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ENGAGING THE LOST IN HIGHLY SECULAR SUBURBAN SETTINGS

BY

STEVEN M. REESE

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE
FACULTY OF COVENANT THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

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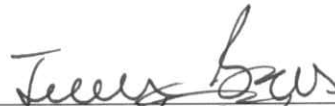ENGAGING THE LOST IN HIGHLY SECULAR SUBURBAN SETTINGS

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Abstract

Even though city centers and urban cores are attractive to church planters, the church must not overlook the pressing need in highly secular suburban settings. To that end, the purpose of this study was to discover the process by which recent converts became Christians and connected to local churches in thoroughly secular suburban settings. Following a qualitative research method, along with the constant comparative method, eight recent converts were interviewed. The researcher looked at the hurdles encountered by participants in their conversion process and how the hurdles were navigated through relationships, resulting in commitment to specific local churches.

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Acknowledgments

This journey in the Doctor of Ministry program has spanned three World Series in which the Cardinals played, winning two out of three. Throughout the whole time, my wife Julie has stood at my side, supporting me and sacrificing much in order for me to complete this long journey. Elizabeth, Katherine, and Christopher, my three children, have watched their dad read a lot of books, hide away in his downstairs office writing, and given up much of their time with me. I am grateful and humbled by their sacrifice and relentless love toward me.

I extend my heartfelt thanks to the session of Redeemer Presbyterian Church. They attended to the pulpit and leadership of the church for the course of several weeks while I focused exclusively on writing. I am grateful to Casey Higgins, Jim Mattson, Todd Nemitz, and Max Taylor. They are truly partners in ministry to me as we shepherd together the flock God has given us.

May this work help us all in the work of reaching out to those without a shepherd, living in the highly secular suburban settings in the western United States.

Chapter One

Introduction to the Study

Sharing the gospel with secular people who are outside the church and have little

or no prior church background is an increasingly difficult challenge. After a year of

developing relationships in his new neighborhood, Ronald,[1] a young church planter in a

suburb near the urban core of Denver, is still seeking to gain traction with his new church

plant. While his colleagues in a young network of churches are gathering people by the

dozens if not hundreds, Ronald feels the pressure to produce similar results. However,

Ronald keeps engaging non-Christians with minimal results. He struggles with feelings of

incompetence and failure. He's been told that the other more successful planters have the

gift of apostleship, which explains their greater numbers and his lesser effectiveness.

Ronald is left wondering about his giftedness and what it takes to reach his non-believing

friends. He's beginning to wonder if he and his friends are even doing the same type of

people-gathering work. Are they gathering Christians or non-believers? He seeks to know

how to contextualize the gospel for his suburb, which lies close to the urban core of a

highly secular western city in the United States.

In a blog entry entitled, "The Attractional Basis of Neo-Reformed Church Plants

YES OR NO?" in January 2011, David Fitch, professor at Northern Seminary in Chicago,

raised the question concerning the spiritual background of newly attending churchgoers.

He noted, "I have no doubt that the success of many of the New Reformed Missional

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[1] Names have been changed and stories are composites of real-life examples.

churches in the cities is the result of the influx of twenty-something populations into the cities in the past fifteen-twenty years with little or no place to go to church."[2] The question he was asking of this group was, "Prior to this church, did you come from a previous church or Christian upbringing?" He was seeking to elucidate how Christians were gathering and whom they were gathering into their churches, primarily in the city. In a response to Fitch's blog, Tim Keller, founding pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City, wrote, "Today it is very possible to start a center city church simply by attracting people from evangelical backgrounds to live and serve in the city. You can gather a church without actually evangelizing the residents. I'm glad we started up before that possibility presented itself."[3] Later, Keller noted, "After about 1998, for every one New Yorker/secular person who came to Christ, we saw 2-3 others join who were coming from other churches. Without that, we would be a quarter to a third the size we are now."[4]

Recent literature and seminars have focused on contextualizing the gospel in urban settings and city centers. As helpful as these materials have been in clarifying the need and practice of contextualizing gospel ministry, the transfer of these principles to a highly secular suburban setting has received little attention, increasing the challenge for suburban church planters. The suburbs do not offer the lifestyle appeal offered by their urban core counterparts. Therefore, the literature, training, and teaching for evangelism in the suburbs receive little attention and appeal.

