also helping Mike and that’s a good thing.

I’m done. (laughs)

    Franklin: Thank you. Sam?
    Sam: well, once I had to do a thesis myself, about wood drying, and I know how hard it is to get people to participate, so that’s why I joined in.

    Franklin: OK. Anything you feel about the research?
    Sam: It’s like all research. It will be put in the cupboard somewhere. (general laughter, Sam chuckles.)

        (One participant) That’s positive thinking! (more laughter)
        Sam: That’s what happens to most of it.

    Franklin: OK. Lysianne?

    Lysianne: My mind is a blank! I’m curious. I’d like to help Mike. As an English teacher, I noticed that five of the questions were “yes” or “no” questions. That means all we have to answer is one word! (laughter around) That makes life a lot simpler. But I hope that I can find more answers in my head as we go along, stimulated by the others. No, I think it’s a really interesting project, and I do want to be a part of it. And do whatever I can, however small, to just help it go.

    Franklin: Thank you. Roxanne?

    Roxanne: I joined because I got asked (laughter). But research needs people! It’s just like when somebody calls you on the phone, once in a while, you answer them because somebody’s got to do it. How do you get anything done, otherwise? And I thought it would be a fun way to get to know some people.
Franklin: Do you have any feelings about the research? …the form it’s taking?

Roxanne: No. (smiles)

Franklin: Margaret?

Margaret: I sort of made a pact with myself, that I’d leave my name in the hat, and if it got drawn, then it was meant to be, and I had faith that whatever came of it, I would try to participate and “help Mike” I think that… I agree with the thought that was going around, that it’s important to have this kind of research, and quantitative (sic) research is probably the most difficult, you don’t just play with numbers, you play with thoughts and feelings, and I think it’s a good group, and it will be productive.

Franklin: OK. Elizabeth? Elizabeth?

Elizabeth: Well, I did want to turn it down, but when I was told it would help Mike and his research, I decided, well, what have I got to lose? I thought it would probably be interesting, to maybe learn something, and to help the congregation, help Mike to help the congregation… and, leave it at that. (smiles)

Franklin: OK. Katie?

Katie: I’m kind of in the same feeling as everybody else. I wanted to help Mike with his project, and I also wanted to make myself step outside my comfort zone, like Hank was saying last time, too. And I think it’s an interesting concept, because everybody comes to church for a different reason, and gets something different out of it, and I’m happy with what I am getting out of the service, but I’m sure I can concentrate on other aspect of it and get something else out of it, so, I think it will be an interesting project for everybody.

Franklin: OK. Thank you very much. Now we’re going to the second round. You will have a little more time, I’ve allotted six minutes per person, you don’t have to pad your
answer for six minutes (general laughter) if you don’t feel good about that, but you’re to try
to talk about your personal experience of worship, and you can do it as it relates to the
questions that were circulated, or the stories that Mike prepared, or his sermon yesterday,
and what he said about worship, so…

Mike (*sotto voce*) …or none of the above…

Franklin: …or none of the above, just talk about how you experience worship and I
think the questions sort of related, inside or outside of church. So, Henry?

Henry: Hot seat, eh?

Sam: …first person has it hardest!

Henry: I was just thinking, worship… the way it was described to us, the idea
…communicating with God. As God is God and we are lesser than God, obviously, uh, and,
church in itself the service, what I find is that I learn a lot, and it’s not every time, there’s
always little nuggets, things that will hit you, or if there’s a Bible reading that you’ve read
before, it will trigger another thought, right?, and that’s the thing I like about the Bible. You
read it, and, like the 10th time, you find something new about it, right, the same pages, right?
Um, so in that, and also the community as well… The thing I find through the rest of the
week is, for me, uh, I was just reading for the youth group, we were reading 1st Peter, the
section that goes basically, be humble or God will make you humble. That’s always been my
weakness, is, you get to a certain point in your profession, and sort of you don’t trust God so
much, you do it yourself, and you find very quickly, he’ll just stand back and let you
flounder, unless you make it clear that he is in control, and you’re just moving forward,
right? So, I find, during the week, that’s basically what I’m into all the time, is a constant
reminder of that. As well as, hey, giving him praise. The thing is, what I do at work is
technical, technically challenging, so you have to be sharp and you have to think about what you do, and a lot of the time, hey, it wasn’t me; you know, God moved me along in the right direction. That’s how I got where I needed to go. And the thing is, is, work is my mission field. Cause you end up talking to people for one thing or another. So, those kinda how I see worship. Uh, same with, you know, financial, uh, number of years ago, somebody challenged us, I don’t know if it was a talk, or whatever, “Is your money your money? Or is it God’s money and you’re the steward of the money?” Right? It’s two different, if you look at it, it’s two different really two different scenarios, right? Yeah, between Sandra and I, it became, yeah, it’s God’s money and we’re the steward of it, right, so you have to pay attention to what you’re doing with it. And, it’s worked out very well for us. When we’re short and stuff, things have happened, miraculously. So, that sort of covers, I think, most of the questions that I saw there, so…

Franklin: So, your experience of worship is while you’re at work…

Henry: As well as here, yeah.

Franklin: And when you’re dealing with your financial situation, that’s part of worship?

Henry: Yeah. Basically, the more you get into it, I find, you know, there’s very little part of your life that isn’t, you know, if you start getting connected with God, and how… I guess it’s perspective, but I kind of look at it, I’m going forward, doing stuff, it’s not under my power… if that makes sense…

Mike: So, you’re saying that you do feel connected with God?

Henry: Oh, very much! A lot of time, I’m praying, one way or another, pray either “Thanks!” or “Help!” (chuckles).
Franklin: Do you feel connected with God in church?

Henry: Yes! Very much so, and also, is, it’s funny, you see, sometimes it’s through other people, indirectly, …you’re not … Everybody’s probably felt the warm, fuzzy feeling, you do something, and you don’t claim it or whatever, you get this warm, fuzzy feeling in the back, right? And if you brag, it’s all gone, right? That’s just how it kinda works. But it’s funny when you talk to people at church, and it’s like, “God put those words in your mouth. I mean, they may not have realized it but it meant something, really hit you, that drove you around, so, yeah…

Franklin: OK.

Henry: Are they you? Oh, there it is…

Franklin: Angie?

Angie: Um. I guess, like Henry, worship for me is communicating with God. whether I’m sad, or angry, or upset or hurt, or just have questions, or just really happy and thankful that He’s (gestures upward) in my life. Worship has many different forms… for me. For me personally, there’s been a difference in worship for the time I just went to church because that’s what you did, you went to church, and a time that I actually come to know God and invited him into my life, and became personal, then worship became a more intimate friendship. Like Henry, I find my job is my mission field in many different ways, uh, I’ve been able to pray with a number of my customers, we’ve been able to laugh, we’ve been able to do a lot of things together, there’s a connection there that I don’t think I’d have been able to have without God, well, I know I wouldn’t have it without God in my life, they minister to me in many ways…

Mike: Can I interrupt. Can I just say to the group that you care for people’s hair…?
Angie: Oh! I’m a hair dresser. I have a shop in my house, but I also go to people’s houses, to shut ins, and I also do the hospital. Like right now, I have a customer that I’ve had for at least ten years, and she came every morning, Friday at 9:00. She had progressed to the point in her life where she wasn’t able to come because of arthritis, so I’ve gone to her home every Friday morning at 9:00, for the past 3, 4 years, she’s now in the hospital, long term care, I go there, every Friday morning, 9:00, that’s our time. I grab a couple of Timmies, and life is the same for us, no matter, about the surroundings, and I have a connection to her family because of that. To me, that’s all part of worship. One of the questions here is, “Do you imagine changes in the church service that might improve your experience?” Um, I guess we’re supposed to be brutally honest or everything, while we’re here…

Mike: Yes.

Angie: OK, I have found coming from a different background, I’ve really found a Presbyterian church very, very hard, very (gestures two hands describing narrow confines) I don’t know what’s the word, the liturgy, I’ve found that really, really, really, hard many, many, many times. And it didn’t make a lot of sense to me, but I have to say, Mike’s sermon on Sunday really, really spoke to me, and sort of all made sense. It’s like this thing, when you come to worship, you come to God, and you praise him, and then you thank him, and you confess your sins, and it all made sense …

Franklin: that is worshiping in church, what we do in church in terms of how that relates to worship?

Angie: Yeah, I mean like, the whole service… Lots of times for me, it’s like, there’s no life to it; it’s just a bunch of words that you go through, just read all these things and go home. Lots of times, I find that really hard. Sunday clarified a lot of stuff for me. It really
spoke to me. And one of the passages of scripture we read that was in the lectionary specifically spoke to me, because of some decisions that Felix and I are in the process of making; it was like Oh! Wow! You know, is God really just saying that to somebody else, or can I really apply that? So, I’m waiting for him to clarify that in my own life. And, I’d like to see some more contemporary music because I find some of the hymns really, really boring. (General laughter)

   Sam: I love the hymns!
   Angie: Some of the old, old hymns. Some of them are like just (grimaces).
   Sam: The old hymn book was that way, I thought.
   Angie: The old hymn book was, yeah, I liked better…
   Sam: Really!! Oh, I’m jumping in…
   Angie: I’m done! There you go!
   Franklin: I just have a question. Do you see worship as God communicating with you? Is that part of worship? I’m just mentioning that about when the Bible verse sort of spoke to you.

   Angie: Yeah, yeah. I think it’s a two way communication.
   Franklin: And that’s an important part of worship?
   Angie: Yes.
   Franklin: OK. Thank you, Angie.
   Angie: And during the week; not just on Sunday. OK. I’m done now.
   Franklin: OK. Sam?

   Sam: I was a… I came here as a kid, when I was, I was probably baptized here, and I left when I was about 14, for reasons that weren’t really important, but were at the time. And
then 34 years later, I came back, because of a pair of Jehovah’s Witnesses (shows emotion, as others chuckle, and Sam struggles to control emotions)

Franklin: Do you want a minute, and we’ll go on?..

Sam: It’s all right.

Franklin: Are you all right?

Sam: I have panic attacks and if I don’t control myself I’ll be out on the floor. And I’m bipolar, so,

Franklin: Do you want to go on?

Sam: Mm. I think I’m all right.

Franklin: You’re all right?

Sam: Yeah. I came back, to (struggles with emotion) I don’t know, had a big epiphany here, whatever you want to call it, and I came to visit Mike and we had a discussion, and I came back, and he said, Are you going to come back? And I said, Well, I could try it. And that first day I came back to discover God, and (struggles with emotion) the only thing I could find were the kids. That really touched me at that time, but since, there’s always something, that, I don’t know. Now the music is more important than it was at the beginning, and it changes over time, what moves you. (Struggles, smiles) Now you can ask me a question. (general laughter).

Franklin: So, so, would you say your emotional response is an important part of worship for you?

Sam: Uh, my emotions are, when you’re bipolar, you can go high and low, so…

Franklin: Hmm.
Sam: And the medication helps but it doesn’t always work. So it’s always hard to tell what’s emot… what’s, like these worship ones (refers to the short stories that had been handed out as preparation for the session) are about the same thing, about having highs and lows, the stories, you kinda laugh at them, cause I do that every other day! (general laughter, and Sam chuckles)

Mike: Do you still enjoy the children?

Sam: Oh, yeah. You moved them over (to the other side of the sanctuary) I didn’t like that. (general laughter)

Mike: I got pressure from people on the other side! (more laughter) We need em up front (indicating facing the congregation.)

Franklin: Do you feel that there’s worship outside of church?

Sam: Oh, yeah! Like I saw a fox on the beach today, and that’s…amazing, cause they’re usually very shy, but it was just, I don’t know. (laughs) Things like that. And the countryside, I think you’re more in touch with God than … especially when there’s nobody around, I think Jesus always liked to go to lonely places (shows emotion)…

Franklin: OK. Is there any part of the story, or any questions that you can relate your feelings of worship to? Or your experience of worship to?

Sam: I don’t get you.

Franklin: Well, the two stories,

Sam: Oh, the stories…

Franklin: I thought you made reference to…
Sam: Yeah, I did. Well, like the bottom one, about, some days, like, the check engine light comes on in your car, that’s all you’re thinking about the whole time, what’s going on! How much is it going to cost, it throws your whole…

Franklin: your whole church time?

Sam: Yeah, your whole church time, it’s kind of just, it’s always buzzing around in your head…

Franklin: Does that mean there’s no worship that day?

Sam: The songs take it away for me.

Franklin: The last sentence in that story is, “Was this an experience of worship?”

When the guy came out of church and said, “I don’t know what went on in there! I was just worried about all that stuff going on in my head.” Like you were worrying about your engine light. Is that an experience of worship, or do you say, like, well, maybe next week.

Sam: To me it’s an experience of worship. But I don’t know. I don’t know if it truly is.

Franklin: Well, we’re talking about your experience of worship.

Sam: Yeah, for me it is.

Franklin: It’s no uh it doesn’t matter what somebody else thinks. You’re the one that’s experiencing it.

Franklin: OK. Lysianne?

Lysianne: I’m kind of a bit of a fraud. Because, here I am. All my life I’ve gone to church, every Sunday in my life, practically, I’ve gone to church. I’ve been a missionary in Africa, I’ve been a missionary in Jamaica, I’ve done everything related to the church, partly because I’m married to a minister, and when he said he… well, first of all, of course, I fell in
love with him, but then it was a problem, he was going to be a minister, and I didn’t want to marry a minister, at that point in my life, but then he said he was going to be a missionary, so that was good, because (with feeling and amusement) we could go to Africa, (general laughter) so that’s been my motivation. So I kind of feel that I’ve been part of the church, and I’m not objecting to it, and I said to Archie, I don’t really feel, I haven’t got this feeling of faith in my life, and he says, You must, because look at all you do—wherever we were, I was doing all sorts of things, so why was I doing all these things, so, well, this is off the subject of worship, but, in terms of worship, I have to say that it’s really a habit in my life; I can’t not go to church every Sunday, so that’s not a good reason for going to church, is it? You can answer. I’m going to throw this back at you. (Laughs, amid general laughter)

Franklin: Now…

Lysianne: I’m just being honest.

Franklin: So, do you sort of relate to the second story? And you wonder that whether you’re really worshipping at church, or would your own story … habit of going to church, so, I get up on Sunday morning, and I get ready and I go to church…

Lysianne: No. I’m more into it than that. I don’t like that guy. (general laughter)

Franklin: OK, But, you could write your own story, you could write your own story where it’s just a habit…

Lysianne: …it is a habit…

Franklin: …and I don’t know, maybe you could compare it to some other habit,

Lysianne: No, it’s a very important habit.

Franklin: more important than…

Lysianne: But I don’t know why.
Franklin: …and your experience of worship here, when you’re in church?

Lysianne: It’s pretty good, as long as there’s a sermon that takes me into an idea that I haven’t thought of before. It’s hard because there’s a lot of repetition in our services. After all, we hear the same stories again, year after year after year.

Franklin: From the Bible?

Lysianne: Yeah.

Franklin: Do you feel worship outside of the church when you’re doing, well, you’re very involved in a lot of things…

Lysianne: No. How I feel worship affects my life is, I know, I’m consciously applying what I know, well, that’s more like faith than worship, but worship is a kind of transfusion so that I can apply that in my weekly secular life when I was always trying to do that when I was teaching, and when I was teaching, I particularly appreciated worship because (sighs) I could relax, and somebody else was doing all the work and I was just sitting there, so I really liked it, that time away, when I was teaching.

Franklin: So you feel that worship is like a transfusion…

Lysianne: (nods enthusiastically) Yeah.

Franklin: You get something that you can apply to the rest of your life

Lysianne: During the week. For sure!

Franklin: And the transfusion happens mostly in church?

Lysianne: Well… I don’t know. It’s hard to make that connection, because secular life is so different, but it’s just, when you’re dealing with people, how you deal with them must tie back to something you know in worship, or in your faith. It’s just hard to make that connection. But it must be there!
Franklin: So, you don’t really understand what it is, but…

Lysianne: No. (with a smile)

Franklin: …you think it must be there?

Lysianne: (nods)

Franklin: Any questions, out of these questions, anything that related to you, or that you could sort of see was your…

Lysianne: There was one that asked for an answer, not just a yes or a no, (laughs, amid general laughter) that requires more thought, but …(someone hands her the list; she looks over it, and grimaces, to general laughter)

*Videographer indicates need for time out, then says, it’s all good again…*

Franklin: Did you want to say anything about the question, anything you had to think about?

Lysianne: We’ll do it in another round.

Franklin: OK. Roxanne?

Roxanne: I found Mike’s sermon on Sunday interesting because—I got these questions, I think it was Thursday, so I thought, I went through them all, and I wrote down my answers, and of course, by the next day I’d changed my mind on half of them, and then… The first day I got this, it says, what does the word “Worship” mean to you, and I said right away, It’s time devoted to praising God. And by the time we got to today, my mind has changed quite a bit. Especially that night, our devotional it said something about The purpose of worship is to change the face of the worshiper. And I thought that really applied to the second one [story] because where you might think that that’s not an experience of worship, he at least walked out the door and realized he could have got more
out of it, and he’ll try harder next time. And I think, when Mike was talking on Sunday about some people get this out of worship, some people do this, some people do that, I think on any given Sunday, you could be any one of those people. And when you were little you could have been a totally different person. Like I came from a church where the sermon had to be at least a half hour, and it was very theological, and so I learned very early, you turned it off. You didn’t hear anything. And so as I got older, it was a big thing that I had to focus, because I had learned for so long that you just turned it off, and when he’s done, you go home. (laughs) So, I think, as an adult, I find the experience very important because I listen and I get something out of it, and even though I might not get something out of it on Sunday, a couple days later, something will happen, and you go, Oh, I see what he was talking about now. And I think that it’s interesting that you can apply it later on even though you thought you got nothing that day.

Franklin: Is there particular parts of the service that you think are more relevant to worship than others? I mean, basically, you’ve been talking about the sermon, right?

Roxanne: Right. I think they all are. I think they all play their part. I think even when you walk in the door, and you talk to people that are in church, I think that it makes a big difference. Like, so many people ask us, Why do you drive half an hour to go to church on Sunday? And it’s the family feeling, like, you walk in church and you feel like you know these people. And they’re NICE to you! (general laughter) I get, the church I grew up in, nobody talked to each other. You walked in, you sat down, you didn’t say a word, until it was all done, and then you got in your car and you went home. It was not like this at all. And I think that that’s an important part. And also the songs. I understand what you’re saying (looks at Sam, who liked the songs) but sometimes there’s five verses to a song we
don’t know, you said it on Sunday, sometimes you’re thinking, Is it DONE yet?? But then there’s some songs, especially the familiar ones, like you were saying (looks toward Sam) that you could sing them forever.

Franklin: And outside of church? You said you see a place to apply something that you heard in church, is there anything else outside church that you feel is worship?

Roxanne: I think especially with very inquisitive children, I learn a lot and I’m forced to think about a lot of things, because they have a lot of questions because so much of it doesn’t make sense to them. And I think I learn a lot, not even necessarily what they get from church because, for example, couple weeks ago, Tommy’s sitting there in church and he’s looking at the choir singing and he says There’s ten people wearing glasses! (General laughter). So, I don’t know how much he picks up out of it, but later on, he’ll say something, he’ll have a question about something, like when Mike was talking about the guys in the trucks, he’ll talk about how there really wasn’t trucks a long time ago, and like you were saying on Sunday about how they walked and they walked, it forces you to think about them more, and especially when you have to answer somebody’s questions.

Franklin: So, would you see that talking with your children as worship? …an experience of worship?

Roxanne: Of course!

Franklin: Anything else you’d like to add?

(Roxanne shakes her head.)

Franklin: All right. Thank you. Margaret?

Margaret: Uh, for me, worship is a combination of private and public. I communicate with God in a private way through praying, through my thoughts and asking for direction,
and thanking him for what he has drawn me towards in my life. Then I come to church and there’s a whole energy, everybody is there, different slants and reasons for being there, but there’s still a common thread that is drawing people there, to church, and I, the build-up I find, we sort of start quietly, and then, we’re building up, through prayer and song and scriptures, and the sermon, and I’m, … the prayer after the sermon has always, it doesn’t matter, Mike, what it is about, it’s always really important to me, I always, I don’t know where, well, I DO know where you get your inspiration, but it always touches me in some way, then, uh, I feel that energy, and of course I love music, so that’s a big part of worship for me; and we try the new songs, (laughs to general laughter) and the old songs, anyway, either the melody, or the lyrics, there’s some that just really get me. And I’ve been both of these people in the stories. I can remember when we were facing the difficulty with Joshua, and at some point we didn’t even know where he was, and Jim and Donna Semplonius sang a duet, God of the Valleys and God of the Mountains, and I had to leave, cause I just felt, I was overwhelmed, and I came down and sat here and someone from the congregation came, like that’s the family thing, that feeling you get, that people are all there to help you, and in turn, you turn around and do something for someone else, that’s the, uh, energy. And I’ve been… is this worship? #2 (looks down at paper, refers to one of the stories) …this poor guy’s striven with all these problems and you do come caught up with things, and it is an opportunity to reflect and be quiet, and all those things that are churning in your mind you can sometimes set aside and be caught up in the service and at other times, those are overwhelming but you maybe don’t do anything during the week to kind of solve these problems but when you sit and you’re surrounded by that energy of love that I find in the
church, that you have an opportunity to be quiet and perhaps God is working in that way to help you resolve your problems. (Shakes her head and smiles) I guess that’s…

Franklin: So do you feel that there’s worship outside… I think you started out that way…

Margaret: Oh, yes! The work that I’ve been doing with mothers and babies, I just find… you’re starting out with this new, precious life, and that has always just got my heart and my soul and I find that there’s kind of an aura when a baby is born, and I can’t help but think that that is coming (gestures up and around) from the energy of God, that he’s at work and it’s a miracle and I find myself, like Angie, praying with … I’ve done that with people, happy, sad, when there’ve been losses, yes, I find it’s part of my life…

Franklin: …and you see that as worship? …an experience of worship?

Margaret: (nods definitely)

Franklin: OK. Elizabeth?

Elizabeth: I’ve been coming here for some time now, and when I first started, I didn’t know anyone, and (shows emotion) just slowly began to learn to talk to people, to meet people, join different clubs, and I try to help—I hope I’m helping. And with Mike’s sermons, sometimes they catch me (shows emotion). And the prayers, they just floor me sometimes (emotion) and I’m I get feelings (wipes eyes) like, the air, God’s just knocking the air right out of me, trying to tell me something, but I don’t always know what it is.

Franklin: So you have a feeling of God communicating with you?

Elizabeth: Always. Even at home; I’ll be sitting there and all of a sudden I’ll hear something, I don’t know what it is, and I’ll feel that he’s communicating with me. Uh, I do my readings every morning to get my day started. I come to church, and I try to get the
meaning of what’s being said, but I’ve never when I was younger I never got the drift of what church meant, of what worship meant, what worship meant, what anything meant, and until just the last few years, have I been able to uh, really catch on as to what I’m supposed to be doing, how I’m supposed to worship. I pray to God every day and just hope that everything works out.

Franklin: Do you feel your readings are a form of worship?

Elizabeth: Yes, I do.

Franklin: Is there anything about the stories or the questions that sort of struck you?

Elizabeth: Not off hand. I’m just not thinking right…

Franklin: OK. Thank you. Katie?

Katie: I wasn’t in church on Sunday, but I’ve read the Mike’s sermon, and I have the same feeling that, and other people have mentioned, that it really helped the service make sense. I’ve never thought of it as breaking it down into sections that flow and make sense, and it’s just like: you sit down, you start, you go through the routine, and you go home. I do think about it more often than that, but it was, it just, it clicked, a lot of the parts and it just kind of made me think. Uh, I, uh, (shrugs), I really enjoy listening to Mike’s kind of synopsis of a scripture, where he explains the setting of when the scripture was taking place, and it makes sense, when I read the Bible… I don’t sit down and read the Bible on my own, and so when I hear a scripture, I don’t have that perspective of where it is coming from, so that’s one thing that I really appreciate, in the services is that the scripture has a setting, you have the reading, and it makes, Mike explains it so it makes sense, and he applies it to everyday situations, and for me that really hits home because I can, uh, it takes me from my everyday world that I get wrapped up in most of the time, and it broadens my thoughts
beyond my own little life, and what my kids are doing, and what people I know are doing, and it kind of brings the whole picture together. And I find I really need that, not just with the scriptures, but that’s part of what coming to church and the worship service helps me, is to focus from my own narrow path into a broader situation, and it puts everything into perspective where, if I am getting too self-absorbed, uh, something that is going on in my life or my kids, because right now my kids are a bigger part of my life than, well, they always have been, but it’s a big part of my life too. And it, uh, it just helps me sort things through, and make sense of things, and not just think about what I’m doing. I don’t have a busy lifestyle, like some people are running 20 different directions, but it makes me more aware of other people and other things going on in the world. And I like the idea of having the sermon kind of interconnected with the scriptures, and relating from the past to the present it just, it makes the connection there for me so it makes sense. I grew up where you would have a 20 or 30 minute sermon too, as a kid, and I know the minister that was at the church for most of the time, mind you, he was a very intelligent man, very knowledgeable, but it was so far above my, like, my understanding that I got basically nothing out of it; it was more of a survival (general laughter) and when I got to be, got my confirmation, I grew up in a United Church, and my girl friend and I kind of did a rebellious thing, and we said, “I’m not getting anything out of this church; I’m not going, so we went to all the different churches, we went to the Lutheran, and the Catholic, and all different churches, and it was a very uncomfortable feeling to go into churches where you didn’t know what you had to do next, or what they were going to say, or where they were finding the stuff in the books, and anyways it was kind of a phase that we went through and, very fortunately, by that time there was a new minister that I connected with and was very comfortable with, but it was,
uh, I think that’s why I really appreciate the way the service is broken down, and it flows now, and I get a lot more out of it.

Franklin: So, I think what I hear you saying is that the, uh, what goes on in church, what’s said in church, how it affects your outlook in your life; you said about broadening your view, so is that a part of worship?

Katie: Mm, hm. And I, I always find something, uh, Mike’s comments that I didn’t even think affected my life, but somehow there’s usually a little gear that clicks in there that, well, a couple people mentioned the same thing, something’s happened, either in the past, or later on in the week that it helps, uh, I don’t know, it’s just, it just helps me realize that there’s that I’m—like a lot of people said—I’m not in control of necessarily what I’m doing, there is a greater force that is directing me sometimes, or giving me a little kick in the butt to get moving in another direction it’s just …anyways (smiles)…

Franklin: That’s Ok…

Katie: No, (laughs) I’m, I’m rambling… After listening to everybody else say their, you know, present their thoughts, mine have jumbled so much, because I’ve connected with something that everybody has said as you’ve gone along, and I’m going, Oh yeah! Oh, yeah!

Someone: You’ll go first next round. (general laughter, and jesting comments…)

Katie: Can I just say one thing about the music?

Franklin: Sure, no, go ahead, go ahead.

Katie: Music is something that I really enjoy in church, whether it’s religious music, or the kids’ songs, or classical music outside of church, I find music very moving and it’s a real trigger point for me, whether I need a boost, or if I need something to calm me down, I can kind of use music to either help me focus, or move in a direction, so when I come to
church, and sometimes I think it’s the kids’ hymns that I enjoy the most because they’re very simple, they’re basic and they’re catchy, and I find I’m humming those tunes the rest of the day sometimes (general laughter), and I don’t always listen to the words of the songs, but, and I think that’s very important to you (looks over at Mike) and the way you plan what hymns we sing, but I realize afterwards that I don’t always hear the words; it’s the music that moves me, and I think the reason that I like the simple little catchy tunes in the children’s hymns is that people behind me and in front of me are singing too and I don’t feel like I’m the only one that’s whispering the words (general laughter) or anything, so, that’s a…

Franklin: …more of a group activity!

Katie: Yeah! It’s like, Oh, my, like I don’t have a good singing voice, but I don’t want to be turning somebody off and two rows ahead of me

Franklin: So music is an important part of the worship?

Katie: It’s a very important part of worship for me… Sometimes, I don’t even make it through the song without tearing up! But I’m getting better.

Elizabeth: Join the club…

Franklin: OK. Thanks, Katie. We’re going to have a little break, but I just thought that maybe we didn’t take as much time as we could have for that first round, if anybody has any comments about what somebody else said, or something that they would have like to have said in there we could take a few minutes if anybody had anything else to say.

Henry: It’s sort of a transformation, what I’ve seen with Mike’s services, because in the past, like we came about 2000, we sort of … around, it was the lecture, reading notes, and then eye contact occasionally. Now it’s eye contact all the time, and occasional notes,
right? Right? And it makes a world of difference when you’re engaging an audience. Right? Because you’re engaging them instead of lecturing to them. And you can get feedback. And you can tell, Mike gets response, so he’ll respond to that, you know what I mean? There’s feedback is Margaret’s? That was the one, I just wanted to bring that up, because I find that very positive, very beneficial. And the other one was about the music, cause Sandra and I, I’m used to the hymns and stuff, I have to put them up on the screen and stuff. But my kids are always like, Come on, can’t we get something decent up there?! Right? And so you get the struggle, cause they’re getting kind of turned off, right? So…

Franklin: OK

Angie: (Looks at Henry, gestures toward him) OK, along with that, I have two thoughts. At the same time! Wow! (general laughter) Well, what were they? No. I find that I’m drawn back here every Sunday, and feel This is my home, and this is where we belong, so, even though there’s things I’ve been uncomfortable with and found them hard, there’s no way I can leave because this is my family, and that’s how I feel…

Franklin: Is that an important part of your experience of worship?

Angie: Yes! Yes. I don’t think it’s the only part, but it’s, I think it’s important. Not that I can’t worship in other congregations, because any other congregations that I have gone to I’ve known people there too, so …but this is my home. It’s like visiting cousins if I go somewhere else. Umm. The other thing was the music. Uh. I don’t mean I don’t like all the music. There’s a lot of it I don’t really care for, I do like the more contemporary music, and I’m wondering if maybe we change some of the music a little bit some of the time, it would be more relevant to younger people, because we are an older congregation and would be a lot of flack because a lot of the old people don’t like..
Franklin: Well we’re not, not really talking about that…

Angie: No

Franklin: We’re talking about our experience, but you feel that your experience of worship would be enriched if you had some different music?

Angie: I find music, like Katie, is very huge part of life and a part of worship, and can make you happy, sad, you know, enjoy.. yeah.

Franklin: Anybody else have a comment?

Lysianne: I’d just like to say “amen” to what Henry said because I really appreciate Mike’s change of style. It’s a hard thing to do and he works at it and he’s done a super job, mixing it up and more talking to the congregation instead of lecture.

Franklin: And that enhances your experience of worship?

Lysianne: Not really because I’m behind (in the choir) (general laughter) and I can see him going back and forth…

Franklin: Does he turn around to the choir sometimes?

Someone: Yes, he does…

Franklin: Does he turn around to the choir sometimes?

Margaret: He does! And that’s really great, whether he catches us with our noses down, (laughter generally) But, no, I just, I’ve noticed that, and come to appreciate, you feel like you’re part of it.

Lysianne: I can also tell Mike that if at the end of a sermon, Margaret goes, “mmmm” That was a good sermon. (general laughter) It was a nice, really well expressed, got through, whatever, the meaning…
Roxanne: I’d like to say further to that, I said about how when I was growing up that the sermons were very theological and they were very long. I find I get a lot more out of the service with a conversational tone than being talked AT.

Franklin: Sort of a lecture?

Roxanne: Right. Right.

Sam: Personally I like the split up …

Franklin: Sermons?

Sam: Yeah.

Franklin: Which is what Katie was talking about.

Katie: And I think your focus and concentration work better, too because you..

Roxanne: It’s like a commercial; it’s like a commercial break. (general laughter)

Katie: And you zoom back in, kinda, to the point.

Henry: You don’t have a whole bunch of stuff, you’ve got this much.

Katie: And my mind…it’s not that my mind is wondering all around, but it keeps my mind from wandering.

Franklin: OK?

Angie: To me, the fact that Mike has worked so hard at this is an expression of his love for us and the way he cares about, you know, his people, and he does what he thinks is the best for us:

Franklin: OK. We’ll have a five minute break…

Franklin: OK. The second round we thought that we could be a little more interactive about the, if people wanted to ask questions for clarification, if somebody’s speaking, anything in the first round that you wanted to respond to, something somebody said that
relates to how you feel about your experience of worship, I think that would be what the third round would be about.

Mike: Let me suggest that if you do want to jump into the middle of somebody else speaking, think about my microphones, OK? you know, sort of get people’s attention and then speak into the silence, so I’ll be able to capture your comments.

Franklin: I’m sort of thinking that we will go around the other way for a change up (general laughter) and we’ll set the time at about six minutes, and, you know, we’ll be a little more relaxed with that, not that anybody, not many people went to six minutes, but… OK, Katie?

Katie: I thought I did quite a bit on the last time, (laughter) …trying to cut it short, but I was just thinking that this is an interesting mix of people, I’m hoping that we… everybody’s kind of bringing a different angle to this, to your research (looks over at Mike) so I’m hoping that it will all kind of help, make things easier for you. I’m not sure (looks at Franklin) that you’re…that we’re supposed to be talking about? (general laughter) I didn’t think I needed to add anything…

Franklin: The experience of worship. I guess this round is more to relate to what other people said, or relate what they said to your experience of the worship… Uh, it’s not anything different, it’s just if there’s anything, what other people said brought out, brought to mind something.

Katie: Well, I think I’m just kind of reiterating a lot of what other people have said, but I liked Henry’s comment too about how direct Mike is with looking at people and interacting and I especially enjoy the children’s time too. I think the adults get as much or more out of the children’s story and all the musical instruments and the little props and
everything that he, uh, puts into the children’s story. And, I enjoy that… I don’t know, I just feel like I’ve already said enough…

Franklin: OK. Elizabeth?

Elizabeth: Well, I feel the way everyone else does about Mike’s, the way he explains the Scriptures, and I’ve started to understand them better. And the way he’s communicating with the congregation has changed a lot to what he used to do. Uh, the hymns, I would like to see some of them changed. I like the old ones myself, but then we have all ages in the church, and so maybe the younger people would like the new ones we’ve been singing. Some of them, I’ve never heard of before; they were OK, but (grimaces with smile) uh, I still like the old ones. And I enjoy the kids when they’re up front. And having their time with Mike. I think they enjoy it, and they always seem like they’re happy when they’re ready to go downstairs. And the way they barrel out of here. But, uh…

Franklin: OK. I’ll just sort of remind you that we’re talking about your experience of worship, not necessarily the sermon, or not necessarily the music, whatever you feel is when you’re worshiping, in church, outside of church, that’s what our focus is. Any comments about what Elizabeth said, or any questions?

…pause…

Lysianne: You want us to go in order, or…

Franklin: Yeah, I was thinking we would go in order. Margaret?

Margaret: Uh, I was listening to people talking about the effect that, use, using the Scriptures, and having the mini-sermon, and I know when it was first introduced, I thought (shakes her head) after everything was done, I thought, well, where’s the sermon? And I do like to have… I’m glad that it’s not every Sunday that it’s done that way because I do like to
have the sermon with some meat to it as well. But I do agree with the explanations and the context and such, uh, is very meaningful, but I do like to have a sermon with some meat; you (looks at Mike) usually serve up meat and potatoes and gravy as well. And that usually speaks to me. And the music, uh, we get introduced to the songs before the congregation does, and we go through the same sort of “Whoa, what is this?” But it’s like everything that you, is familiar, you like the old songs because they’re very familiar and predictable, and if we do the other songs enough, they’ll become the same way and do the lyrics and they’ll have meaning, and such, so it’s, uh, I guess that’s all I had to say about that.

Sam: Uh, I remember there was a song we sang, like, four times about two years ago, four or five times in a row trying to get it right (general laughter) upstairs, and that’s what happens, in the choir, you sing, a couple times, maybe four or five times before you get it right. I don’t know if we ever did get it right, but (general laughter) we did try…

Franklin: you remember the efforts, but not the result?

Sam: it’s the effort that counts… I think… Partially, anyhow.

Franklin: Roxanne?

Roxanne: Uh, I’d like to respond to something Lysianne said. She said that “going to church on Sunday is a habit.” And I think that’s not entirely a bad thing. Because I know for me, sometimes during the week you get so lost in what is going on, and God is there, and you get these little glimpses and you remember, but I think that when you go to church on Sunday, even if you feel like it’s a chore, it gets you back where you need to be. It centers you and it gets you thinking about God more often again, and realizing that he was there, he didn’t actually step away, but he was there with everything… (shows emotion? Or not.)

Franklin: So that would be like a focus?
Roxanne: A refocus…

Franklin: A refocus on God when you go to church?

Roxanne: right

Franklin: even if you go because of habit?

Roxanne: Right!

Franklin: OK. Lysianne?

Lysianne: (Lying back against the corner of the couch, smiles…) I feel very, very comfortable in church, and I feel very, very guilty about it. Because I’m too comfortable. In other words, I don’t get kind of worked up to do or be different. …better. I’m not quite sure how to…

Sam: Don’t you, when you read the Bible, though, don’t you get challenged by things that you don’t like…

Lysianne: Yeeesss.

Sam: And doesn’t that irritate and bother you? (general laughter)

Lysianne: I think of it , I guess I’m thinking about the rest of the world, and I’m thinking we are so, so pat, we are so happy with ourselves, and it’s a lovely community, and I just, I guess I wish that somehow we’re more open and more available to others to maybe experience the kind of fellowship that we have. I just feel guilty that it’s so enclosed.

Franklin: OK.

Lysianne: That sounds sort of negative, doesn’t it? (Shrugs with a smile)

Katie: But it’s a positive thing that you’re feeling negative about, to my way of looking… Like I remember the first time I came to this church, that was… we had come at that time because, I think that’s when Mark Lewis was here, and my kids were young, and I
wanted to start (nods emphatically) uh, coming as a family to church, because when I had been… before that, I was the one taking my kids, and they weren’t happy, I wasn’t happy, and I said, OK, that’s it! We’re either all going, or I’m not going either, kind of thing, so, uh, Joan and Bill Baker had, uh, been talking about Mark and how good he was with the kids, and that was kind of a turning point with us, I remember the first time we walked in the door, everybody was so welcoming, and just happy that you were there. Whether they knew who you were or not, it didn’t matter, and people got up and moved from pew to pew and would go and talk to somebody before the service, and you’d hear people chatting and laughing and I kind of grew up in a church where you sat in your, in a spot, and you didn’t say anything, you never turned around and talked to the person behind you, I mean you would speak to people outside, but I just felt that was very welcoming and it just seemed so natural in this church. Like everybody was like that, and it’s a very welcoming feeling; it’s … so, I guess (looks at Lysianne, smiles) if you feel that (someone breaks in?..?) Maybe you have to bring someone with you so they can experience that, that would be a challenge or something. But I know that’s hard, because I know you tried to get us back to it , too. We weren’t coming regularly there, so, it’s easier said than done. (Smiles and nods).