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[2] David Fitch, "The Attractional Basis of Neo-Reformed Church Plants Yes or No?: Or Don't Try This at Home If You Live in the Secularized North," http://www.reclaimingthemission.com/?p=1762 (accessed September 22, 2011).

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid.

In addition, it must be noted that many do not live in urban settings or city centers. The Denver metropolitan area, the focus of this study, has a total population of 2,868,412.[5] Denver proper has a population of 600,158.[6] Accordingly, those living in the suburbs comprise seventy-nine percent of the population as compared with the twenty-one percent living in the urban cores and city center. Thus, Denver, which is listed among the top forty least spiritual cities in America,[7] contains sprawling suburbs filled with non-churchgoing adults and families. "There's (sic) fewer churches here per person, and fewer people that go to church here than literally almost anywhere else in the United States," says Pastor Brian Brown, who moved to Denver from Texas with his family and a team of other church planters three years ago.[8] Denver's suburbs comprise seventy-nine percent of its total population. While it has been exciting to consider gospel contextualization in Denver's Lower Downtown or Capitol Hill communities, the need for gospel outreach in its suburban application has received little attention.

The significance of Denver, with its large non-churchgoing demographic, is that it provides an example for what will be a growing reality across the United States. If suburban churches and their leaders do not learn how to reach a growing demographic of non-believers with the gospel, then the church will diminish in size and influence regardless of how their urban core counterparts are doing.

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[5] "2011 Economic Forecast for Metro Denver," Metro Denver Economic Development Corporation, http://www.metrodenver.org/metro-denver-economy/forecasts (accessed September 22, 2011).

[6] "Denver County Quickfacts from the U.S. Census Bureau," U.S. Census Bureau, http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/08/08031.html (accessed September 22, 2011).

[7] "The Barna Group - New Barna Report Examines Diversity of Faith in Various U.S. Cities," Barna Group, https://www.barna.org/barna-update/faith-spirituality/435-diversity-of-faith-in-various-us-cities#.UoVuT5FR4R8 (accessed September 22, 2011).

[8] "New Church 'Plants' Sprouting in Denver," 9News.com, http://www.9news.com/news/story.aspx?storyid=161167&catid=222 (accessed September 22, 2011).

Problem and Purpose Statements

The church faces a challenge that will not go away, reaching people with little or no previous church background in highly secular suburban settings. The challenge grows each year along with the increase in the geographical size and numbers of those living within these settings. With trending interest in church planting and mission for the urban core, as well as the absence of literature for contextualizing the gospel in secular suburban settings, the Christian has fewer and fewer resources for the task.

The calls for ministry to the urban core are compelling and increasing in number. John Stott's commentary on Acts 18 says, "Christians need to move into the cities, and experience the pains and pressures of living there, in order to win city-dwellers for Christ. Commuter Christianity (living in salubrious suburbia and commuting to an urban church) is not substitute for incarnational involvement."[9] Wayne Meeks, historian at Yale University, points out in his book, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul,* the advantages of evangelism in the city over towns and country.[10] With these advantages comes the increasingly compelling nature of a call to the urban core and less focus on gospel ministry in suburbia.

When one reflects that in 1950 less than one fourth of America's population lived in the suburbs, and that in fifty years later more than half of America's population lived there, one realizes that it is import to focus on this growing critical segment. David Brooks humorously points out:

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[9] John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Acts: The Spirit, the Church and the World* (Leicester, England: IVP Academic, 1994), 292-293.

[10] Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul*, 2nd ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 14-19.