Franklin: Any other comments about Lysianne’s guilt. (general laughter)

Henry: If you don’t get pushed outside your comfort zone, do you really grow? I mean and that’s one of the things I find, It doesn’t necessarily have to be the sermon, but something pushes you to make you feel a little bit uncomfortable, about what you’re doing, what you’re in, whatever, and that’s the point I find where you get the most, sort of, touch from God; it’s like, You know what, you know, there’s a little bit of improvement, here, guys. You need it right here, right? type of thing.
Franklin: So, just to come back to what you said before about, or somebody said about God communicating…

Henry: Well, I was just saying, Lysianne was saying, there’s where the negative comes into it. From my point of view: if I feel comfortable, usually, generally speaking, there’s something, some part of the service, or even outside, where if you get dinged with a point, you go, well, you know what, I hadn’t thought of that, or something that pushes you beyond your comfort zone, so that you have to do some thinking, or, you know: do I have to change my direction?

Franklin: Do you believe that comes from God?

Henry: Oh, yeah! Yeah.

Franklin: And that’s part of the communication that happens in worship?

Henry: Yeah. And one of the questions that was in there that I forgot about was: If you don’t feel God, are you still worshiping? The answer is: Yeah. Because just because I don’t sense him all the time doesn’t mean he’s not there. Right? That’s part of your faith, right? And, so, yeah.

Lysianne: (Looks at Henry) I would agree with you that once in a while, and sometimes often, there’s an idea, or the sound of music, or something that’s said in the sermon or just something that happens in the service that gets to you and you feel you have been touched by God; that has really moved you. It doesn’t happen too often, but it’s wonderful when it does. I do, do agree with you. It does happen. And it’s hard to explain, because there, everybody’s sitting there, different heads, receiving these ideas …

Franklin: And you enjoy that because it probably gets you out of the guilty feeling, or …
Lysianne: Oh, no, I still feel guilty. (general laughter. Lysianne smiles) No, I’m feeling, I just wish more people in the world could have this experience. I think that every time I come to church. I see all these other people around, I think if they could just come in, maybe they wouldn’t like it but it would be, if they could just try and see the love that’s in this community, it might really help them in their lives. There’s just so many that don’t need it, FEEL they don’t need it

Mike: Is part of your feeling, uh, related to your desire for more diversity in the congregation?

Lysianne: I hadn’t really thought of it that way. Sometimes diversity is wonderful. Sometimes it can be complicated. I have experienced, of course, a lot of diversity, but that isn’t the solution. The solution is just whoever is there and how they come together.

Mike: So, would you like there to be less of a sense of, uh, more movement in and out of the group, or into the group, let’s say. More people feeling free to join in with what is going on in our church?

Lysianne: That would be nice. We just have to pray to God for that to happen, but unless we have a campaign and knock on everybody’s door, which I’m not suggesting, but, um…

Sam: It works. (general chuckling, uncertain…)

Franklin: Sam, do you have anything?

Sam: I was just thinking that, uh, last year was the year of the Bible, and I’ve been reading the Bible, a page each day, before that, and uh, things, you read things and they irritate the heck out of you. Like it was Jericho that bothered me for seven years, until I
figured out (shows emotion) why they massacred all those people. To me it was… Mike never says what the answer is to these things, so,

Margaret: He just says, “Amen.” (general laughter)

Sam: I figured out myself what, why, why it’s there, and now I’ve got a new one, and I, I was reading back through the Old Testament, the Old Testament is always more irritating; it was Korah, and he was there swallowed up by…

Henry: and his family and all those other people…

Sam: …swallowed up, and he says, (shows emotion) Aren’t we as holy as you, Moses? And it was like he was wanting democracy, and Moses was telling, basically God telling that Moses was the leader and you weren’t going to have a democracy in Israel. So that’s irritating me now. I can’t figure that out. That’s… when I read the Bible, I play with these things. For years. (laughs)

Henry: Sounds like the ____ monster…

Franklin: Angie, do you have anything to say?

Angie: Um. I’d like to respond to two people. Uh, I’d like to respond to Margaret, what she said about having the diverse types of sermons, or the little explaining the Scriptures. Like Margaret, I prefer to have both, not the same day! (laughter) but it’s nice to have the variety because you get something different from each style, uh, so, I, I feel the same way, too. And, to Lysianne, I’d like to respond, uh, now how was it you said you felt, not condemned, but

Two People: guilty, guilty.
Lysianne: Guilty. It’s just because I’m so comfortable, it’s my happy space, I love all the people, pretty much, And I’m familiar, the whole procedure is familiar, step by step by step. And I feel maybe I should challenge more…

Angie: I agree with you in that I’d like to see more people come, and participate, and become connected with God and worship, and connected with people, and with the love, I agree with you on that. What I was thinking was, Henry said, if you hear a word, is, What word did you use, Henry? Convicted? Or

Henry: Challenged.

Angie: Challenged. That’s the word. And that’s true, but, and then you can also hear a word either from scripture or something Mike says, or someone else says, or a look, that you’re encouraged. It’s not just being challenged, it’s being encouraged, it’s being, um, oh! …saying, you know what? I know where you are. I know what’s happening, and I care. To have some empathy. And someone, maybe they don’t understand what you’re going through, but they will identify with you. And be there, whether they’re there physically, or they’re there in thought or prayer or whatever. So there’s all that going on.

Someone: Community

Angie: Community. Yeah. So, it’s not just being challenged. It’s also being encouraged and all those other things as well. And to me that’s part of worship.

Franklin: Henry?

Henry: Uh, about the music. It’s funny. I’m the guy who gets to type them in, myself and Karen, so every week, there’s at least two or three songs that aren’t in our list, which means there are two or three new songs, right, within a year… So, like this year particularly, we’ve been cranking a lot of new songs, and I find it kind of disjointed at times when we do
that because there’s sort of a… it sure draws away from worship, because what you have is
the choir singing, and everybody else is mumbling. Cause I’m at the back, and I’m putting
the words up, and I’m trying to sing along with it but I don’t know the tune uh, so, it draws
away. It’s OK to add songs, but don’t throw them in, like full tilt. I mean, they’re probably
germane to the topic, but the problem is people don’t have any clue, they don’t get it, right?
It’s not, to me it’s not helping me to attach… (something?)

Franklin: OK. Katie?

Katie: I’m just going to kind of respond to that by saying I understand the need to
learn some new hymns and I think it helps when the choir kind of runs through it once or
twice, whatever, and it’s oh what am I trying to say? Um, if you can’t read music, by the
time you learn that, the tune, for the, the hymn, everybody’s already tuned out. So like if it’s,
some of them are beautiful hymns, but if the music is really complicated, and you can’t read
music, then it’s it makes it very difficult to learn, until you repeat it over and over and over
again. And by that time, you’ve either lost people, or whatever, so, I’m not sure what the
answer is. I don’t really think it’s a huge part of um our worship service, but you do tend to
lose people when you can’t participate, and you can’t read music, or you can’t remember
what it sounded like the last verse, then I’m not sure; there’s a learning curve in there
somewhere, but I don’t know what the answer is either. It’s just, it’s only a small part of the
service, but you do lose people, I think.

Someone: Zone out…

Katie: Yeah.

Lysianne: In relating to the situation now, when people are looking at the screens,
there isn’t any music there, so really, theoretically they can just count on singing along with
people as they’re singing and they don’t really need to read music, but hopefully they would, by the time they get to the third verse, they’d would be, if it’s not familiar, they’d be probably more familiar…

Katie: Can you hear the congregation, though, when we’re stumbling through the ones that we… (laughter)

Mary Lou: …cause we didn’t have a practice on Wednesday, and therefore, that last hymn, we didn’t… we knew, but we didn’t know very well…

Someone: I didn’t know…

Lysianne: We stumbled

Katie: Well, there’s our challenge! We need to be encouraged. (General laughter) I don’t have the answer either.

Margaret: There are times when it’s unfamiliar, it’s suggested that the choir just sing the melody, rather than throwing in the different harmonies, which I think is, then the choir’s playing more of a guidance role, rather than uh, and also it was suggested that we use a new hymn as an anthem, and sing it as a choir piece and then next week we would… or Donna would play it on the organ, so that the tune is there and it’ll become more familiar, and that, that’s what you’re saying, to break in the piece… but it just depends on what Mike has in mind with his… cause all the songs, there’s a lot of thought goes into those songs to make them relevant to his message, and I think it’s a very difficult thing to do. And you finally find one that, Ooh, that’s got just what I want to say! And then, Ooh, Mike! We just don’t know that one. We all come from different backgrounds. I’m bluegrass gospel. Like, and I don’t get that here at all! So, we all have different backgrounds, and to find something that’s relevant to everybody is really difficult…
Lysianne: Ministers choose the hymns because of the words.

Katie: And for me,

Margaret: Singing is a big part of worship for me. So there we have that little difference too… It’s a very personal…

Elizabeth: Growing up, I was country.

Margaret: Yeah!

Elizabeth: Not too much gospel.

Katie: I’m dating myself, but in elementary school, we sang hymns, in the auditorium, once a week, on Friday. So I knew some of the, a lot of the basic ones. From school as well as from Sunday School. So but they don’t do that any more. (laughs)

Sam: We used to say in school the Lord’s Prayer, but now, totally shocking in the public school system.

Franklin: Any other comments about your experience of worship either within the church or outside the church..

Mike: Well, this is great. I think people have had their say. Is that how you all feel? You’ve had your chance?

Elizabeth: I know I’m uncomfortable if I don’t come to church every Sunday. My week is ruined. So that I need to come to church to get the… even though I do read the Bible every day, but the, I need what Mike is teaching us.

Mike: What do you think? Shall we have a little prayer to close? OK. First of all, thank you all very much. It’s much appreciated. And, Let us pray: Thank you, God, for this opportunity we have to sit together in a room and share our experiences, our experiences of
worship. And we ask for your blessing on each person here and we ask for your mercy as we travel toward home, and we pray in Jesus’ name. AMEN.

End of Faith Conversation I
Appendix 7 Faith Conversation II (Transcribed)

Franklin: OK, I thought we’d start tonight with a, uh the same, the same way we did last time with a short, just a short round and maybe you could reflect on how you felt about the last meeting, was there something that you thought of after you left that you wished you had said, if there’s anything like that that you wanted to add, maybe how you feel about tonight’s conversation, uh, do you think the topic for tonight, uh, Communion slash Fellowship was easier, more difficult than last week’s. So you can pick any of those questions to answer. And, let’s start with Elizabeth…

Elizabeth: (grimaces) I don’t know where to start.

Henry: Do you have any questions?

Elizabeth: (pause) Um, (pause. Then looks at Franklin, smiles) I’m not sure…

Franklin: How did you … Did you have any feeling about last week, or last time we came, did you…

Elizabeth: Well, I wasn’t sure what I was going to say, but uh, I was, uh, a little unsure how I was going to put it, (pause) and, I enjoyed listening to everyone, on their thoughts (pause) but, uh, I was just, (shakes head, smiles) I don’t know Uh, (long pause)

Franklin: Are you saying you weren’t particularly happy with what you said?

Elizabeth: I was OK with what I said, but I was a little upset with myself, for acting the way I did, but, uh, because I don’t usually do that…

Henry: Just remember; you’re among friends. Don’t worry about it.

Franklin: OK? Henry?
Henry: Uh, Yeah, I thought it was a good session, what we were talking about, communicating, uh, so, yeah, it was good. As for the difference between last week and this week, I don’t know. Until we get into it, we can’t really tell. (Smiles broadly) So…

Franklin: Thank you.

Henry: OK

Franklin: OK?

Henry: Yip.

Franklin: Sam?

Sam: Last week, I had a panic attack, and I, it was very strange. I could only hear what my heart felt. I couldn’t hear… you asked me a question last week, and I asked you to repeat it and it was like a foreign language; I couldn’t understand a word you were saying. It wasn’t spoken to my heart, I couldn’t. …It was very interesting I guess… but…

Franklin: Mm, Hm.

Sam: I wouldn’t want to do it again. (general laughter) Le

Franklin: Well, now that you’re over that…

Sam: You’re never over these things…

Franklin: Well…

Sam: It’s always, always in the back of your mind. I had six of those in my… seven now! Seven panic attacks… I have little ones that, if I catch, like once a month. I had one with Mike, talking about Revelstoke, (to Mike) I don’t know if you remember? No. To my mind, it sticks in there, so strong, but I just sat down, and I was fine. You never know. It’s part of my life. (smiles)

Franklin: OK, uh, any thoughts about tonight, before we get started?

Franklin: Margaret?

Margaret: Uh, I thought everyone was honest with how they felt, and I think people must have felt comfortable enough that they expressed how they felt, and I … it was a good exchanges, last week. Uh, this week, I thought it was going to be easier, but as I tried to reflect, I uh apply some things, Well, it’s going to be a little harder than I thought, so, we’ll see what develops…

Franklin: OK. Katie?

Katie: I really appreciated the opportunity to kinda try to get my thoughts in order, because before it came, I kinda thought I had an idea what it involved, and what I wanted to say, and as I listened to everybody else around the room, I realized that I hadn’t really touched on a fraction of what I thought I really didn’t know what I thought, and I really felt mixed up and out of it, and I don’t know, I felt like my conversations didn’t make any sense to anybody else, but by the time I walked out of here, I had felt like I kinda reached a level where I had an idea of what I thought, but it just kinda kept going all week, too, I kind of came back to different things that people had said, because I’ve never really thought about how I feel about my own faith I guess and I don’t talk to anybody about it; I would talk to people about ideas, or thoughts, or you know, things that came up in the sermon, or service, but never how I felt, and I think I’m gonna struggle with that for a long time to come, but it’s, it’s, I enjoyed it, and I found it interesting to listen to everybody else, too.

Franklin: OK. Thank you. Roxanne?

Roxanne: I thought it was awesome. I went home, and I couldn’t believe how open everybody was, how like Margaret said, how honest everybody was; I learned a lot about
people, I was surprised by things that people said, and I found it really interesting, because when we got the phone call, it was, Well, Jake’s name and your name got picked out of the hat, if you two want to decide between the two of you who wants to do this, and we kinda looked at each other and we don’t really know what’s going on, what this is, I went home and I’m like Ha, ha, I got the better end of the deal. (general laughter). I just, I thought it was really cool, and, like I told Mike, I couldn’t even have the radio on on the way home. Like, all the thoughts just spinnin’ around and I really enjoyed it.

Franklin: Good! (Looks at Angie who arrived a couple minutes late) OK. Amy?
We’re just sort of— I think you gathered— having a short round about, er, sorry, Angie, we’re just sort of having a short round about how we felt about last time, and maybe what you thought of the topic for tonight. Or, what you think of tonight.

Angie: Um, what I’ve heard I have to agree, dead on, with everybody else. I found it really, um, eye opening, or it’s like, whoa, I never knew people thought like that, or … I felt that there’s going to be a real bond amongst our group that have met together because, we’ll all know each other better, and I think that’s a really good thing, and we’ll sort of lead into what we’re talking about tonight; the fellowship and you know, the bonding together. I enjoyed it very much!

Franklin: Mm, hm. Lysianne?

Lysianne: I was a little bit embarrassed the last time because I felt I was revealing some of my inadequacies, and problems with the faith. But I’ve appreciated the company and the people who were here and the things that they were saying, and I enjoyed it very much, because it is a good thing to talk about these things, it’s something that you really should do more often.
Franklin: OK. Um, we’ve rearranged the questions, uh, here, if you just wanna take one of those and pass em. It’s the same questions, just in a little different order. (papers are passed, rustled) Yeah, sort of like the people in the room. They’re the same people, just in a little different order. (quiet chuckling and facetious comments the researcher cannot make out) So, I thought for the—Oh, there are your folders there, if you need them—Uh, the reason they’re in this order is, uh, we thought that for the first, uh, the next round, we would try to deal with those first, I guess, six questions there, not that you have to deal with them specifically, but that aspect of communion and fellowship, and then, after we have our break, we will look at your experience in terms of the last four questions. So there’s a division there. OK? And there’s an 11th Question down there that Mike sorta thinks that shouldn’t really be in, in terms, when we’re talking about our experience, this is talking about what you’d like to see in the future that … If it relates to how you see your experience now, then I think it’s a good question. But we’re not just going to get onto what we’d like to see in the future. OK. Any questions before we start? Basically do the same thing as we did last week; we’ll have six minutes to say what you want. And we’ll start with Roxanne.

Roxanne: …after you rearranged all the questions? (with an ironic smile, to the chuckles of others…) Uh, to me the word “communion” or “fellowship” as you say, means getting to know people and feeling like you’re part of a group, coming together for a common purpose, uh, or people that have things in common. Do you feel welcomed and at home in the congregation. Uh, most of the time. I think everybody is most of the time. But there are, like when we first came here, when I first started coming to this church, I couldn’t believe how many people stopped and Hi, how are you doing? And who are you? And it was so nice to be welcomed like that, and then there are Sundays when you come in the door and
you go sit down, and you sit there in silence for ten minutes. That’s OK, too… but it’s not the same feeling. Uh. I think there are lots of opportunities for you to experience communion and fellowship in our church. I think between the Fellowship Dinners and when we have snacks and coffee after church, and there’s SO MANY committees in this church, if you really wanted to get out and talk to the people there’s lots of opportunities to do that. The only thing that I find hinders me is that I have kids that are small. And it makes it hard to do things like this in the evening. And, uh, the fellowship dinners in particular, I don’t feel comfortable bringing them, because they’re picky eaters, and all, the whole time I just worry about what they are doing, I don’t feel like I have time to talk to people and yeah… That’s all I have to say for now. (smiles)

   Franklin: OK?

   Roxanne: Mm. hm.

   Franklin: All right. Katie?

   Katie: Um. I agree with Roxanne. Just on the feeling, the idea of communion as just being part, having something in common, and being able to communicate with people, and being part of a whole. And it can be in so many different ways, within the church, or with different people, but it’s, um, I’m stuck. Um, anyways. As far as feeling welcome in the congregation, that was one thing that I appreciated right from the beginning, um, and it’s still, still that way even if you don’t know, there’s a lot of people that I recognize by sight but I don’t necessarily know them, at all, but people are always friendly, or pleasant, or helpful, if you need a tissues, or you’re choking (general laughter) or just, you know, if and I notice like when you come in (looks to Roxanne) with kids, everybody seems to love watching the kids, and I know, as a parent, when mine were younger, it was the same thing.
Anybody could drop a marble on the floor, everybody in the congregation would know exactly where it was rolling down the hill, the front or wherever, but—and it’s cute (looks at Roxanne) when it’s somebody else’s kid… (general laughter)

Roxanne: Not when it’s yours.

Katie: (gestures with hands moving up along her neck toward her ears) …but when it’s yours, getting all red, but I mean, they’re real little people, and it, I think it brings out the little kid in everybody else, too. Or at least that’s my take on it, so I enjoy watching all the kids and the seeing them, the stages that they go through too, and then I, I, I guess as the, um, mature adults, we all change a bit too, and I mean people get sick, or they, um, pick up different interests and sometimes they’re there and sometimes they’re not, it’s just they’re, everyone in the congregation is growing and changing too, so you, I just feel that it is a welcoming church, but you also need to make a point of going out on your own too, and, and approaching people and saying just Good morning, and asking how they are too, I mean you can’t always sit and wait for people to come to you. So I think it is a very caring church, and there I if you are interested in getting involved then I believe there are lots of different things that are available for you to do and get involved in the church and people have different interests, different time factors available to them, and that’s a very personal thing, I guess, and so if you, but the opportunities are there if you, if you do want to get involved. So, that’s all.

Franklin: OK. Thank you. Margaret?

Margaret: Um. Communion or fellowship. To me means companionship, um, being able to feel comfortable, with other people, and um being able to exchange ideas and share, uh, and I think, um, I’ve felt welcomed in this church and, and because of that, when I see
new people, I like to sort of um, um, introduce myself and I’ve found that’s one thing people don’t do, they say, Hi, and what’s your name? And then they forget to tell them their name. So I try to overcome that in my own es… you know, to introduce myself as well because I’ve found that’s, it’s kind of a strange thing because, when I first came here, I’d introduce myself and then I didn’t know who I was talking to, because they didn’t introduce themselves and you feel uncomfortable saying, And who are you? Uh, anyway, Uh, but I do, you know, I feel there is a nice welcoming atmosphere, I’ve heard it from other, from friends who come here, to church, um, and said, have had that feeling as well. Uh, I think there are a lot of, as the other two ladies have said, there are a lot of opportunities to, to join a group, or uh, opportunities to be together with… the after church coffee hours, and any of the committees. And the fellowship dinners (looking down, speaking with emphasis) um, I must be honest, I don’t feel the church is the key part of my life; maybe I’m revealing a lot of stuff here, but I um it’s never been that way in my family. It was there, and we were involved, but it was never the central part and so I find that I’m always drawn, there’s, I have a busy life and I have friends here, and I have friends there, and I feel guilty if I’m not doing something, or going to another fellowship potluck dinner, and I’m thinking, yeah, well, we were out Thursday night, we’re going to be out Saturday night, I feel like where do you draw the line with activities, and sometimes I find it’s a chore? Uh, but then when I get here, there’s like an energy that kind of picks up and uh I feel I’m glad I come, I’m glad I came, sort of thing, so, uh, I just, um. I find it’s How do you get the rest of the people to come out? I don’t know how you do that. It’s always the same people? I don’t, I don’t know how you, you can ask, and say, Let’s, or Are you coming to the pot luck? Well, NO! I don’t like pot lucks. OK! So, I don’t know how you get other people out to kind of switch the
dynamics. It’s easy to sit with someone different, and learn more about other people, but it
would be nice if it were other, people who haven’t come out to come out. And, uh, and see
what it’s about. Uh, uh, I don’t think I have anything else to say.

   Franklin: OK. Thank you very much. Sam?

   Sam: Well, “Communion” I had no idea when I saw “communion” it’s uh, so I
looked it up in the dictionary and it said, “Shared beliefs, what is it? …shared beliefs in
common.” I don’t know, that doesn’t fit my idea of… well, fellowship is more closely to my
heart. And, I don’t know, communion, that doesn’t fit. So, do I feel welcome and at home in
the congregation? Yes, first time I came back I remember sitting through the sermon at the
end, I remember the end of the service, Donna Semplonius coming up, and (shows emotion)
I knew Donna cause I’d met her once when she came to visit my mom and that sort of
surprised me. And Hank Barton, he came up to me, too. I sat, I think I sat in the Higgins’s
section (gestures toward Henry Higgins) (general laughter) They kinda looked at me strange
(laughs) cause that’s where we sat, I knew we sat in there long ago, somewhere in that area,
so I just sat where we used to sit. I don’t know why that is that way in this church, but you
have your little nest and… “Do I feel understood and cared about?” Cared about? Yes.
Understood (smiles and shakes head) I don’t think anybody understands me but God. (shows
emotion, smiles, points to his head) especially with my noggin problems. I remember I was
talking to my father about … I told him I had a panic attack. And we were talking about me
going to the hospital 8 years ago. And I, and we’d never talked about it. And I’d, he’d taken
me in and I’d gone into the emergency room, and we were sitting there waiting for
somebody to come see me, and by that time, I’d, I, I got this idea that I’d go to my
grandma’s house, and I escaped the hospital and the police car came after me and took me in
and two, two police officers took me into the hospital and after that I don’t re… they were
taking me down the hall and I just blanked out, don’t remember anything for like two weeks.
So… I think that’s enough. (chuckles).

Franklin: OK. Thank you, Sam. Henry?

Henry: Uh, Communion. Uh. The way you explained it was community of feeling,
fellowship and all that. Uh, very much so. Uh. We enjoy this congregation very much. Uh, we came from St. Catharines and my parents… It was really funny, cause we were looking
for a hobby farm, so my mom was bent and determined, try to get one close to Dunnville so
we could actually come to their church. (smiles, general laughter) So, it turned out it worked
that way. And, uh, it’s really quite interesting, you see the different people growing and
changing and moving on, and younger ones, go off to school and what not and uh the older
ones, you know, it’s kind of, there’s two ends of the spectrum, some of them are failing,
right, and then they don’t come anymore, right? Uh, and you care for them, very much,
right, and it’s neat, cause you just see them, and sometimes you only see them for that one
day, in the week; you don’t see them in the other parts of the week. And other people, you
have more, the different times of the week, experience with them. (looks to paper) Uh,
welcome? Yes. Uh. Feel understood and cared about? Cared about, yes. Understood? It’s
harder, yeah, Sam, you have your concerns, too, but it’s just that if you just see people for
one day a week, it’s harder to get deeper unless you have another relationship on top of that
one day. Uh, there’s lots of opportunities. The one thing obviously you have to do, is uh, be
able to commit time, and that’s one of the precious resources most people have. They don’t
want to put one more day on top, so, that gets a little challenging for most people, that’s
where you see your deterrent from, cause, what are you gonna take away, right? People are
already kinda built up. (Looks to paper) …occasions? Yeah, all the ones, people are trying
to as much as possible, I mean, no matter what group you’re into, you’re always going to
have different personalities, uh, some are abrasive, and that’s just, that’s who they are, right?
Um, and then some basically love you to death, right? So, you’ll have that with anything…
(Looks at paper) So, there you go.

Franklin: OK. Thank you. Lysianne?

Lysianne: We’re doing the first ones, or just the first ONE?

Franklin: No, the first six, eh? You don’t have to answer all of them. We’re just
trying to focus on those, and then the second time, we’ll have another focus…

Lysianne: OK. That’s fine. I thought we were just doing #1, and I couldn’t say
anything along the lines of six minutes for that, because it’s already been said. (general
laughter). Uh, welcomed, at home, well, welcomed in the congregation: when we first came
here, we’d been coming to Dunnville for years, but we hadn’t come to church because it was
just in the summer, and when we moved in September, we came to the first service, and I
spoke to someone… we were sitting, and I said, Do you know if there’s a WMS here? And
she said, well, speak to that lady in the choir. So, I went up to speak to Margie, Lymburner,
She said, AH!! A GIFT FROM GOD! PRAISE THE LORD! (general laughter) Another
woman to join the WMS!! So, by that time, we had about six or seven or eight. It was …
Talk about welcome! That’s all I needed. (general laughter). But there were many, many
other things, and one of the first things was the play, the, Uh, Christmas Carol, and that is
the best way to get to know people in the congregation is to have to do something with them
and have a project, and so Margaret and I worked together making sets, and I got to know a
few other people in terms of directing the dance group, and we had part in the play, and it
was just a great way to get to know other people in the congregation. So, we gotta have another play, or another show, or something. But then, of course, you just meet certain people. And the other way you meet people is, uh, running things like bazaars, because then you see, the things people do are just amazing, generous of their time. That’s amazing. Um, I, wanted to say something here, the other thing is, Um, well, things like the choir is just the best, most wonderful thing. You see, when we came from a church, well, other churches I’d been going to, Bill is minister, and well I did what I could but I was teaching full time. Then when we lived in Montreal, it was a church where people came from all over the city, and we didn’t do any midweek activities, so you didn’t know anybody except during the Sunday service. And we practiced the choir after the service. And I was in the Session, but it was in French, and I didn’t understand half the things people were saying. So, there were no other, there was not much of a fellowship in that congregation. But it was a good thing on Sunday. So this was perhaps the first time I’d really been involved a little it more in a congregation, and I really appreciate the fellowship here, for sure. (stares down at the paper) Yeah, that’s good for now.

Franklin: That’s good. OK.

Jenny: I uh, have to stop the camera…for a second… OK, it’s going again.

Franklin: All right?

Jenny: Yep.

Franklin: OK. Elizabeth?

Elizabeth: To me, communion means like the others have said, um, getting together, meeting with other people, and I have lots of opportunities to do that because I’m the head of the TLC Group, and, uh, I have some girls that they’re, they’ve always been very
welcoming … and I’ve worked with them for a few years. Do I feel welcomed here? I always have from the first day I came to this church. Uh, Do I feel understood and cared about? Mostly, yeah. I don’t know of any time that anyone has ever said anything to me that was unkind. And uh I do meet with other people with being on the Session, and I try and meet with everyone, but, uh, I also talk to people in the church on Sunday mornings, and lately I have found that, uh, people are very warm and welcoming on Sunday mornings. Lately, I’ve found it with Mike’s sermon, I’ve found that more people are sitting up and taking notice, and I think that has a lot to do with how people are reacting in the church and towards each other, and lately I’ve found that people are more welcoming to, especially to strangers. Uh, I think we should have, if we can get the people that are members of the church, if we can get more of them coming out a little more often. And, uh, I’ve been talking to different ones that aren’t coming to church and some of them I’m trying to get them, I’m, to come, because I think that they need it and it would do them good, as well as, well, I’m here every week, and I get, if I didn’t come on a Sunday, I would be lost. So, maybe I’m getting too pushy with people (smiles), I don’t know, but that’s just the way I feel about it.

Franklin: OK. Thank you, Elizabeth. Angie?

Angie: Uh, I understand that communion and fellowship are supposed to be meaning the same thing, but to me it doesn’t. Uh, it says, What does the word “communion” mean to, to you, to me? And to me, I have communion with God. It’s a very deep, personal thing. And that’s to me what communion is; and it’s also with the bread and the wine, the symbols, but to me, it’s something different from fellowship. That’s just my own personal thing. Uh, do I feel welcomed and at home in this congregation? Absolutely, yes. Definitely. At one, at one point, I was coming here one Sunday, and going somewhere else another Sunday. It was
a while where Arch wasn’t coming, and I thought, well, if he’s not coming, I’m just going to go where I want to go. And then one Sunday, I just, it was the Sunday to go somewhere else, and I didn’t want to. I just came here and that was the end of it. This is home for me. Uh, do I feel understood and cared about? For the most part, yes. I guess I agree with Henry. Uh, ye slip, ye have to have sort of a second level to really understand and care for people. You can care about them—I don’t want to say “superficially” because not what I mean—you can care, but then there’s another level as you get to know people more intimately and better. Like, I’m sure that we in this group will care for each other more, at a different level, than somebody that just comes into the congregation. That’s my opinion. Do you feel that there are adequate occasions provided… I actually, my first reaction was, “No.” And I’m thinking more of a different type of get together. Sometimes I think that committees, it’s good to get on committees and stuff, but I’m not sure what level of fellowship that leads to. Maybe I’m just all confused about it. Which I could be, cause I’m not in any committees now, and I’m good with that. Uh, I’m thinking of different types of occasions, to provide fellowship. Uh…

Mike: Did you want to say what kind of…

Angie: I could, or is that part of the second part?

Franklin: Sure. Uh, no. You wanna say what…

Angie: Uh, I’m thinking of, a couple things I’m thinking of would be a woman’s Bible study, maybe during the week sometime, with nursery provided if there were any young moms that wanted to participate. I’m also thinking of—again it’s a woman’s thing—a craft, devotional, outreach kinda group. Where you could invite people from, you know, the community. Again, have nursery provided; I understand that’s difficult with the nursery school being here. That’s not something that’s practical, but it’s something that I’m just
throwing out there. Uh, that would be more for outreach and stuff. Umm. What changes have occurred in the congregation… I think that is… Mike’s at the top of that, and the way Mike includes everyone, and especially the young people, and he calls people by name, so you get to know people’s names if you don’t know them, without saying (mimes nudging someone in the arm) who is that over there? (general laughter) Yes, exactly! I think that’s been huge, huge, huge, in, uh, in helping with the fellowship, and the getting to know people. And I think the kids love him because of that. They are treated as individuals, and not just “Would you kids get out of the way? It’s time to go downstairs.” It’s like “Come up and tell us what you’re thinking.” I think that’s been huge in this congregation. And I’m done. (Smiles)

Franklin: Thank you. Thank you very much. OK, I think that we certainly concentrated more on these questions than we did last week, which… I don’t know if that was exactly the purpose. I think we wanted to sort of focus on one aspect of communion sort of indicated by the first questions, and another aspect of communion or fellowship that come from the second group of questions. But we can also talk about how you reacted or related to the stories, maybe in the next round, so I think that would be something else that maybe you could think about. But I think we’ll have a break now, and be back in FIVE minutes. (smiles).

Franklin: OK. And the next round will be, uh, maybe a little less formal, so if somebody wants to question somebody for clarification, or make a comment, uh, that’s fine. And as I said before the break, we’ll look at the second four questions, not, you, we don’t have to, you don’t have to specifically answer each one but if one of those questions relates to your experience of fellowship in the church, then, let us know about that. And if you have
any reaction to the stories, or if any of those bring out something about your experience of fellowship in the church, that would be good. Angie, how would you like to, uh,

Angie (mouth full) Mhm, hm. (shakes her head, smiles. General laughter) …

Mike: Can I say something while she’s…

Angie: um, hm!

Franklin: …trying to finish her cookie?

Mike: I noticed during the first round that’s people, people said things that were kind of loaded sometimes, and we were all being very good, and not responding, but I guess I’m suggesting that if you do notice those little, inviting little nuggets that people say, you know, they say something, and you kinda think, Yeah, is there something more there? Maybe you could invite one another to push down to a deeper level.

Angie: OK. (Cookies gone, she laughs)

Franklin: OK, Angie!

Angie: What was the question? OK, on these next four questions?

Franklin: Next four questions, or the stories… whichever.

Angie: OK. Um, OK, those are the questions that said, have you had occasion to receive concrete help from others. I have to say, “Yes. I definitely have.” And hopefully, I’ve been able to offer some concrete help to someone else within our congregation.

Franklin: How did you feel about somebody helping you? And was that a, was that a…

Angie: It’s hard.

Franklin: OK. Good.

Henry: …saying hard to receive, or what?
Franklin: …hard to receive…

Angie: Hard to receive. It’s much, much, much easier to give, than it is to receive.

Elizabeth: I would agree with you there.

Angie: You agree with me there? It’s like, “Oh! Am I really needy, or…?” (laughs)
No, uh, no, it’s just, it’s just easier to give… You’re more vulnerable when you receive. I think. And, uh, that’s not always easy to be vulnerable to someone…

Henry: It’s not a pride issue?

Angie: Not at all! (laughs knowingly, ironically) No. No, no. It’s just… I think you need to know s… To have a certain level of intimacy or know a person really well to let your guard down and be vulnerable. Uh, so I find that hard, because you know, I can be whatever, but there’s not, there’s very few people that really know me, as a p… me, me, deep down me, so, anyway, uh, moving along (laughs)

Franklin: How do you feel about when you help somebody?

Angie: That feels good! It feels good. I’m, If I, if I could have, if I can do something to help somebody, that’s great. That’s great. I hope I’ve made their life easier, in some way or uplifted them, or encouraged them, or whatever. That’s good! I’m good with that! Uh.

Franklin: I think the other question is, Do you realize how hard it is for them to receive your help?

Henry: Yeah, I was thinking that too…

Angie: Probably not. No. Probably not. It may be something I need to think about, though. I’m sure probably it is. That’s a good point, Franklin. Uh, do I feel a connection between the bond and the faith? I would say Yes. The more comfortable I feel with someone, the more apt I am to share deeper issues and faith issues, than if, you know,
somebody I met on the street or maybe sat beside in church but didn’t really know them, and didn’t see them except for the Sunday to Sunday, so, I would say, Yeah. For me there is a connection. The deeper the bond, well, the deeper the relationship. And the more freer you are, I am, to share things that mean a lot to me. My faith being one of those things. And, as far as those stories, on another page, I …

Franklin: One was about the guy who really liked the fellowship potluck dinners and the other one was about the lady who tried to avoid the guy because he was …

Angie: (nods) Yeah. And I think we have both in our congregation. I think either situation would apply. Maybe on any given day. Uh. Yeah. Fellowship dinners are good and you do get to meet people outside of church, I think can be a really good thing, because again people are…shouldn’t say they’re content to be different in church, but, maybe. Anyway, that’s enough.

Franklin: OK

Angie: OK

Franklin: Any questions anybody has for Angie, or anything they want to uh

Sam: I’d like to say that, uh, I met Angie for the first time that I know of in the hospital. She’s really good with… folks up there. (shows emotion)

Angie: Thank you. I love it.

Franklin: OK. Elizabeth?

Elizabeth: Um, have I had occasion to receive concrete help from others in the congregation? Uh, I would say, Yes. Whenever I need something or something done, there’s usually someone there to give me a hand and there’s no question about it, uh, To help others? I try, uh, I haven’t had too many occasions to really help anyone. Other than to say,
Hello, how are you? I hope you’re feeling well. Uh, do I feel a special bond with others in the congregation? At times, yes. Uh, I do know to speak to, to work with quite a few of the members of the church. And I appreciate anything that, whenever I need something, they’re there to help me. And it’s usually for the church itself. Uh, the connection between the bond and the faith that I share with others, uh, I, yes, I would say that uh I believe, and my church and my faith and I try to, I don’t go around pushing myself on other people, but sometimes, I would like to talk to other people about my faith, but I don’t, even like, as being an elder, I don’t really push myself onto anyone. That I should be, maybe, be getting a little pushy, but I don’t. Uh, any changes? Uh, right off hand I can’t think of any.

Franklin: Would you uh be interested in an opportunity to uh share your faith with others?

Elizabeth: I, Yes. And sometimes I try but they don’t reciprocate.

Franklin: Any comments or questions on what Elizabeth said.

Henry: That last one, it can be intimidating sometimes. Cause you kind of lay yourself out like a table…

Elizabeth: Right.

Franklin: OK. Lysianne?

Lysianne: Uh, couple other places where I felt really a bond with people is in the Mission Team. Because we were together quite a lot and had some interesting experiences and very moving experiences. and another time I felt very… I learned a lot about faith, and that’s in the Bible study because really I haven’t been much in my life, and I really don’t, believe it or not, I really don’t know that much about the Bible, no matter who I’m married to. (general laughter) He knows a lot! But, he’s always aghast at my ignorance, if I ask a
question, so I hate to ask a question sometimes. Anyway, there are people in the congregation that I really enjoy working with, and that’s also in the choir as well. I think, the thing about the choir is it’s wonderful because Donna does all the preparation, … if you’re involved in an organization, if you’re any kind of officer, you have to prepare, and when you go to the choir, Donna’s done all the work, and I can just relax and enjoy singing, so that’s a really nice aspect of the… (inaudible). There’s some things here we haven’t talked about, but about communication, uh, changes, uh, there’s… it’s hard sometimes really to get along with some people in the congregation, and you really work at it, and it works, and I’ve just been reading a book, it’s a mystery, but the detectives have a really hard time because they get to be arrogant because they know how to fix everything. And they’re discussing this, and one guy has this quote, and I just thought (puts on her glasses) I’d bring it because it’s kind of interesting.