It's as if Zeus came down and started plopping vast towns in the middle of the farmland and the desert overnight. Boom! A master planned community! Boom! A big-box mall! Boom! A rec center, pool, and four thousand soccer fields! ...How many times in human history have two-hundred-thousand- or five hundred-thousand-person communities materialized out of practically nothing in the space of a few years.[11]

The church must not overlook its call to this vast and growing mission field, but it needs help in understanding how to reach it. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to discover the process by which recent converts become Christians and connect to a local church in thoroughly secular suburban settings.

Primary Research Questions

The following research questions were used in this study:

1. What hurdles do recent converts encounter in becoming Christians in secular suburban settings?

2. What helps recent converts to negotiate these hurdles?

a. Contexts: What are the contexts that facilitate recent converts to negotiate these hurdles?

b. Relationships: What are the relationships that enable recent converts to negotiate these hurdles?

3. What influenced recent converts to commit to a particular local church?

Significance of the Study

Churches located in suburbs, especially newly planted churches, must not engage in gathering believers out of other churches. Those in highly secular suburban settings face an intense challenge as they seek to reach and maintain a sustainable size; they need

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[11] David Brooks, *On Paradise Drive: How We Live Now (and Always Have) in the Future Tense* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004), 3.

as many people as they can get regardless of their source. Church leaders must resist this temptation, as they remain focused on the goal of reaching people who have little or no prior religious or church background.

Therefore, this study is significant for church planters, pastors, and Christians seeking to engage those living in highly secular suburban contexts. It gives them the ability to understand and utilize the process by which those living in highly secular suburban settings become Christians and commit to a local church. First, this study identifies the suburban contexts that are most conducive to spiritual conversations. Knowing how to identify and what to look for in these contexts is crucial for engaging secular people in spiritual conversations. Second, it provides an understanding of the specific hurdles to Christian belief that secular people face in suburbia. Insight into these hurdles gives the credibility and confidence that Christians will need if they are to help secular people in suburbia negotiate these obstacles. Finally, this study identifies key factors and characteristics of churches to which new converts are drawn. Identifying these factors and characteristics allows churches to prepare themselves for greater effectiveness in their secular suburban contexts.

Definition of Terms

Third Place – Third places are informal public gathering places. The phrase "third places" derives from considering our homes to be the "first" places in our lives, and our work places the "second."[12] A third place is a "mixer."

Suburban – In this study suburban means suburbs in which there is a thoroughgoing secular stance or resistance to spiritual issues.

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[12] Ray Oldenburg, "Our Vanishing Third Places," *Planning Commisioners Journal* no. 25 (1996): 6.

Recent Convert – People who have become professing Christians within the last three years and have actively committed themselves to a local church.

Chapter Two

Literature Review

The purpose of this study was to discover the process by which recent converts become Christians and connect to a local church in thoroughly secular suburban settings. Discovering this process assists both church planters and church leaders serving in highly secular settings in a suburban context. Abert Hsu, who points out the shifting population to which the suburbs have been the objects over the last fifty years, underscores the importance of this issue. He says, "In 1950 less than a quarter of America's population lived in suburbia. By 2000, over half did. Urban cores have plateaued or are declining, while the suburbs continue to expand and grow at amazing rates."[13] Along with Hsu, David Brooks explains that the huge mass of people now living in suburbs have little if any significant contact with the city.[14] The focus of this literature review is to address this increasingly dominant cultural context. As Joel Kotkin points out, cities will no longer be the main areas of national life.[15]

While there is little literature specifically addressing the challenge of evangelism in highly secular suburban settings, the Bible provides examples of the gospel engaging hard to reach people in very secular settings. Two other areas of literature also bear on

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[13] Albert Y. Hsu, *The Suburban Christian: Finding Spiritual Vitality in the Land of Plenty* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books/InterVarsity Press, 2006), Kindle 110-111. (Kindle "edition" provided no pagination.)

[14] Brooks, *On Paradise Drive*, 21.

[15] Joel Kotkin, *The New Geography: How the Digital Revolution Is Reshaping the American Landscape*, 1st ed. (New York: Random House, 2000), 22.

this challenge. First, there are very helpful works describing the religious life of those living in suburbs. Second, there is a growing body of literature describing the public context in which relational dynamics occur. These three areas will shed important light on the process of evangelistically engaging people in the secular suburban context.

Biblical Foundations for Engaging Secular People

What does the Bible say about engaging highly secular people in suburban contexts? Is there any encouragement for the church planter or church leader seeking to start or grow a church in this suburban context? Are there examples and patterns in which this activity has taken place? Within the scriptures, the power of the gospel is demonstrated in the highly secular context of Philippi, amongst a group of deeply self-sufficient people in Corinth, and moving in some high levels of political power and influence. While not specifically addressing suburban contexts, the scriptures do address the kind of people who live in them.

Three Key Conversions in Philippi

F.F. Bruce points out the key nature of three conversions in his commentary on the book of Acts. He states, "Three individuals are singled out by Luke among those whose lives were influenced for good by the gospel at Philippi; they differ so much one from another that he might be thought to have selected them deliberately in order to show how the saving power of the name of Jesus was shown in the most diverse types of men and women."[16]

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[16] F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, Rev. ed., The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988), Kindle 5368-5370. (Kindle "edition" provided no pagination.)

Lydia

Acts 16 records the narrative surrounding the conversion of Lydia through the ministry of the Apostle Paul, Silas, and Timothy. The importance of Lydia is pointed out by Richard Ascough, New Testament professor of Greek at Queen's College in Ontario, Canada, when he writes "Lydia was the host and patron of the first community of Jesus-followers established in the land mass that would later be known as Europe, and she was the nexus for the network of Jesus's believers in and around Philippi."[17] This view is further corroborated by A. Boyd Luter, professor of biblical and theological studies at Criswell College in Dallas, who states, "…her conversion is a major milestone in the Christian witness as it moves slowly but surely 'to the ends of the earth.'"[18]

Lydia was crucial to the movement of the gospel, but did she need the gospel? What was her spiritual state? In Acts 16:15, Luke indicates that she had a household, addressing any physical or relational needs she would have experienced. Her position as a seller of purple goods indicates that she was an accomplished businesswoman. Richard N. Longenecker, prominent New Testament scholar and former professor of New Testament at McMaster Divinity College, says in his commentary on Acts, "Thyatira was famous for making purple dyes and for dyeing clothes—industries mostly carried on by women in their homes (cf. Homer, Iliad 4.141–42). As an artisan specializing in purple dyes, Lydia had come to Philippi to carry on her trade."[19] John Stott, former rector of All

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[17] R. S. Ascough, *Lydia: Paul's Cosmopolitan Hostess*, Paul's Social Network: Brothers and Sisters in Faith (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2009), 1.

[18] A. B. Luter, "Partnership in the Gospel: The Role of Women in the Church at Philippi," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 39, (1996): 416.

[19] Richard N. Longenecker, *Luke--Acts*, Rev. ed., The Expositor's Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006), Kindle 27938-27939. (Kindle "edition" provided no pagination.)

Souls Church in London, goes even further and indicates that Lydia was presumably the Macedonian agent of a Thyatiran manufacturer."[20]

If Lydia had no apparent social need or financial need, then what accounts for her remarkable conversion? Luke reveals, "The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul."[21] Lydia, as a perfectly self-sufficient, accomplished businesswoman, came to Jesus because he was true, and God opened her heart.

The Pythoness

The remarkable story surrounding the conversion of the Pythoness is told by Luke in Acts 16:16-19. In his work on the book of Acts, Dennis Johnson, professor of New Testament at Westminster Theological Seminary, points out the supremacy of gospel power over pagan divination. He writes, "There were no rituals, no concatenation of secret syllables, no manipulation of talismans, and no examination of omens. Only one thing explains the instantaneous result: 'the name of Jesus Christ.'"[22] Luke declares that the slave girl had a spirit of divination, revealing that he regarded her as demon-possessed.[23] This means she was subject to great bondage. Tim Keller, in a sermon entitled *A Woman, A Slave, and a Gentile,* makes several observations about this woman. Keller points out that she was a woman in a man's world, which means she was powerless; she was someone's business asset, which means she was exploited; and she was a pythoness, which means she was enslaved.[24]

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[20] Stott, *The Message of Acts*, 263.