Mike: What’s the title of the book?

Lysianne: It’s called Four Sentences that Lead to Wisdom: Four sentences: I’m sorry. I was wrong. I need help. I don’t know. And I thought, Those are wonderful things! I’m going to write those down because I need those, cause I KNOW I think I’m right, many occasions. And I don’t apologize that much, so… You’re welcome to have these after the session (general laughter) We could maybe put them in the bulletin.

Katie: …sermon on them… Mike’s wheels are spinnin’

Elizabeth: Yeah.

Lysianne: So, I’m working on those, and as part of my communication.

Franklin: How do you see those as relating to your experience of fellowship in the church?
Lysianne: because I think they are really good for everybody who is a Christian. Well, I guess it’s really an aspect of humility. Because we tend to feel we’re right. Because we are Christian. We HAVE the answer. We have the faith, but and we’re so bad at it, and therefore we have to keep… NO, I don’t think we should always apologize. I just think it’s good to remember that sometimes we haven’t got it, and listen—we talked about that last time—and listen to what other people are saying.

Franklin: And you’re sort of reflecting your experience in the church, and you were just talking about people who are hard to get along with?

Lysianne: (nods, smiles) Mm, hm. (nods emphatically, smiles) No more said. (general laughter)

Elizabeth: Yeah.

Franklin: Any more comments or questions? About Lysianne’s suggestions?

Henry: Do you find it easy to take help?

Lysianne: Hm?

Henry: Do you find it easy to take help?

Lysianne: To have someone help me?

Henry: Yeah.

Lysianne: NO!!

Henry: Not that easy, or it IS easy?

Lysianne: It’s EASY! I NEED it!

Henry: OK (general laughter)

Franklin: OK. Henry?
Henry: Uh, Have you received concrete help? Uh, uh, Many times. And the most unusual was a certain gentleman in the room who, uh, I was changing, ...re-roofing my house and he came over, came and helped me re-shingle my house. I had dislocated my, I had a week’s worth of vacation, first day in I was over at the mini-put place over here, and the teeter totters in the back, managed to dislocate my shoulder, and I pushed it back in (general gasps, groans) as it happened, so I basically just stuck my arm in my pocket, and we went home, right? But that whole week I had to cut fence posts, I had to redo the roof, I had to put in a whole bunch of stuff in the barn, right? And so, you’re kind of tender, and you’re doing all this stuff. So, we’re doing the roof and who shows up: Mike. So we were joking about, you know, sermon topics. You know, like “stripping” (general laughter) things like that. Somehow, he never got those on his topics. That was a good concrete help. I’ve had a number of things like that where people have helped out one way or another. Even like baby sitting when we’ve had issues with the little guys and stuff. Have you offered or had the ...concrete help of others. Yeah. The thing I find, what’s the most awkward part of that is: they’re trying to reciprocate! Cause they don’t want to feel obligated somehow. Like cookies, or food, or can I help you, or whatever. No, just, you know. Here you go, right? type of thing. That’s the awkward part of helping others. Sometimes they feel uncomfortable about receiving help. Um, special bond with others in the congregation, yes, very much so. The connection between the bond and faith, I find it’s tremendously deeper if you can bridge that and talk about your faith together. It’s really cool because instead of just the weather, and you know, sports, and all that kind of thing, you can actually get into something that’s, is, you know, eternal. You know, what means something to you. I think that pretty much covers it.
Lysianne: Can I ask you what the young people, what kind of questions the young people ask? I’m sure, everything…

Henry: Oh! Yeah! That’s actually something I really enjoy much with, uh, with the young people is because with them, uh, we always have a Bible study, and we read the Bible, and, intentionally we bought those big, thick, *Life Application* Bibles, so that they can get the context from what’s in the bottom to help them read what’s in the top. And, because the thing I find with most Christians is they haven’t even opened the Bible. They’re always regurgitating somebody else’s comment about the Bible instead of having actually reading “the owner’s manual.” So I’m trying to get them to read it themselves. And so we have these topics. Sometimes you’re ready to go into, you know, we’re going to read something, right? And we try to read through, we did the gospels, we’ve done Revelation, that was fun, but then we do, you know, small epistles and that, and so, you’re ready to do something, and they have what’s called “burning questions” and this burning question will just keep going and going and going, and like, so what you do is just sort of close up what you had in mind and you just keep going, right? And I, they’re really good, cause it’s something that’s important to them, right? And if you don’t have answers, you just say, hey, you know what, I don’t have the answers, but I’ll sort of do some research for next week type of thing.

Lysianne: That’s good then. I don’t know.

Henry: Yeah. Well, it works for me. (general laughter)

Franklin: How do you think the youth group relates to fellowship?

Henry: Fellowship…

Franklin: Or your experience of fellowship.

Henry: Oh! Uh, with…
Franklin: either one.

Henry: What is funny right now is, is that uh, two thirds of the youth group do not belong to this church. Uh, yet they’re very tight group. Uh, so it’s kinda, kinda neat, in itself is a kind of fellowship. OK? Uh, so it’s kind of a subset of the group, and, uh, hopefully that answers your question.

Franklin: mm Hm.

Angie: Do you have any suggestions that we as “adults”—supposedly—could do to reach out to the younger people and get to know them and their individuality and you know, what, so, what’s happening? What’s going on in your life, Jenny? You know?

Jenny: (Laughs)

Henry: Exactly.

Angie: …and caring, and knowing… Or do we intimidate them?

Henry: Well, the thing is, is that you know, I watch people do this, but be intentional about asking them a question, and then listen, shut up and listen type of thing, right, you know that “hold your tongue” type of thing? Uh, cause if, you know, it’s like anybody, if you show that you care, they will respond.

Angie: They don’t think you’re being nosy, or, …

Henry: Well, you can always put it across that way, Hey, if you think I’m being nosy, just say so, right? Type of thing. But you know, genuinely interested, and How you doing, type of thing.

Angie: OK

Henry: Cause once you get a relationship, then you can go deeper. Right?

Angie: Yeah.
Franklin: Anything else? Sam?

Sam: Concrete help. When my mother, well, people that know me, my mother had a stroke fifteen years ago and me and my father looked after her at home for ten years and two years in the hospital. And a great help was having visitors come (shows emotion) because they, it’s like having a holiday from your troubles. I remember Hank Barton coming with his wife—that was a long time ago. And Donna Semplonius and Joan Barnes came once when I didn’t know who they were. I learned a lot about them just uh, just meeting them that day. And then they came after I’d come back to church, I knew them a little better. And Henry came once, I remember very well. I can picture these things in my mind very clearly. You have friends, other friends come, but they come, I don’t know it doesn’t stick as clearly as having someone from the congregation come. And unexpected people are more imprinted on your mind. And so, after my mother died, me and dad had been doing the same thing, going up and visiting people that we didn’t have, we did little visiting, but not very much, cause we didn’t have the time. And, special bond with the congregation? About 20 years ago, I built, refinished Hank Barton’s furniture. Every time I saw him after that, he’d mention how, what a good job I did. So, me and Hank always had a, he’d always try to… he’s a special guy (shows emotion).

Someone: For sure.

Sam: And #7, I don’t have a clue about. (smiles)

Angie: I’d like to say, if anybody had an opportunity to see Sam, well, and his dad too, but particularly Sam, the way he interacted and took care of his mother It was incredible. Absolutely incredible, Sam. You were, ahh, it was amazing! You could only hope to have somebody care that much for you. It was amazing.
Sam: Thank you.

Franklin: Any other comments? …about what Sam had said? (Pause) Margaret?

Margaret: Uh, one of the questions, Have I received concrete help from others? Most definitely. Uh, when Joshua had his accident, I think maybe we had known for half an hour and before, five minutes after that, people were at our door with food, with hugs, with… and I thought how did you find out? We just found out! And it was just like there was some kind of, like a connection there that they knew that we needed their support and they were there for us, and, uh, and I think I related last week just how emotional I got in one of the sermons, uh, one of the church services, and I had to leave and then there was someone who followed me down and comforted me and uh I felt that with a lot of people that whether it’s their bringing a casserole, or a hug, it’s all that concrete connection that is there. And, uh, have you been able to offer concrete help to others? Uh, I hope I do, I don’t know, I think with I’m with Angie. You feel like you’re… it’s something you do naturally, like I know for you (gestures to Angie) you are such a caregiver, and there are times when you have to allow other people to reciprocate and it’s really hard. So, uh, I think people receive your help, or my help, I think I do things, but uh I think I could do more. Uh, do you feel a special bond with others? Uh? I, Yeah, I think I do, I think I see people outside the church and I can feel comfortable right away, you know them from situations in church, either groups or when we’re all together listening in church, either to music, or the sermon, or the scriptures, I think that is a connection, it’s sort of like a universal thing, everybody’s listening to the same thing, and uh, that is—I always talk about energy, and I just think there is that, there’s an energy and we’re all doing the same thing, so I think that bond sort of flows out when you meet people on the street, or in other situations. Do you feel a connection between that
bond and the faith you share with others? Like everyone else, it’s very difficult to share your faith, uh, actually with a good friend it’s been, uh, very, probably different, good friends who don’t come to our church, but we find ourselves talking about our faith. That’s bec…, I guess, because we feel even more comfortable with them because we’ve known them probably longer and see them probably more frequently, uh, and we’ve kind of laughed about that and said, Well, I wonder if there’s anybody else around that does this, just sits around and talks about, you know, did you … you know, just about their faith, or a Bible story, or something, so… uh, I guess that’s all I have to say.

Franklin: Any questions for Margaret, or comments on what she said?

Jenny: I gotta stop the camera. (laughs apologetically) …OK, it’s all good.

Franklin: (to Margaret) Did you have anything from the stories that related to your experience of fellowship?

Margaret: I don’t think so.

Franklin: Thank you. Katie?

Katie: OK. Uh, that question on receiving concrete help from others, I think in my experience, Mar? it was probably the biggest influence. And I think he had a very difficult (struggles with emotion) If you don’t mind, I’m just going to take a breath… I’m just going to… thinking about it…

Sam: Been there. (general laughter)

Katie: My turn. (general laughter)

Someone: There’s Kleenex there.

Katie: I have, I have some, thank you. I’m not choking, so…

Franklin: Roxanne?
Roxanne: OK. I’ve definitely been on the receiving end of concrete help in this church I think especially being one of the few younger people, I feel like I have a whole lot of parents and grandparents (general laughter) but in a good way, like when Jake and I got engaged, some people organized a shower, and I can still tell you, like when I pull dishes out of the cupboard, I know that came from that person because I was so impressed by it because you kind of expect your friends and your family to do those things for you; you don’t expect that sort of thing out of your church. A terrible thing: every time I take out the garbage I think of the Semploniuses because they gave us this really nice garbage can. (general laughter) It’s so nice. Like, and when we had babies, Margaret and Corrine came and they had a lot of good advice for us because of their jobs and what they do and it was so nice to have people that you could talk about, about really intimate things that you can’t talk to other people about. Or being on the receiving end of clothing because as you know when you have kids you go through clothes like crazy, and they don’t wear anything out when they’re little. But I can’t say I’ve known a good place to give it back. Because again, it’s an older congregation and you just kind of assume they have everything. You don’t know how to help…

Lysianne: There are other ways to help. Such as wonderful things that you do in the CEC [Christian Education Committee]. (to the group) She takes minutes, and she has lots of good advice, she understands money, and …

Roxanne: I’m learning to understand money!

Mike: …runs the website…

Roxanne: Thank you. But, uh, forget what else I was going to say. Oooh! We were talking about whether or not there’s a connection between the bond you feel with people and
the faith you share, and some people said you don’t have time to really get to know people here, you don’t have time to talk about your faith with people here, there’s not a lot of opportunities to sit down and do that. But at the same time, you walk in the building and you know, All these people believe the same thing as you. They’re there for the same sort of reasons that you’re there and for that reason I feel a connection with people, even if you don’t know where they’re coming from or what they do during the week, you have that connection with them. And as for the stories, Uh, like I say we don’t do the fellowship dinners right now but when Jake and I were dating and were going here, when they did the—it wasn’t called the Christmas potluck, but when the three churches get together and the choirs would do a big practice before the evening service, the potluck used to be open to everybody, it wasn’t just a choir thing, towards the end it got to be just a choir thing, but I used to love it, getting to talk with people from this church, but getting to talk to people from the Anglican church, and United Church, it was a nice time to get to talk to people, so I understand how Frank feels (indicates the stories). But I also understand how Jill feels, cause you have those Sundays when you walk in the door and you just ask the wrong person, How are you doing? And (shakes her head to general laughter) you get a lot more than you bargained for. And like Henry said, some people are just that way, and you have to learn to accept them that way. But they are hard to accept that way sometimes. (smiles) I think that’s it.

Franklin: Any questions or comments, about what Roxanne said?

Henry: The thing with the kids is they bring a lot of joy to (lost words) other people (?) so that’s another spin on…

Roxanne: …even when they’re doing laps around the basement… (general laughter)
Margaret: …they’re wearing out shoe leather…

Roxanne: …and their parents!

Katie: We’re just envious of the energy.

Roxanne: Me included! (general laughter)

Margaret: When you said, uh, asking that, you asked the wrong person and they just
(gestures around with hands) unload on you, that is a gift, for you to be listening; that, that is your contribution to…

Roxanne: It doesn’t feel like a gift sometimes. (general laughter)

Margaret: No, I, yeah, but you don’t know how much that has helped that other person…

Roxanne: Right…

Margaret: And for you to swallow what you might be feeling at that time, and just allow them, that is a real contribution…

Angie: Yeah, I was going to say, allowing us as “parents and grandparents” to be, like, not in your pocket, but to sort of include us in your life, or just acknowledge us, and that, that’s very concrete help, too. Not like, “like you’re really old and I don’t want to talk to you,” like that doesn’t cut it, you know.

Roxanne: I didn’t call anybody old…

Angie: No! I know! I know! And that’s what I’m saying; that, that’s a gift you can give, that you do give, you don’t distinguish between age; that’s a gift.

Roxanne: I would like to add to something Lysianne said. When we did the play. That’s when I really got to know a lot of people, cause we had just started coming to the church, and you know how it is with the new people; everybody jumps on you, You want to
do this, right? And (mimes shrinking back) and here we did the play together, and I really got to know some people. Like a lot of them aren’t here anymore, which is unfortunate, but it was quite an experience, for sure.

Lysianne: I remember working with Margaret on the play and set and lines and everything, but she said, Would you like to join a pastoral care committee? Talk about new people being invited to join committees! Anyway, we did, I did, and we had it for a few years and that was, I learned a lot from that too, thanks to you and Angie and Mike. (nods) It was good.

Franklin: OK. Katie, are you O…

Katie: I think I can get it together here… Uh, I think there’s different levels of help that you can receive, and Angie kind of mentioned that earlier; it’s, it’s um, you can accept, like there’s a light (gestures shallow) level of help, and you can extend a little bit of help to somebody in just a comment, or helping them on with their coat, or down stairs or something, but to get to a deep, that deeper level, that’s where you have to have a, it’s easier if you have a connection, if you know somebody through something, or um eith-, that they’re a neighbor, or you happen to be there when they need that help, then you form that next layer of that bond, and you have that connection, or you have a, like you had the connection with Hank with the, your, um, restoring his furniture, like as soon as you have a bond with somebody, then you kind of jump on it, and it kinda reminded me of um, of uh, Frank [in the stories] and the potluck dinner, like he had, the food was kinda one of his enjoyments, and, and strengths, and he could use that as a, a starter to get to know other people, he had, it was a conversation starter, it kind of brought him, um, into a new group of people that he could talk to and relate to and the more he did, like helping out in the kitchen
and stuff, the more people he got to know, the more fun he had, and it kind of grew, and the
bonds, the layers, the layers start meshing and getting a little thicker, and um but you’ve got
to accept that help, and, and put yourself out there, I guess, to get to that layer, layer? And
some of it takes time; some of it just happens, and I know when um when, when Jacob was
sick, we met so many nice people in the hospital and anything that, any problems that he had
or we thought we had, you met up with other people that had much bigger problems, and
everybody was, most people were so happy and pleasant that it gave you a focus, and we
found that we would have these layers of friendship with people that we didn’t even know,
and you might meet up with them again the next week because everybody kind of came in
either monthly or two months appointments or whatever it was, but I figured if you could
meet up with these people and have these friendship bonds, or just communication bonds or
faith bonds, fellowship, whatever label you wanted to put on it, you could do it in a place
like a hospital, then, and you (looks to Sam) found that with your mom and people that came
to visit, you get to know people, and you may never meet them again, but they’ve touched
your life in a little way, and it made a difference. It doesn’t have to be a big thing, but, um,
it’s, you’ve got to be open, like you say, it’s I find it’s so much easier to help somebody else
do something too, but until Jacob got sick I never had to accept help, and even then when we
really did need it, it still, it’s still… and people were, were more comfortable if they could
do something, um, but, it’s uh I don’t think, you can have that fellowship in other parts of
your life too, like Sunday is nice cause you have that one connection with everybody in the
church, and other people have it in, you know, in your choir meetings or your committee
meetings, but you also find that in all the other aspects of your daily life, too, so hopefully
you can accept that help. (laughs shakily) because, I don’t know why, it… some people
always want, but most people like especially here tonight have said that they have a hard
time accepting help too and I would much rather do something for somebody else than ask
somebody to do something for me, so (shrugs) I don’t know, it’s just, that’s kinda surprised
me; I thought human nature, everybody was like (gestures grasping) I want, I need, and take,
take, take, like that’s kinda what part of our, our, uh, you know, that’s part of our some
people seem to think other people are like, but I really don’t think they are, so, anyways…
(shrugs). That’s… (lost words) I’ve said enough.

Franklin: Any… other questions or comments about what Katie said?

Lysianne: I wanted to say how generous people in the congregation are of their time
in preparing things for, say, the bazaar. So many women go out and make these things for
the bazaar, and some of them might not even approve of the WMS, but they go all out and
they bake and bake (general laughter) and then they, what I really get a kick out of is the
people who do the, uh, “what not” table because they get, THEY get such a charge out of,
out of looking at everything that comes in, and discussing the prices, and all those little
details. But they’ve given time, and it’s hard for them to stand on their feet, and I just think
that so many people in this congregation give to, and, their time and money and everything;
I’m really, I’m amazed. There’s another guy in this congregation who gives, you wouldn’t
believe! This guy here (points to Henry) comes down and help Bills (sic) put the water in the
lake in the spring or take it out in the fall, but mostly get it going in the spring. And this past
time, he had to do it several times during the day, and

Henry: …next door. Remember that? (general laughter)

Lysianne: He even came ONE NIGHT, after it was dark, to make sure it was
running, water was coming out of the pipe at the top from the lake at the bottom, so there’s
just a lot of people who give, give, give (smiles fondly at Henry). In this congregation.

(laughs) It’s wonderful!

Franklin: Thank you. Anything else?