[21] Acts 16:14

[22] Dennis E. Johnson, *The Message of Acts in the History of Redemption* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R Pub., 1997), 278.

[23] Acts 16:16

[24] Timothy J. Keller, "A Woman, a Slave, and a Gentile" (New York: Redeemer Presbyterian Church,

This secular, enslaved young girl daily followed after Paul and his friends, shrieking in such a way that Paul became deeply troubled over her and grieved at her condition. Luke says that Paul turned and commanded the spirit to come out under the name of Christ.[25] F.F. Bruce describes it like this; "The words had scarcely left his lips when she was released from its power."[26] Stott adds this interesting note concerning Luke's placement of her conversion between that of Lydia and the jailor, "The fact that her deliverance took place between the conversions of Lydia and the gaoler leads readers to infer that she too became a member of the Philippian church."[27] The power of the gospel broke through darkness, leading a spiritually enslaved girl into the light and into the early New Testament church.

The Jailor

The final of the three conversion stories Luke records is that of the Philippian jailor. When the owners of the now converted slave girl lost the income that she had brought them, they took their anger out on Paul and Silas, imprisoning them under the watch of the Philippian jailor. F.F. Bruce comments, "The good deed done to the slave girl was not at all to the liking of her owners; when Paul exorcized the spirit that possessed her, he exorcized their means of income: she could no longer tell fortunes."[28]

The jailor's conversion happened during a crisis moment. An earthquake took place, popping open all the doors of the jail. The jailor, sensing his life would be in

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November 9, 2003), Sermon accessed online at Redeemer Sermon Store.

[25] Acts 16:18

[26] Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, Kindle 5384.

[27] Stott, *The Message of Acts*, 265.

[28] Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, Kindle 5398-5400.

danger due to the compromised prison cells, was about to take his own life when Paul cried out to him in a loud voice. Responding, the jailor rushed to their cell and asked for salvation. How did he know they would have answers for him? The jailor was told to keep Paul and Silas under close guard.[29] This means he would have observed the gospel at work in their lives as they prayed and sang hymns within earshot of the other prisoners. In the moment of crisis, the jailor knew where to go for help. Responding to their message, Luke says that the jailor was baptized that same hour, along with his whole household. The change was immediate; as Bruce points out, "The jailer bathed the wounded backs of the two men, probably at a well in the prison courtyard, and there too he and his household were baptized. 'He washed and was washed,' says Chrysostom: 'he washed them from their stripes, and was himself washed from his sins.'"[30]

The three conversions in Acts 16 demonstrate the power of the gospel in the lives of highly secular or self-sufficient people. Stott sums up the conversions and points out the power of the gospel saying, "Racially, socially and psychologically they were worlds apart. Yet all three were changed by the same gospel and were welcomed into the same church."[31] In agreeing with Stott, Bruce writes, "they differ so much one from another that he might be thought to have selected them deliberately in order to show how the saving power of the name of Jesus was shown in the most diverse types of men and women."[32]

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[29] Acts 16:23

[30] Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, Kindle 5470-5471.

[31] Stott, *The Message of Acts*, 268.

[32] Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, Kindle 5369-5370.

Corinth

Philippi presents the power of the gospel in the lives of three highly secular

people, while Corinth demonstrates the gospel's power in the context of a highly secular

city. Corinth was noted for a level of corruption and immorality that exceeded that of

even the ancient world. Even the Apostle Paul noted the effect of the secular nature of

Corinth in his first letter to the church. In a moment of vulnerability, he reveals, "I was

with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling."[33] Richard Hays, professor of New

Testament at Duke Divinity School, shows how the name of the city itself became a used

as a sensual term. He explains, "The comic playwright Aristophanes, for example, coined

the verb *korinthiazesthai,* meaning to 'to fornicate.'"[34] The need of the people living in