Henry: Just one comment. Um, there’s a book out there called *Love Languages*. And one of them is acts of service. It’s, some people have a really easy time, they just want to sit there and talk. And that’s how they show their love to somebody. And the challenge is if you’re married to somebody who, they want to DO things for you, to show their love, and the person who you’re trying to do this for wants to have meaningful conversation, you’re not feeding them, but you’re feeding what you THINK they should be right? (lost word. general laughter) and so that’s kind of what you get, right? Um in that some people, um, the acts of service is how they show love; right? And it’s their heart and focus, and; they couldn’t stand still on the couch for 20 minutes, it would kill em, right? But, you know?

Lysianne: …to do things…

Henry: And it’s one of those things. So, we get that mix up, too, right? Within our families and friends.

Franklin: Any last words? (pause) OK! (To Mike) D’you have any last words?

Mike: No, I don’t.

Franklin: (to Mike) OK. So, I’m going to give them next week off…


Franklin: But I hope you can be in church on a week from Sunday.

Mike: …new set of questions?

Franklin: …and we have a set of questions for you.

Sam: Are they in the right order? (general laughter)
Franklin: That’s a GOOD, good question! (papers are passed) Yeah, we have the right to change the order as required…

Someone: Jenny is still filming…

Jenny: Well, I was told I was missing some last time, so I’m just going to keep going (laughs)

Mike: You gotta be careful what you say… (to the group) Um, I wanted to say that I’ve been watching what Jenny videoed last time, a number of times. I watch it downstairs and Corrine is working around upstairs, and she thinks that there’s an awful lot of laughter (general laugher) She said, You’re having WAY too much fun.

Henry: Is that not a good thing?

Mike: I think it’s a good thing.

Franklin: We’re pretty entertaining.

-End of Faith Conversation II-
Appendix 8 Faith Conversation III (Transcribed)

Franklin: Maybe we’ll open with prayer from the moderator.

Mike: Good. Last time before I led you in prayer, I made a little comment to you, so I will again tonight. Uh, I’ve again enjoyed very much listening and watching what you had to say. And I thank you all very much for your valuable contribution to my research. Let us pray. O God, we pause at the beginning of this meeting to recognize your presence and to thank you for your presence and we ask you for a good time together this evening, a time in which we are able to say things that matter to us, and things that are important to share. And we pray these things in Jesus’ name. Amen.

Franklin: OK. I thought for our warm-up round, we’d sort of ask do you have any reflections on the last two sessions? How are you feeling about this process? What do you think of the process? And/or have you enjoyed your experience in the group so far?

Angie: I will go first. (laughter) As long as you don’t ask me the first question. I think it’s been absolutely fabulous. Uh, I think we’ve all gotten maybe to know each other a little better. Katie and I spoke briefly on Sunday, and what a difference it’s made. I would like to see something like, like this continue, where you feel safe and you can be vulnerable and encourage each other and lift each other up. And I think it’s been great, and I personally have really enjoyed it and getting to know some people better.

Franklin: OK. Let’s go around this way. Roxanne didn’t want to be last, so, Roxanne?

Roxanne: I think it’s been really interesting to hear what people have had to say about different things, and I think it’s funny that on Sunday, you know, you give the casual glance around to see who’s there, but I go, “Where are the eight?!?” (points around to general
laughter) “Are they all here? Are they listening?” (more laughter) I think it’s interesting that we all have our, it’s like a little group, but it’s funny that we’re all spread out in the church still, like not everybody sits together, or, you know. It’s kind of neat.

Franklin: I’d like to mention, Roxanne, you didn’t have a whole lot of time to do that, look around the church on Sunday

Roxanne: Well thank you! Thanks for pointing that out.

Franklin: I was worried! I was worried for a little bit, there

Mike: He was looking around, too.

Roxanne: Cause I was late!

Angie: Oh!

Someone: He was looking for everybody…

Henry: Come back and sit with me!

Roxanne: Mike was doing the announcements when I came in on Sunday

Angie: Oh, because I didn’t know

Sam: The teacher was taking attendance

Franklin: No, no, I just wanted to make sure everybody was there. Just like you! (to Roxanne).

Roxanne: I was there (to general laughter).

Franklin: Lysianne.

Lysianne: Can I pass?

Franklin: Sure.

Lysianne: OK

Franklin: Sam?
Sam: Uh, it’s been exciting, and devastating at times, but I survived, so “what makes you, doesn’t kill you makes you stronger.” That’s about all.

Franklin: OK. Katie?

Katie: I’ve actually enjoyed this, and I feel like I’ve really struggled to figure out what my thoughts are, let alone speak them. And it’s obvious I’m sure when Mike is having to listen to all this stuff. But it’s something that I’ve never taken the time to, or even thought about discussing with other people is my faith and my ideas. Like, I would, if something… there’s always a topic on Sundays that would hit me and kind of balance out my life, but I wouldn’t just talk about my faith, and it’s uh, I’ve really struggled, I’m still struggling with it, but I’ve really enjoyed it and I think I’m getting a whole lot more out of it than Mike is getting out of it from me. (laughs) So, I’ve enjoyed it.

Franklin: Thank you. Henry?

Henry: Uh, (gestures toward Katie) same kind of thing. It’s a learning opportunity because you’re having to refine your thoughts and I find that, you know, what I try to do generally is read them (indicates the preparatory materials) and let it incubate for a while, uh, and then, you know, come back and say, OK, what do I mean by this stuff. And it’s very helpful. It’s also really cool to see other people’s snippets of their lives you know because it shows another facet of them, right? That you don’t normally see.

Franklin: OK. Elizabeth?

Elizabeth: Well I feel I’ve learned a little bit about everyone here. And I’ve enjoyed it. Uh, I’m a little comprehensive (sic) about speaking out. Uh, I’m not one to give opinions, especially to religion. I don’t speak up on that to too many people. (shrugs)

Franklin: Um, hum. Margaret?
Margaret: Um, each, uh, time before coming here, I’m quite apprehensive, and wonder, you know, I think about it ahead of time, but, I feel like Katie, by the time I get to say something I’m really not sure I’m saying it clearly. Uh, but it has been a time of reflecting on what faith means to me, what, what do I mean to the faith community I belong to, and, uh, um, it’s been nice getting to know people on a different level, and exchanging ideas and learning to listen, and, and uh, and feeling safe to, to express yourself. I guess that’s all I can say.

Franklin: Thank you. Did you have anything you wanted to add, Lysianne? Or… You don’t have to. If you want to, well, you can… OK?

Lysianne: Actually, I just might take the next step further. If this kind of thing is good, and people like it, it’s something maybe we could do in, in the future, having groups of people who just might like to get together and talking about topics that, this is just an idea floating around. I’ve heard of, I have been in a church where they just, they didn’t have women’s groups and youth groups, they had maybe a couple people who got together and then cause they wanted to talk about things, and then they formed a little group and then another group was formed. That could lead to all sorts of problems, but, um, it seemed that it’s a good thing and we should do it more. Maybe not an official Bible study, but just some people wanted to get together and talk, but how do you get that sort of thing going? I don’t know.

Franklin: OK

Margaret: Well, perhaps it is an evolution of Bible study, people look at Bible study and say, Oooh! Bible study! And then when you get there, it’s a, it is a conversation like this. You s… we sit and… there would be a topic, and reference to the Bible, but it ends up
being a current thing, with the message coming from the Bible scripture, so it’s, well maybe that, people have a different connotation of what Bible study is, and maybe this is maybe what it’s more like. If people got to know that, I don’t know…

Franklin: OK. Any other comments before we move on, about anything that was said in that round? OK. So, then our first “official” round I guess we’d say… uh, and before we start this, I want to say that uh regardless of what you heard in church on Sunday, there’s no quiz on the sermon, you don’t have to make pointed references to the sermon, there’s no quiz on the stories, uh, basically, you’re talking about your experience with mission in the church and I think that if somebody has a question for somebody who’s speaking, or has something that they want clarified, or something like that, I think we could be a little more open to that now that we’ve been together for two sessions. (smiles). So, Henry, we’ll start with you.

Henry: He who comes last gets first time… the last shall be first.

Franklin: The last shall be first. How Christian is that?

Henry: Um, I’m just going through some of the questions. What is mission mean to you? Uh, kind of two different types, uh. There’s the sort of the mission that’s way the heck out there, OK? And then there’s the mission that’s close to you. Right? Um, I’m more familiar with the mission that’s close than the other one. At some point in time, I’ll probably pursue the other one as well, but uh…

Franklin: Are you talking about foreign mission, when you say mission that’s way out there?

Henry: Distance wise. Distance wise, yeah. Yeah. Doesn’t have to be a foreign country. It could be just farther away from where you are, right?
Franklin: OK.

Henry: See, cause I, I mentioned in the first one, but you know, work is also a mission field for me. In the sense that, there’s 2000 people at National Steelcar. You’re bound to bump into a few people who’re having a hard time, right? And it’s funny, I mean, where I used to work, I had people come up to me, “Are you a Christian?” Right? And it was like, Yeah? (shrugs) But, you know, it was, it brought on conversation. Right? You’re not overtly trying to proselytize anybody, but you’re also waiting, looking for those opportunities. So I found that was one aspect. The other one is youth group. I really enjoy engaging young people because of their brains and how they’re thinking and things like that. And then usually there’s burning questions. And, uh, and it’s kinda neat, cause you let them, try to help them figure out what does it mean, right? Um, so that covers the first few.

“…outreach involve verbal communication?” Yeah. Uh, lot of the time, it’s kind of like the, uh, the us... one of the uh leaders of the church in the past said you know, something, it’ll come to me who it was, but, uh, you know, “preach the gospel every day, and if you need to, use words.” Right? That kind of thing? That’s been one of those that I heard, and I went, “Wow!” You know? That’s basically how you gotta live, right? So it usually ends up in verbal communication but it doesn’t usually start there. Amongst the church here, like I said, there’s a lot of different opportunities and stuff like that. I don’t get into everything cause I just can’t. There’s not enough of me going around to make that happen. And I am in favor of mission very much. So. OK?

Franklin: OK. Any questions for Henry?

Sam: The youth, uh, the youth, uh, group. How do they get, how do you get so many members outside of the church? Is that the kids…?
Henry: Well, usually what happens is you have friends. You know, the kids here have, bring friends.

Sam: That’s what I figured…

Henry: Uh, and, it sort of just mushrooms. And, see, cause here, we have a number of youth, but we don’t have massive quantities, right? And then the way I always looked at it was: if you’re being satisfied at a youth group or something, that’s great and you don’t need to be at ours. OK? I’m not trying to steal somebody else’s youth group. You know what I mean? Cause the idea is to get the word out wide, not steal from the same pool type of thing. Uh, the United Church, their youth system, well, wasn’t flourishing at all, so basically a lot of them came and joined us.

Sam: (indecipherable expression of comprehension…)

Henry: Uh, we have somebody from the Lutherans who’s just a friend of one of the other guys. And, and it just, it becomes sort of knitted together, right? So, that’s how it works.

Sam: Good. OK.

Franklin: Katie?

Katie: Um, well, mission to me kind of means sharing the message of the church within the con, the community, and further outreach beyond that. Um, I, uh, I don’t feel like I have, uh, I’m a big part of mission, It kind of scares me sometimes because it’s, to me it’s a huge task or mission, whatever you want to call it. And I mentally have to kind of break it down instead of thinking that I’m not prepared to go to Africa or Central America like I’m not prepared, er, I’m not sure whether “prepared” is the right word or not, but to me that’s what the mission beyond the church is is helping so many other people that, that, that need
help, that don’t have things. But one person can’t (clears throat) ‘scuse me, one person can’t solve all the world’s problems. And so, I kind of go (gestures backing away) OK, I can’t do it, I can’t do it, whatever, so I have to kind of come back to doing something small that I can do, and usually that branches out into something else and, the one thing that I have got involved in is the Community Kitchen a little bit and I’ve really enjoyed it; it’s, I’ve got to know a few more people too, and a lot of the clients are, there are some characters in there, and I’ve learned, I’ve learned a lot about that. I helped out with, uh, some, uh, handicapped kids when I was in university in, uh, the phys ed program, and almost kind of considered going in that direction, but that, that didn’t work out and, uh, so it’s just kind of like kind of pulled memories for me from, from that (smiles) from the olden days, too. And I realize that I did, I did enjoy it and I would like to, uh, like to do more, but I’m, (pauses, showing emotion, or uncertainty) this is me, I’m just feel very vulnerable here, but I’m really cautious about committing myself to do more and more because I’ve gotten myself into issues a long time ago, and, and ever since them, I’m like I want to do this, but this not, and my life is changed a lot in the last little while, and I’m trying to figure out where I’m going, and it’s like, so, but every time I do something, I’m finding that I enjoy it, and, um, so, I’m trying to stretch my boundaries so that I will do more, and be involved more, so, kinda got off track again, but, that’s me. (smiles in some confusion. Laughs to soft general laughter)

Just stop!

Franklin: Do you think there’s enough opportunities in the church…

Katie: I do. Like Mike mentioned them, um, in the sermon, and, and I, I’ve got a copy of it here, and everybody knows how many opportunities there are, and I, I didn’t really realize how many there were until you know, you (looks at Mike) kind of listed them
off during the sermon, and I’m like Oh, yeah! Oh, yeah! And I di..., I wasn’t really thinking of a lot of them as mission, but I think that’s, for me that’s where I kind of (looks at Henry) You said like there’s the two levels, and for me, there is, is mission within the community, like within the congregational community, the bigger community of the Dunnville area, and, and, and beyond, and beyond is so huge that that’s where I keep going (mimes shrinking back) OK, can’t do it all; just do something, and do, and to do some different things. And like I say, some things have, um, you know, faded into the, into the past, and some things are really growing, and, and new things evolve from some of them, so, that, to me that’s a healthy sign of mission to, that things are evolving and growing.

Franklin: OK? Any other questions for Katie? (pause) Sam?

Sam: Uh, Mike’s sermon did mention Mission Impossible. For me, it was The Blues Brothers. (smiles to general laughter) He’s always on “a mission from Gott.” He said it about 20 times and it stuck in my head (gestures to head, laughs to general laughter) It’s hard to get things out of your mind, but he basically was (unintelligible) helping out the orphanage or something, and forming a blues band, so that, but, mission itself, I’ve been so busy that most of these things in church that (shakes head) I looked at the wall, and watched the progress of mission down south, and I sent a cheque off to the Presbyterian World Service and Development, and that was about all I did for missions. (smiles broadly)

Franklin: Do you have any feelings about how the church is involved in mission? I mean, you come to the church and hear about what we’re involved in. Do you feel good about that…., or do you feel you contribute to that even though you don’t actually…

Sam: Well, the, the, it would be nice to have that early church where the, everybody was, you know, and, like I might be a caregiver, and somebody else might do something
else, and we’d but in this world it’s, it’s hard to, uh, I was a caregiver for so long that it’s I just (pause, smiling) it’s hard to change. I’ve been kicking Dad out of the kitchen. And out of the, he’d been doing all that sort of work and now, now, but he’s just reading, pretty much, well, he was doing dandelions this morning (general laughter) But, uh, so, started looking after him.

Franklin: OK.

Angie: I think in that way, Sam, you are using your gift. You’re honouring your father and you’re caring for him. And that’s, that’s your gift.

Sam: Yeah, but it’s not part of the mission that…

Lysianne: Yes it is. Yes it is.

Sam: You think it is?

Lysianne: Very much.

Angie: Yes. He’s your prime responsibility, in my opinion. I don’t know what anybody else would say, but in my opinion, he is your prime responsibility. And as you cared for your mother, you’re now caring for your father.

Sam: He’s easier to look after (laughs to general laughter)

Roxanne: And it’s not just that. It’s an example, right? Like even though you’re not necessarily doing something for somebody else, you’re an example to somebody else of what we need to be like.

Margaret: I’m sitting here thinking, All you people who’ve commented for Sam are also fulfilling mission. Encouraging, supporting. That’s part of it, too. I think that was neat.

Franklin: Any other comments? (pause) Lysianne?
Lysianne: Well that just leads to, I could just say one thing: Mission is everything! Everything that we do. And I’m an old fashioned missionary type, who goes overseas and (general laughter rendering a word inaudible) with all sorts of ulterior motives as you’ve heard, just to sort of, the adventure of going somewhere strange and unusual, but there’s so many missions going on in our world that are not necessarily Christian missions, but so many good works being done by people who’ll give their time and their energy and their love to help other people, that’s mission and it could be in your family, it could be somebody far away, it could be putting money in a, you know how many times you put money in, in an envelope because we get so many people wanting money, and that’s mission to, but we want more, if you want to be more Christian, then within the church... what bothers me sometimes is that there’s a lot of work going on by Christians and they’re, and that, well we should be quiet and humble, but the only thing you ever hear are the great sec… secular NGOs doing all this great work, and you get lots of letters from them requesting help, but you never hear about the work that is the sort of development work that is done by churches, Christians in the world, it’s just not publicized, because it’s, I don’t know why it’s not publicized, but maybe we don’t want to, we just want to do it humbly, quietly, so I, it, all of it is mission. Everything, any kind of giving is mission. (squints at Franklin, smiling)

Franklin: You’ve had a lot of experience in mission.

Lysianne: Mmm.

Franklin: What’s your experience in Knox, Dunnville? I mean, just, in sort… like, not listing it off, but more you know, What do you think goes on … mission in Dunnville?
Lysianne: there’s a lot, a lot. And I had an idea for another one. (general laughter) which I’ll whisper in Mike’s ear later.

Sam: Now he’s curious (more laughter)

Mike: What would that sound like? (more laughter)

Lysianne: Well, it’s in the, the idea’s in the latest issue of The Record.

Mike: The garden?

Lysianne: Mm?

Mike: The gardening stuff? (Lysianne looks puzzled) The gardening stuff?

Lysianne: The folks here from Mexico.

Mike: OK

Lysianne: I saw some in front of the, uh, supermarket today. Just… not to do anything in the way of proselytizing or even interfering in terms of the fine, fine employment measures that I’m sure the managers have under their fair conditions of work. Just to be uh, to listen to them if they have any problems, and, uh, listen to their stories, and if we need help with the language, we can call on Tim. Just a thought.

Franklin: Are you satisfied with your experience of mission in Dunnville?

Lysianne: NO! I’m not! (smiles) I’m just joking. No, of course I am. (general laughter) You know, you should never ask yes/no questions. You say, “Is there some reason, can you explain why you are not satisfied…”

Franklin: Or can you explain why you ARE satisfied?

Lysianne: Yes, something like that. That’s better!

Franklin: CAN you explain why you are satisfied? (general laughter)
Lysianne: I already have. There’s a lot of things that a lot of people are doing. And, uh, and they’re not doing it with a lot of publicity either, they’re just doing it quietly. (nods)

Franklin: OK. Roxanne?

Roxanne: Uh, kind of like I said already, I think that mission is more than just telling somebody about our faith. I think it, a lot of it is by example. You don’t necessarily have to tell somebody everything you believe, but they will notice that you live your life differently, and they might question you, like Henry said, it might lead somewhere, that they ask you something and you have that opportunity. I don’t think necessarily that you have to go out there and, I’m not sure how to say it, don’t knock on people’s doors? (general laughter) I don’t think you need to do it THAT way, I think, I think that you can do it by example more than anything. And I agree with Lysianne; I think that there are so many opportunities here, if, I think you could find something, and if you’re not happy with the opportunities here, then you can go find something to do. Like there’re so many things out there that need people to help them that, I don’t think it’s the church’s responsibility to find it all for you. (sotto voce) I can’t remember what else I was going to say. (general chuckling)

Franklin: Any comments, uh.

Katie: I, I’m glad to hear you’re talking about mission as being so much more. I was kind of compartmentalizing it, I think, but you, you guys have encompassed everything and, and even the idea of setting the example and not professing your faith to people at your front door, or anything like, it’s just everyday experiences, and, and helping family members, like it’s just a total package, not something that I’m trying to put labels on or little compartments. Makes more sense.

Franklin: OK. Anything else?
Mike: Well, I, I want to go back to what you were talking about, Sam, because, um, there’s, there’s something in the New Testament and some of you who know the New Testament can tell me where it is, but it’s something about taking care of people, uh, um especially the household of God, it says. So, I suppose reference is to the church, but I think the principle is that you, um, you start close, um, and you know, you can’t get much closer than who’s living in your house. And there was your mother, in obvious need, so, you know, uh, you HAVE to then respond to that need. Now, some people will try to farm it out, and send her off somewhere, and maybe that’s OK in some situations, but I think the people in this room have been clear that we admire um what you did. And, um, for me that certainly falls within the um, purview, as Lysianne would say, of mission. Because, you know, there’s an obvious need plunked right down in front of your face. So then what do you do? Well, you respond. That’s what you did. So…

Franklin: OK?

Jenny: I’ll stop the camera… There. OK

Franklin: Angie?

Angie: Yes.

Franklin: You’re up.

Angie: I’m up? OK. Um, OK. When I first read the question, and I had a copy of Mike’s sermon and re-read that, so, I’ll try to blend them both together, but my immediate reaction, it says, what does the word mission mean to you? My gut reaction was it means your purpose, your goal, your reason for being. Is your mission. That was my first gut reaction. Uh, then, I went to Mike’s sermon and I highlighted, and mission meant a job or a task assigned to someone, and that’s OK too, so, Uh, I’m going to be rambling here because
I’ve got notes all over, Uh, I see mission as part of what the church does, yes. Uh, I just reach out the community, well, the meals on wheels, different forms of volunteering, and the mission team that went overseas, um, that was all good, and I think there’s people involved with the pregnancy centre, which is really good, and, am I personally involved in any of these efforts, No. I’m not. Uh, I think, this isn’t written down, this is just, ooh, this is just coming out and this is scary, cause I’ve never really said this out loud before, for me, the really, really hard, hard part is I think I need to tell everybody about Jesus, because he’s like the best, right? He changed my life so much. But the reason I, I know the reason I think that is because of some training I had that helped me see how important Jesus was, and is, and not just going to church and doing good deeds, so I think everybody should know that, like, it’s not just about going to church, it’s not just about doing good works, it’s about, like, Jesus! And having him in your life and letting him change you. So I have a really hard time sometimes because I, I really don’t say that to a lot of people and then I think feel guilty sometimes really that I should cause that was the training that I had, I think it’s all confused in my head. Uh, so I tend lots of times to say less, which you’d probably never believe (laughs) but it is a fact. Anyway, so, and, One other thing that was, has always been important to me, uh, I’d say especially when my kids were little, but even now, in my second marriage, is, uh, if there’s a need or something, or you’re making, for instance, a casserole or some cookies or something to take to someone who’s sick, make sure there’s one at home for your family! You know, don’t ignore your family to help others. I think your family has to be your first priority. That’s only my opinion. If I made cookies, there has to be cookies at home. If I made casserole, there’s something at home that they enjoy. To me, that was really important. And that’s part of your mission to your family. Because God
gives us our families for a reason. OK. That’s enough on that. Um, let’s see. (looks at papers) Do you ever imagine changes that would make the mission more satisfying? Uh, like I mentioned last, last week, whenever, lady’s Bible study, or group like Lysianne was talking about, a lady’s group, uh, or, like I said earlier, a group like this, because I think we’ve really … have developed “communion” (air quotes) and we’ve, we have a trust in, I feel like I have a trust in all of you; I know what’s said isn’t going to be taken outside of this room, and nothing that is said will I take out of this room. And I think it’s good for us to bounce things off of each other. OK. (smiles) I’m done.

Franklin: Any questions or comments?

Henry: I was curious what you thought about your hair cutting. Cause you went, you sort of, the way you cut hair?

Angie: That’s my mission?

Henry: Sorry?

Angie: That’s my life.

Henry: That’s what I thought, cause…

Angie: It’s

Henry: …you went above and beyond the, you know, it’s, you know, $2 for a hair cut or whatever you want to say, but it’s like here, you’re going and catering to people…

Angie: Yeah

Henry: To me, that’s mission to,

Angie: It is. It’s definitely, I have customers who actually pray together,

Henry: Yeah!
Angie: I have customers that don’t know they’re being prayed for. Cause I’m praying as I cut their hair, Please help this to be a good hair cut (smiles) No. (general laughter) …that the clippers don’t slip. That’s really nasty (more laughter) Uh, but you’re absolutely right. If they’re having a perm or colour, as you all know, takes time to develop, I always have coffee or tea and goodies ready and they sit in the kitchen and we have coffee and tea and stuff. There’s probably not a lot of places where you get your hair done that has that. But I enjoy that.

Henry: That’s what I was going to say. I thought that was what …

Angie: Yeah. It’s what I, it’s what I enjoy, so I… And say all that, and I will tell you all that I’m retiring in June, or semi-retiring, and I’m so excited. (laughter) OK.

Franklin: Thank you.

Margaret: Um? Mission. Uh, I think it’s having a purpose for your life, and then as you, uh, get to know other people, and you, uh, fit into your community, having that purpose enlarged (sic) and include that, the community and, uh, I was fortunate to go on a couple of mission trips, and I came back thinking what do I do with this? Uh, I saw, I went, really not knowing what to expect; I had in my mind the, uh, uh, the missionaries who (gestures toward Lysianne) I’m not being derogatory, I’m just, stories of sort of taking over a culture and proselytizing, evangelizing, making people believe what you believe, and I didn’t want it to be any part of that. I don’t even want to be called a Christian, because I don’t feel that I can live up to that, uh, and I don’t like the connotation of the things like the crusades, uh, there’s a whole mess of stuff that have happened in the name of Christianity and I feel I want to be called a follower of Jesus, but I, I just get all mixed up in that negative stuff, so I went with mission thinking, I’m not going to do anything but help build this house, help
paint this wall, and, uh, that’ll be helping. And I came back learning so much more from the people we were “helping” (air quotes) that, uh, and as I say, I didn’t know what to do with it when I came back. Uh, everything was so much simpler, everything here is so, uh, according to, like, everything has to be done, like, right, and be perfect, and have, uh, a reason for having, we have the stained glass windows, we have the, you, you know, the upkeep and everything else that has to be done in the church, and I, how can we make it more simple? Um, that’s one of the reasons I don’t believe in the air conditioning going in, because I think that’s just, we’re just depending on our creature comforts, we don’t want to suffer, we don’t want to have to put up with anything, plus we’re doing stuff to the ozone layer (puts up hands, palms out) I, like, I’m really off on a tangent, (laughter) but I just feel, uh, (sighs) Um, I don’t know what else to say, uh, pretty much, uh, I, I feel mission to me is, has become more personal, and if I can help someone on a personal level then I get overwhelmed if I start thinking about the experiences we’ve had abroad, so, (pauses) I have belonged to many, uh, groups in the church and I just found that there would be the same people coming and uh, I’m in ch…, I was chair of groups, and then you get, become the chair, and then that’s it; you’re the chair, and, uh, so I’ve learned to, to say No and maybe it’s to my detriment, maybe I would, we should start to open up a bit more, but I’ve just sort of had to put brakes on because you can get, um, completely, um, overwhelmed, at least that’s how I was feeling, and so, I think there’s lots to do, if you want to get involved, and, uh, but I have become cautious because, you get involved and then you’re it. So, I’ve in the last few years just backed away, so, um, anyway, I guess … I guess that’s all I have to say.

Franklin: Any questions or comments?
Elizabeth: She made my, mare, reminded me of the things I do in the church, and then somebody’ll ask me something, and I’ll just sort of get overwhelmed by… (looks at Margaret) you know. I think Oh, my goodness, not one more thing! (laughs) I just get … to the point where, I don’t think I can handle anything else. I’ve got my hands full. And (laughs) my brain, I don’t know if it can take any more.

Henry: Yeah, but it’s a good thing to say No.

Elizabeth: I know, but I don’t LIKE saying No. That’s MY problem.

Henry: It’s just that everybody’s so intimidated to saying Yes all the time… That’s OK.

Angie: No’s a really hard word.

Elizabeth: Yes, it is.

Angie: …and especially if you’re care.. a caring person…

Elizabeth: I have a hard time saying No.

Angie: Yeah.

Elizabeth: …to anything or anyone.

Angie: Yeah…

Elizabeth: I don’t like to feel that I’m letting someone down? It doesn’t matter whether it’s family, or whether it’s uh, someone here at the church, or where it is. If I feel I can help, I’ll help, but (shrugs)

Angie: But not to your own detriment because… That’s, that’s a hard line to draw, balance, it’s, yeah, that’s all the same things, I could be gone all the time, and ooh ooh (mimes out of control).

Elizabeth: …yeah, and never home to do, sit home and relax a little bit…
Angie: Yeah, and you have to just quit. And it’s hard, it’s harder to do it, it’s easier to say to somebody else what to do, but it’s hard to do. But once you start, it gets …

Elizabeth: …it gets a little easier, but (laughs) Over the years, I’ve had to say No a few times, and it hurt, but… I had to!

Angie: It’s funny, but one of our grandsons was home over Christmas, staying with us, and someone called and asked me to do something, and I, actually I said, No, I’m sorry, I can’t. I hung up, and he goes, That’s the first time I’ve ever heard you say that. And I’m What? He said, No. (laughter) I said, Really? He goes, You never say No to anybody, Gramma. And I was, O- K-. Maybe I’d better rethink this! And he’s 27, so, you know (grimaces). Yeah.

Franklin: OK, I haven’t started your time yet, Elizabeth.

Elizabeth: Oh, you didn’t? (laughs)

Franklin: No, I was …

Henry: She was kinda hoping that was it!

Elizabeth: Well, to me, missions is, uh, reaching out and helping others. I try to do that, uh, in the community and in the church, but, I, uh, (shrugs) I don’t know; I’m just, like I said before, I’m comprehensive (sic) about a lot of things and I feel that our church is doing a lot and, in the area, and in out of the country as well as around us, and, uh, (pause) I don’t know (shrugs)

Franklin: Are you satisfied with your opportunities for mission in our church?

Elizabeth: Uh, yes. I’m on enough different committees that I think I can, that’s all I can handle.
Lysianne: There’s a terrible bureaucracy in the church, and a lot of things that have to be done, and we’re human beings and we organize ourselves by committees, and presidents and secretaries, and it can be really, um, discouraging because it doesn’t seem very interesting, exciting, it’s not passionate work, it’s not inspiring, it just has to be done to keep the machine rolling. And we do a lot of those things, and you have to think that’s part of mission too. Otherwise, you get so discouraged. (smiles impishly)

Franklin: You mean getting involved with the bureaucracy like the session and the board of managers, and …

Lysianne: Yeah, yeah. It’s that we’re human and we have to, that’s how we get things done, by having somebody in charge, and they call the meeting, and we, the action takes place. It’s not very romantic or exciting, it’s just… But behind it is the feeling that something needs to be done.

Elizabeth: …and the satisfaction of when it is finished.

Lysianne: Yes.

Elizabeth: …and then we can rest.

Lysianne: This event’s over…

Elizabeth: Like at Christmas time, decorating the church. There’s a lot of work involved in that, and we need many hands to get it done, but when it’s finished… people seem to appreciate it, so… (pause) Hopefully they do. (laughs)

Angie: How can we encourage people to, uh, define, to discover their own gifts, and then provide avenues for them to use those gifts? How can we do that? Is there a way to do it? How can we encourage people?

Franklin: Is that part of your experience of mission here, that we need that?
Angie: Yes. I’d have to say, Yes. So it isn’t always the same people, all the time. When there are probably many gifted people that walk in the door and walk out. And they’re gifted, but don’t know it. Or we don’t know it; they don’t know it; nobody knows it.

Margaret: Or maybe they know it and don’t want to get involved and they come to church for that quiet time, and we have to acknowledge and honor that, too.

Angie: Yes. Right.

Margaret: …and it’s really a quandary; I understand what you mean.

Henry: One other thing that’s interesting, Mike and I, and couple other people, (gestures toward Amy) Amy was there too, There’s an idea of sprinters vs. marathoners.

Someone: Hm?

Henry: Sprinters vs. marathoners.

Angie: Mm. Right.

Henry: A lot of people get on board, get on some meeting, and they’re there forever, right? But there’s a lot of people who’re sprinters, too; they don’t want that long term thing. They’re into: here to three weeks from now. And they’ll, they’ll love to do that, but they’re, sign ‘em up for that, go away! Right? And that’s one of the things that I see with people is that, sometimes if you can get them to think about it, look at it for a short period of time. It’s not a long term commitment here, if you like it, you can sign on for another short period of time, you know? Uh, we don’t normally do that. We try to hook somebody in and they’re in for like ten years, right? So, that’s one thing that tends to, you know, mess up. So… And the only other thing I was thinking about for mission point of view, is motivation: why are you doing it? You know? Uh, God’s not after, uh, it’s not a, so many good points and you get in, type of thing. Right? That’s not what he’s about. You know, the idea of mission, from my, at
least my thoughts were, that it’s a, how do I say it, side effect? Of your faith? Is that there’s fruit. To being a follower of Jesus, right? This happens to be one of the fruits. You know, and, uh, it’s not that because you’re a Christian or follower of Jesus, or however you want to define yourself that you’re good, cause there’s a lot of people who don’t have any of that, and they do really nice things. But, why do you do it? Well, because of your relationship with God. That’s kinda how I look at it.

Franklin: Were you using the idea of fruit as a reward?

Henry: No. The fruit of being is, uh, (shakes his head) the out… what is the output of, if you make a commitment to, say, do something, somehow it should show. That’s your fruit. Like if you say you’re a blacksmith but you’ve never touched a hearth or anything else, what’s your fruit? Nothing. So, are you really a blacksmith? So, you see what I mean?


Henry: When you make a commitment to do something, somehow it should show. It’s not because it’s by works that you do it, but it should manifest itself. Right? See what I mean?

Franklin: Yeah. OK. Any other questions or comments for this round?

Angie: Is what you’re saying, Henry, it’s a sort of outpouring of your inner being?

Henry: Yeah. it’s just saying, What’s your motivation?

Angie: Yeah, it has to come from inward outward.

Henry: Is this just so I get a pat on the back cause, you know, I got all these points, you know, newspaper says I’m great and all that sort of fun stuff. (smiles) Or is it, you know, your relationship with God? (nods)

Franklin: OK that’s the end of the… it’s break time
Next Round starts with casual banter about the cookies Franklin had brought for break, after which…

Franklin: OK. For this round, uh, I, I’d like to sort of encourage you to maybe make some comment on the stories or on the sermon. Uh, I had a question for you that if you don’t have anything else to say, maybe you can answer this question. Mike mentioned in the sermon about if an objective person were to look at, uh, an objective and uninvolved person looked at our congregation, he might have two critical comments: one that, is our tendency not to have a clear word of explanation to go along with the good things that we do. And, uh, I think that refers to confessing our faith. And the second one is that, uh, probably be the sense that we are not passionate about mission. So, if, yeah, if you have a comment about those, if you agree or disagree, or if you have something else this, that this objective, uninvolved observer might see in our congregation, you can talk about that. Anyway, Henry?

Henry: Hmph! (general laughter) OK. Um, The two points that I thought were what you made; the first one was, Why, uh, why’re you doing what you’re doing, type of thing. Or. And it’s very much true. Like, a lot of people do stuff, but they don’t explain why they’re doing what they’re doing. And, you know, I thought that rung very true. Uh…

Franklin: …in terms of professing your faith?

Henry: Yeah.

Franklin: …this is outreach from what I believe … that God calls me to do?

Henry: A lot of people have a very hard, or have a difficult time doing that. Uh, …is breaking that barrier and talking about their faith. I think it’s probably one of the biggest fears most people have, uh, if somebody says to you, Well, tell me about your faith, well
(mimes shrinking back) it’s like this until you get somewhat comfortable with it. Uh, yeah, so that’s what I was thinking about that. The two stories: Um, you know, like Olive, was disenchanted because people aren’t getting out there and making things happen, um, you can, you can see that happen, um, I kinda look at it as Faith is in the long haul. Um, If you’re trying to be super passionate, right now, everything’s focused; I watched, uh, one of our, uh, kids that’s associated with one of our family friends, she went to Haiti, very passionate about mission, right, decided that school was going to slow her down. She just wanted to get out there and make it happen. And, uh, then she got out there, and she actually crashed and burned, and came home early. And, uh, the part was, is that she realized that, You know what? To be—not that she wasn’t valuable—to be more valuable to God, she had to learn something. That she could offer. Right? And so when she’s back now, she’s really keen on trying to move beyond that so that she wasn’t stuck? Right? And, uh, you know, so that’s kinda… She was Olive (from the preparatory stories). And then she sort of morphed a bit, with experience. So…

Franklin: Do you think we have any mini-Olives in our congregation? Do you think somebody might have that experience with mission in our congregation?

Henry: Uuhm, you guys that went on a trip and stuff like that, I mean, I would expect people who’ve gone on a trip, uh, to have difficulty coming back. Cause I’ve watched my kids go to, like, North Spirit Lake, where people don’t have a whole heck of a lot; they come back and they go: we’re so privileged but we, just take it for granted! Kind of thing. So that’s usually the thing that most people need a little deprogramming, so that they can get back into society, vs. having a big crunch, uh, So, if, if it was, that would be where it… but I wasn’t really involved with the different people who went.
Franklin: OK.

Katie: I kind of lost track of what the questions were, now… (general laughter) I was just going to say I wrote down some comments that so I could remember them, but they’re, they’re over there,

Henry: Here’s these two questions…

Katie: Yeah, but you didn’t write down my question… my comments! (general laughter). So, uh, I’m trying to, well, the one thing that you were talking about too in the sermon about people not being passionate about mission, and my thoughts are still kind of morphing now, changing of what I think mission is, and so I’m, I’m kind of at a stall again, of, of what I think. But I think people show passion in different ways and maybe I’m not interpreting what this un-, you know, uninvolved person would be, how they would be looking at things, but, um, I was kinda talking to Margaret before, too, about this, and the church itself and mission itself are pulled in so many different directions, like there’s so many parts. The church has all the committees, and everything has to work together, everything, there’s so many different levels that are interconnected and to me, mission is kind of like that too, and this idea of the burn-out can happen so easily because you’re trying to fit all these, these parts together. And I guess some people can fashion their lifestyle, or their thoughts or their feelings that way for a while and then I think things kind of jumble, or hit a wall, and then you have to kinda reassess things and kinda go back in the same direction so that your, you’ve, if you want, if you’re interested in helping or going on a mission, like this, these young girls or these people that want to help, you’ve got to have, you’ve got to have something that you can help and share with. But you can’t do it just by yourself either, you’ve got to be part of a, a bigger group. Like, within, within our
immediate family, immediate community, uh, yes, we can do the individual things that
everybody has been talking about earlier. But when you get into more of the outreach area
(sighs) I’m not sure. I think I’m going to just stop where I am. I’m just going to stop
(gestures palms up and out, back and forth) I, I’m, my thoughts have just been (shakes head)
at least my brain is, is functioning. It’s just not functioning well together right now (general
laughter) So many thoughts going around in my head, and I was just saying to Margaret, I
just read this book about a lady who grew up in Labrador in very primitive survival lifestyle,
techniques, and Margaret was talking about how little these people have when you get into
some of the outreach mission areas, and how simple they, life can be, and we make things
complicated as we get into more complicated civilizations and everything, and this lady
survived, or had a very interesting life, and that’s another thing that is jumbled around, and
I, I was just at this book club last night and we were talking about it and between all those
thoughts, and these thoughts! (gestures confusion) my mind is shutting down, so…

Franklin: OK.