Corinth prompted Paul to write, "I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus

Christ and him crucified."[35]

Supplementing the moral dysfunction of the city were the numerous sites of pagan

worship, adorned by statues of gods and goddesses.[36] The temple of Aphrodite, also

known as Venus, the goddess of love, institutionalized the immorality of the city. While

the temple was situated two thousand feet above the city, the temple slaves, numbering a

thousand, "roamed the city's streets by night as prostitutes."[37] Hays does point out,

however, that historical and archaeological investigations show that the temple prostitutes

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[33] 1 Cor 2:3

[34] Richard B. Hays, *First Corinthians*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1997), 4.

[35] 1 Cor 2:2

[36] Hays, *First Corinthians*, 4.

[37] Stott, *The Message of Acts*, 296.

predated the Corinth of Paul's time.[38] C.K. Barrett, commentator and lecturer in New

Testament, provides a somewhat moderate view on Corinth, "In Paul's day, Corinth was

probably little better and little worse than any other sea port and commercial center of the

age."[39]

Corinth's status as a seaport town meant that it functioned as a commercial center.

It commanded trade in all directions because it was situated on an isthmus, joining

mainland Greece to the Peloponnesian peninsula. As such, it was filled with

commercially driven, self-sufficient people. Stott points out the residents of Corinth,

"boasted of its wealth and culture, of the world-famous Isthmian games which it hosted

every other year, and of its political prestige as the capital of provincial Achaia, taking

precedence even over Athens."[40]

How was a church established amidst a context of proud and sinful people? Paul

experienced opposition from religious quarters,[41] legal attacks,[42] as well as a slow

response to his preaching and teaching.[43] Tim Keller detects four stages in the

establishment of the church in Corinth over the course of eighteen months.[44] During this

time, Luke revealed the fear that Paul experienced,[45] corroborated by Paul's own words

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[38] Hays, *First Corinthians*, 4.

[39] C. K. Barrett, *A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 1st ed., Harper's New Testament Commentaries (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), 3.

[40] Stott, *The Message of Acts*, 295.

[41] Acts 18:6

[42] Acts 18:12

[43] Acts 18:4

[44] Timothy J. Keller, "Mission to Corinth," Acts Small Group Curriculum (New York: Redeemer Presbyterian Church), 3.

[45] Acts 18:9

to the Corinthians in his letter to them.[46] Then one night, Paul received a vision in which Jesus promised his presence and directed the apostle to continue preaching the gospel, revealing that there were many people belonging to God in Corinth.[47]

The draw of the gospel in the established church at Corinth was such that Paul came to expect secular people in their worship services as a regular occurrence.[48] Richard Hays, in his commentary on Corinthians, sees this as a continuing fulfillment long envisioned by Israel's prophets. He says:

> First Corinthians 14:25 echoes the language of Isaiah 45:14, which says Gentiles from Egypt and Ethiopia will come and bow down before Israel, saying, "God is with you alone, and there is no other; there is no god besides him". Thus, when the church prophesies authentically, it becomes the instrument through which God accomplishes the eschatological conversion of the nations--or at least a foretaste of that final event.[49]

Thus, the preaching of the gospel, no matter the difficulty of the context, is the means by which God brings about the promises made to the prophets of Israel long ago. It is these promises which have led Tim Keller to construct worship services and to preach messages in such a way that he expects non-believers to be present, even in his own highly secular context in a city similar to that of Corinth.[50]

Namaan

The New Testament includes many examples of the power in God's redemptive message for reaching highly secular individuals. Likewise, the Old Testament records the story of Rahab, the flesh-for-sale woman, who believed the message of the spies sent

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[46] 1 Cor 2:3

[47] Acts 18:9-10

[48] 1 Cor 14:24-25

[49] Hays, *First Corinthians*, 239.

[50] Timothy J. Keller, "Evangelistic Worship," 2001, Article, p. 6, New York.

ahead by Joshua in the campaign against Jericho.[51] The power of God's word and the redemptive message is seen as Nebuchadnezzer's life is restored and he recognizes and honors the true God.[52] It is in this realm of those with vast political power and influence that the story of Namaan is placed.

Namaan is a great and powerful Syrian general afflicted with the skin disease of leprosy. As a Syrian general, he was second in command to the king and held a position of great authority and responsibility. He enjoyed great favor in the eyes of the king of Syria because he had gained victory for his country.[53] Afflicted with leprosy, Namaan receives counsel from a little slave girl, the Israelite maid of his wife. He goes to Israel and eventually arrives at the door of Elisha, a prophet barely known to Israel's king. After an encounter with Elisha's servant Gehazi, and further counsel from his servants to return, Namaan goes back and submits himself to the simple, almost childlike instructions of the prophet to wash himself in the Jordan River seven times. Namaan is healed and professes his new faith in the God of Israel.[54]

Walter Maier, professor of Old Testament at Fort Wayne Seminary, points out that "of all the stories associated with the great prophet Elisha, this one has the most highly developed plot and contains the largest number of characters."[55] There is a focus the author of 2 Kings is deliberately seeking to make, "there are eight characters or groups of characters: Namaan, his wife, her maid, the king of Syria, the king of Israel,

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[51] Jo 2

[52] Dn 4:34

[53] 2 Kgs 5:1-2

[54] 2 Kgs 5:15

[55] Walter A. Maier, "The Healing of Naaman in Missiological Perspective," *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 61, no. 3 (1997): 177.

Elisha, Elisha's unnamed messenger, and Namaan's servants."[56] Two additional

characters are added in the following narrative, Gehazi and his servants. Maier points out,

"This complexity enhances the main incident in the first part of chapter 5, the encounter

between Namaan and Elisha."[57]

The encounter between Namaan and Elisha, between the God that Namaan was

expecting to find and the God for whom Elisha was speaking is made possible by the

minor characters in the narrative. The writer of 2 Kings focuses deliberately on them and

the crucial role they play in this narrative. The little girl kidnapped in one of Namaan's

raids into Israel becomes his wife's maid and the first to speak out concerning God's

redemptive power.[58] She is clearly at the bottom of the social ladder. She is female, most

likely ten to twelve years of age, and as such, hardly more important than an animal. It is

from her that Namaan, in his position of great power and authority, first hears of God's

redemptive power. The little slave girl is emboldened by the power of what she knows

her God can do, "Would that my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would

cure him of his leprosy."[59]

The servants of Namaan, "with simple yet powerful reasoning, convince him to

go to the Jordan."[60] As Maier points out, "His healing, if it occurs, will not be due to

Elisha, who, in effect, has distanced himself from the miracle, nor to Namaan's own

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[56] Ibid.

[57] Ibid., 178.

[58] 2 Kgs 5:3

[59] 2 Kgs 5:3

[60] Maier, "The Healing of Naaman in Missiological Perspective," 182.

riches or any achievement on his part."[61] Through these minor characters, as well as through Elisha's rebuts and childlike instructions, the powerful and secular general receives God's word and is made whole. The writer of 2 Kings demonstrates that God's redemptive message, no matter who is speaking it, reaches across social, gender, and political boundaries, saving those in the highest levels of power and influence.

Summary of the Biblical/Theological Framework

Throughout both the Old and New Testaments, the power of the gospel and God's redemptive message not only reaches highly secular people, it also provides confidence to the messenger regardless of social standing, gender, or personal influence. These texts provide assurance and boldness to church planters and leaders seeking to reach people in highly secular suburban contexts.

During Paul's ministry in Acts, the theme of boldness is sounded in the presence of highly self-sufficient people. Lydia is a seller of purple whose business shows no signs of failing. Because she works in a thriving business, she appears to lack nothing that she might need. There appears to be no business crisis from which she might be motivated to seek out help from Jesus, the focus of Paul's preaching. Because of the way that God opens her heart,[62] Lydia pays attention and becomes a Christian. The conversions of the pythoness and the jailor further attest to the boldness available to gospel messengers. Not only is boldness the object of requested prayer, as in the case of the early church,[63] it also comes because of the power of the message itself.[64]

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[61] Ibid.