Katie: that’s absolutely no help, but that’s why… I’m no good to you tonight.
(laughs to general laughter)

Franklin: Sam.

Sam: Everybody keeps telling me that mission is different than what I thought it was,
so… Passion I understand.

Franklin: Do you think there’s, that we have passion for mission in our church?

Sam: Well, if they tell me (shows emotion) caring for people is… (nods)

Henry: Just may not be overtly, you mean, overtly passionate type of thing…
Sam: I don’t know in the church if we’re passionate or not. It’s hard to tell. My little chin quivers when I get passionate (laughs) Maybe Mike’s noticed that. I don’t think… that’s just… inside, I…

Franklin: The other, the other question was a tendency not to have a clear word of explanation to go along with the things that we do, not professing our faith, with those, do you think that’s…

Sam: Words are trouble. As I was talking with Mike, the word Missionary to me is sort of a, had bad connotations… I lost a good friend to the missionary when I was three or four years old. She was staying in our house, and she decided she wouldn’t be a nurse anymore and was going to become a missionary. And for me as a kid, that (laughs, sighs) that was tough, to lose somebody I’d grown up with for half of my life. (laughs, sighs) So, words, words are, there’s no way of making them perfect, cause people have different experiences. And the one person says one, something, and the other person will react completely out of, you know, out of the place as what you’re saying. Maybe they’ll take offense, but your meaning is completely opposite. I, I said, uh, there, Dad had people phoning up asking for money, and I said, well, something like, “…you people…” You people should, should quit calling! They were badgering him and, you know, they weren’t being, they were being really nasty to him. I said, You people… and he took great offense to that, thought I was, I was, uh, a racist because, I, I assume he must have been black, but I didn’t know that. But he, I mean, just those words, to me, meant nothing, but those words to that person, were like fire.

Someone: Mm, hm.

Franklin: Did you have any comments on the stories?
Sam: The stories? I like the, uh, Mission #2; I agreed with that pretty much, right to the, except for the Lotshaka, I like the Lotshaka, I like going out to the dinner and all that, but the rest of it, is more or less what I think.

Franklin: The second part?

Sam: Yeah. The first part, I don’t, I don’t know the community… I know the guys. I met them on the street, but, curiously, what is the guy’s name at, that crossing guard on Lock and Pine St.?


Sam: Don. I thought it was Don. You don’t use a name very often, and you lose it. We went without knowing names for a year and a half, to just walking down the street.

Franklin: So, so, you, your experience of mission has been pretty much like the second story; that’s sort of what you’re saying.

Sam: Yes.

Franklin: All right. Thank, thank you. Anybody else have a comment? (pause)

Lysianne.

Lysianne: Well… I was at a synodical just for the last couple days, of the WMS, it’s, there’s passion there, there’s mostly older ladies, but fair number of young ones, 150 all singing loudly, passionately, and then, there was a mission couple who’d been in Malawi, and they were, that was one lively presentation, lots of fun, um, but, again, it’s just the same story, these people are very, very poor, and they’re so generous, and they have such happy faces, and they have absolutely nothing but mud huts and great medical problems, and yet they, they really are quite amazing people when you go and live with people in those countries. It’s just like what we discovered in Central America. So, that can be inspirational
but I know, we’re mainly dealing with us, here, and we can contribute to the work that’s being done in those countries and we can contribute to the work that’s being done in Canada. Most of us can’t go anywhere. We just have to be here, and we can do what we can do here. Um (shakes head) this, uh, as this lady was saying, the last one, uh, (puts paper away) I don’t know. I’ve met in this congregation a lot of people who did not want to be involved in mission. They were against mission. When money comes to the church they want it to go to the church and not to be sent away for anything at all. Maybe they’re just a couple, just a minority group. And I find that hard to understand because my heart is so somewhere else because that’s my upbringing. I, I, I’ve lived in those places and so I, I just can’t understand why they can be against it, but I try to understand because they haven’t had that experience.

Henry: Hm.

Lysianne: Uh, But mission is as I say everything. It’s not just overseas stuff. But the overseas stuff can be really exciting. If you get involved. So, I would recommend to, you know, all young people to go, on any kind of mission trip, whether it’s organized by the church, or by the any other organization, just to be there and see what it’s like. In those countries.

Franklin: How do you find our congregation’s response to the Mission Awareness Sunday?

Lysianne: (Shakes head, tips head back with eyes closed) People are very generous. And people are—well, Mission Awareness Sunday is, how do, nobody talks about it. They just put the money in the envelope, which is good. Nobody says one, one way or the other. “…It’s the WMS… Here we are again. OK. Put the money in.” But I don’t know what they
feel because I haven’t actually talked to anybody in the last couple years who was against mission. Which I did when I first came here. So. Again, it’s a problem we don’t talk about very much, what we think. On the other hand, Amy, you know more about it because people talk to you in your store. But can I, can I refer to somebody who isn’t in this group? (general laughter)

Franklin: She can’t say anything. You can refer to her.

Lysianne: Sorry. Sorry.

Franklin: That’s fine.

Lysianne: They wouldn’t talk to me, cause they know how I feel so, they can talk to other people, how they really feel.

Franklin: OK. Any other comments? Thank you. Roxanne.

Roxanne: I can see how someone like Olive would view our congregation that way, because we don’t jump up and down, we don’t get all excited about it, but that doesn’t mean there’s not passion. Because I know that there are people in our church who feel that meals on wheels is their thing to do, and they are passionate about it, but unless you talk to them, you don’t know that. And I think it’s like we talked about in the first meeting. We all kinda know each other to say “hello and how are things going” but we don’t know each other on that deeper level. And I think that’s why it would LOOK like people aren’t passionate, but I think that there are. You just have to find them and talk to them about it.

Franklin: The question about tendency not to have a clear word of explanation to go along with things that we do? Is that a…

Roxanne: I don’t think there always needs to be.

Franklin: OK
Roxanne: Like I said before, I think a lot of it is by our actions. I think people need to see you acting like Jesus wants us to, and acting like him. More than explaining every little thing.

Margaret: (inaudible)

Franklin: Speak up, Margaret?

Margaret: I said, Or saving a soul. That, to me, is, yeah. That used to be the thing in our Sunday School when I was growing up, that that was our purpose, and I (shakes head) to me, yeah, everything is more personal, and I have no business trying to change anybody, if they want to change because of what I do or say, fine. But I’m not going to, you know, make that my mission, sort of thing. To act.

Roxanne: You might, you might without even knowing it. Something that you have done…

Margaret: Exactly.

Roxanne: … might even not realize it till ten years later and go, Hey wait a minute…

Margaret: …that’s what that meant.

Roxanne: Yeah. I don’t think it needs to be an aggressive thing.

Margaret: But that’s how I was, sort of instilled in me. It went against my personality. I rebelled against it.

Roxanne: That was one note I made to, uh, What could change in the church and make it better, and I think that we’re uncomfortable; in our society it is *not* acceptable to tell somebody exactly what you believe, like, like it seems pushy, or, you don’t want somebody to do it to you; why would you do it to somebody else? And I think that we have to become more comfortable in our faith to be able to be a better witness.
Franklin: OK? Anyone else?

Lysianne: Well, there had to be a few people who did that in the past because otherwise the story wouldn’t have been told. I agree, I agree with what you said, but the history of Christianity is telling the story and sometimes it IS saving the soul, and sometimes it IS putting away the old gods, and the old idols. You had to do it. And that convinced them and they did. And if those people hadn’t done that, we wouldn’t have it today. I don’t know. Whatever. You can’t do that in the street but.

Franklin: Mike made reference in the sermon about the difference between the 1st C Christians telling the story of the resurrection compared to the 21st C story, that people say, Oh, I heard that, I’ve heard that so much that I don’t care… OK. Angie?

Angie: Uh, I don’t have a lot, anything to say, really, about either story. I think, uh, probably I personally could fit into either category, um, I don’t know about anybody else, I probably have to be concerned with what, how I feel, what I would experience, and I could probably fit into either one. Uh, I agree with what Margaret and Roxanne and Lysianne and everybody’s been saying. Um, we need, we need to be more comfortable talking about what we believe, not saying that you have to believe this, but if somebody says, like, why, why do you live that way? Why do you do this? Why do you not do that or whatever, then you have to, you have to learn to be able to comfortably say, in a conversational manner, as if you were having any other kind of a conversation, I do or don’t do this because of my faith, because of what God’s done in my life. It doesn’t mean I’m telling you you have to do that, but you asked me a question. And so we need to be comfortable answering that type of thing. That’s it.

Franklin: OK.
Angie: (Mimes closing lips tightly. Smiles)

Franklin: Margaret?

Margaret: I don’t know that I have anything more to say.

Franklin: OK

Henry: I’m just laughing. Turned it off, and it’s 30 seconds (referring to Franklin’s stop watch in a situation where he just gets it set and the person declines to speak. General laughter)

Elizabeth: Well, I don’t really have much to say either, so...

Franklin: OK

Angie: Now I do.

Franklin: OK

Angie: Has this whole process not been a mission? It’s been a mission helping Mike. So, has that not been a mission? And I think in so many ways we’ve all helped each other. So that has been a mission as well. That’s all.

Franklin: OK. Any other comments?

Katie: I wish Mike well. I’m trying to, I’m kinda interested to know how you’re hoping to be able to use some of this information to, to do your presentation. Do you have some ideas of where you can go with some of these ideas and comments?

Mike: Um, I have uh… this is kind of go off the record. This is beyond the…

Katie: Are you able to

Mike: I’m quite willing to answer that question. I’m just

Katie: I’m curious.
Mike: I don’t want to take time away from anybody else, but. The, uh, I’m working with qualitative research methodology, so it’s different from quantitative research methodology where you hand out questionnaires and do lots and lots of interviews and generate a lot of statistics, and with those statistics you say, Look. Here’s what has been shown to be true. Um, qualitative research, I’m not, like in my chapter on methodology I start out by saying I’m not really looking for what all church people everywhere experience. I’m looking for what it is to be part of Knox Presbyterian Church. What is it? To be part of Knox? Not what should it be, but What is it? And so as you folks talk, that’s the answer to my question. Now, that’s the beginning of the answer to my question. Because the particular methodology that I’m using really, really stresses writing. So the idea is that I will listen and listen and listen and read and read and read, and I’ve got underlining here (indicates transcripts of first two faith conversations in his folder). And, uh, I will, I will, uh, look for themes; what themes are coming out in what people have said? And then, uh, as I, as I generate themes from what you’ve said, I’ll begin to get ideas for what I’m going to write. And then I’m going to write, and edit, and rewrite, and rewrite, and generate what they call “a phenomenological text.” That just means a text that delves into the meaning of the phenomenon of being part of Knox. That’s the phenomenon. So, uh, you can’t, you can’t lose for me. Unless you lie to me. (laughs) You know, if you tell me how you’re feeling. If you (gestures to Katie) tell me, well, you know, I’m all confused tonight between what I was thinking about in of preparation for this meeting, and what I was thinking about as part of a book club last night. And that was about Labrador, and here we’re talking about something else, and that’s helpful to me.
Katie: It’s, I know it sounds very jumbled in a way, but it’s, it’s just triggered so many uh, I just feel like all this stuff has been let bombed inside my head and it, I feel like I’m trying to pull ideas and thoughts together, and as people go around, it kinda makes more sense but I still go home and I spend the week trying to sort out the last two sessions and thinking, feeling like, OK, I’m, I’m, I feel like I’m personally learning and getting um, a lot more out of this than I’m offering. So, I’m just, I’m glad that some people are able to put their thoughts and their um in a more concise form.

Lysianne: Katie, nobody’s, I don’t think anybody’s putting their thoughts in a more concise way than you are. (laughter)

Katie: Actually, tonight I have kind of noticed that everybody else’s thoughts are kind of jumping around, but it’s just opened up so many different topics and ideas and thoughts, and I had no idea that no idea that I had, and, like, I had a lot of thoughts! I’ve been around a long time, a long enough time, but I haven’t, it’s uh, just finding it really interesting seeing how other people are combining different things, things that, personal experiences are coming out, things that have happened to you that you’re sharing, and that’s triggered something else in somebody else is saying, and, and it’s just helping sort, all this stuff is kind of filtering down. (looks at Mike) So that’s why I was hoping that you are able to get something valuable that you can put in print so you can go somewhere with this. So…

Mike: Well, think back to when you were studying education, and they talked to you about cognitive dissonance. So, when you’re teaching a phys ed class. Your students all come in and they think they know it all. And then you lead them a little bit and they start saying, Uh, wait a minute. That doesn’t fit! And as soon as…

Jenny: Mike! I gotta stop the camera!
Mike: As soon as they realize that something doesn’t fit, then there’s the possibility of learning. And so I’m hearing you talk about cognitive dissonance. In your own life.

Katie: Oh, yeah!

Mike: And that’s exciting. (people interrupt with some excitement)

Katie: This is huge. This is huge for me. And to be able to talk to somebody about it. I’ve never talked to anybody about it. So it’s really, really big thing for me.

Lysianne: And learning is sort of organizing all those thoughts.

Katie: Mm, hm. And that’s what I feel like I’m just getting an inkling of, of getting, pulling, pulling stuff together, so,

Mike: And cognitive dissonance, I don’t care if somebody tells you that’s important for education, doesn’t feel good. Cognitive dissonance feels like (mimes head shaking, confused) the jumble. And then that’s, it’s exciting though. It’s the possibility of moving beyond what you’ve understood before, and several people have said, Hey, we need somehow to make this happen more in the church. And then the other night Franklin says, Yeah, but without the formal pressures of an academic program, would it ever happen? And then the next thing that we came up with was, when we were preparing for tonight was, we looked back to the Christmas Sunday service, which we started out down here, and we had coffee and something to eat, and, and we met in groups,

Lysianne: Christmas Day…

Mike: Christmas Day.

Sam: It was an interesting…

Mike: And then we said, Why don’t we do that on a somewhat regular basis? And have a service that starts down here, with groups at tables, and maybe one or two of you in
each group, (laughs) you know, to sort of make a transition between what we’re doing here and how we could do this in the congregation.

Katie: Well, I mean, I remember somebody saying at the beginning that they had, they were stepping outside their comfort zone and I certainly felt like that too. But it is comfortable outside that comfortable zone, to a certain extent, too, but it, it, uh, you can feel the little tentacles starting to grow (laughs) beyond that center point, so that’s… I’ve, uh,

Mike: Maybe that comfort outside the comfort zone is what a couple people meant when they used the word “safe.” Because we are talking together in a way that we’re not used to talking together. But somehow it does feel a bit safe to be here.

Franklin: Any other comments?

Margaret: Once you get beyond your comfort zone, things become familiar, then they become comfortable, so then you do stretch, I guess, yourself.

Angie: That’s ____ when you get a growing process, you can, no matter how jumbled you are, when everybody else comes at, with their opinions, then you can, you grow. Well, you jumble more, but then you think but yeah that’s right, so you grow…

Margaret: Yeah.

Angie: That’s what it is. You grow. I think it’s just been marvellous. I really do.

Franklin: We have one more meeting after you have your (gestures to Mike) report ready for us?

Mike: Yes. I talked about generating a phenomenological text, which would be my effort to put into words what I have heard you say. And then I will give you a copy, and then I will ask you to come back together and you can tell me, NO, that’s not what we said! (general laughter) OR,
Lysianne: Your interpretation of what we said.

Mike: Yes. Yes.

Henry: So we can limit you to five pages? (general laughter)

Mike: Sam said the same thing: “How long is this?”

Henry: This is 30 pages…

Mike: It’s a good point. I’ll have to remember that.

Angie: I have a question for you, Mike. You said earlier that you’ve been reading and WATCHING. Um, has watching facial expressions and body language been of any … Yeah?

Mike: Yes. Uh, I, I notice when I, uh, transcribe, that a fair amount is lost, because of the way people speak, and, uh, how many words per minute people generate? There’s great variation in this group. (general laughter, Mike nods, smiles)

Margaret: I find that with reading sermons. And having you give the sermon. There’s such a wide… talk about cognitive dissonance! (laughs) There’s such a difference. Like, the expression, and a lot of the time, I only see the back of your head, but uh, still, no, you do turn around and address the choir too but we miss a lot when we don’t have your facial expressions and that too. There’s quite a difference between the written text and the delivery. I appreciate the delivery, I’ll say.

Sam: I was amazed at how close it was to the…

Angie: Isn’t he good!

Sam: I couldn’t remember two, two lines. I’d switch all the words around! I don’t know how you do it.

Angie: He works at it.
Elizabeth: I’ve heard him working on it. (laughs) A few times.

Margaret: It’s admirable.

Angie: (to Mike) Are you comfortable with the changes? Mike, are you comfortable with the changes?

Mike: Which changes, Angie?

Angie: The changes in your presentation, The changes in the congregation. The changes, the changes that have been happening in the congregation and in your life.

Mike: Uh, I’ll get into cognitive dissonance. (general laughter) And as Sam and Henry were saying, it’s easier to see looking back than looking forward.

Franklin: Would anybody like to lead a closing prayer?

Henry: I like the way you do that when you stare at somebody. (general laughter)

Franklin: When I asked the question…

Mike: It’s just a yes or no question, Lysianne.

Lysianne: I will. Our Heavenly Father, we thank you for this time together. It’s been an enriching one, one that we’ve enjoyed, we’ve benefited from. It is a joy to meet our fellow Christians, people we know and see every day. It’s a joy to talk to them more closely and feel closer to them. Thank you for the closeness that you’ve given us in these sessions. We pray for Mike and his work and his success in this endeavor. We pray for all of us, for this congregation, for this community. We pray that our mission will grow and that we will understand that it is mission, and we will understand and even be able to organize it into comprehensive things that are not dissonant. We thank you Lord for your presence with us in all of our sessions. We pray that we’ve done what you would have us do. We pray this in your name. AMEN
Mike: I want to ask one question: When we met after church that first day, (you know what I’m talking about?) I said that you will be surprised at how good your contributions will be. Was I right or wrong? Did you find this surprisingly richer than…

Sam: I was surprised; I survived! (general laughter) That’s the way it is with me. I’ve lived with this a long time. It’s always there in the back of my head. I can go on to bigger groups now maybe. I didn’t want to go in the choir because I didn’t want to go up in the front. …pass out or something.

Margaret: But you enjoyed the small group?

Sam: Yeah. It was a good test. I was testing; Mike is testing… (chuckles) We’re running different tests (general laughter).

Angie: Well, you certainly stepped out of your comfort zone!

Sam: Oh, yeah.

Mike: …takes courage.

Margaret: Sure does.

Someone: I’m glad you did!

Someone else: …for sure.

Elizabeth: Going into a choir is very daunting.

Roxanne: People can hear you sing!

Elizabeth: I was in the choir…

Someone: …what?

Roxanne: People can hear you sing!

Mike: An hour and 49 minutes!

End of Faith Conversation III
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