[62] Acts 16:14

[63] Acts 4:29

[64] Rom 1:16

The establishment of the church in Corinth provides church planters and leaders confidence when they venture into highly secular contexts. The case of Corinth shows that gospel ministry over extended periods can yield significant results regardless of the prevailing spiritual climate. The planter can be encouraged that for God there are no hard cases, as evidenced by Jesus's words to Paul, "Go on speaking and do not be silent...for I have many in this city who are my people."[65]

Namaan's conversion reveals the far-reaching power of the gospel in the hands of those devoid of status or influence. The little slave girl and the little-known prophet Elisha affirm the place of the church planter and the church leader in the secular context. With little to no status, church planters can speak the gospel into the lives of community leaders and opinion makers, seeing remarkable spiritual impact and life change.

Several principles may be derived from these biblical examples. First, boldness is driven by the power of the gospel in the presence of highly self-sufficient people. Second, perseverance connected to faithful gospel ministry allows church planters to establish churches in highly secular contexts. Third, ministry effectiveness is not connected to an individual's status or circle of influence. In addition to these biblical examples and the principles derived from them, there are two final areas of literature for review in this study. The first addresses the religious aspects of suburban living, the context in which these biblical principles are to be applied. The second body of literature describes the details and dynamics of public gathering places in which suburban religious life takes place.

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[65] Acts 18:10

The Importance of Suburbs

The importance of understanding the religious mindset of suburbanites is highlighted by the sheer size and growth of this dominant context. Joel Kotkin, author and fellow in Urban Futures at Chapman University, points out that in the last four decades, "the portion of the population that prefers to live in a big city has consistently been in the 10 to 20 percent range, while roughly 50 percent or more opt for suburbs or exurbs."[66] This trend will continue both in the present and into the future according to Kotkin, who writes, "Future generations of Americans will live in suburbs because they represent the best, most practical choice for raising their families and enjoying the benefits of community. For this reason suburbs will remain 'where the action is' in the coming decades, as America tries to accommodate an additional hundred million people."[67] Literature in this area will consider the importance, future, priority, and ultimately the spiritual impact of the suburbs.

The Importance of the Suburbs Versus the City

The importance of the suburbs versus the city has been the ground for an ongoing debate among authors, demographers, and planners. There is passion on both sides of the debate. Leigh Gallagher, assistant managing editor at Fortune, writes in her recent book, *The End of the Suburbs,* "This book isn't about why the suburbs ought to end. Rather, it's about how the suburbs— at least as we know them— are ending."[68] As passionate as Gallagher, Joel Kotkin begins his review of her book in this fashion, "Suburbia has been

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[66] Joel Kotkin, *The Next Hundred Million: America in 2050* (New York: Penguin Press, 2010), 74. Kindle

[67] Ibid., 104.

[68] Leigh Gallagher, *The End of the Suburbs: Where the American Dream Is Moving* (US: Penguin Group, 2013), Kindle 239-240. (Kindle "edition" provided no pagination.)

a favorite whipping boy of urbane intellectuals, who have foretold its decline for decades. Leigh Gallagher's *The End of the Suburbs* is the latest addition to this tired but tireless genre.... Ms. Gallagher's book is little more than a distillation of the conventional wisdom that prevails at Sunday brunch in Manhattan."[69] These two highlight the ardent feelings held by both sides to this debate.

In her introduction, Leigh Gallagher says, "The reliable expansion of our suburbs, the steady growth of the housing industry, and the seemingly unending supply of new single-family homes— and home owners— that we became used to over the past several decades may well be a thing of the past."[70] In response, Kotkin pokes at her claim with the following, "The author restages many of the old anti-suburban claims, and her introduction's section headings easily give away the gist of the argument: 'Millennials hate the burbs;' 'Our households are shrinking;' 'We are eco-obsessed;' 'The suburbs are poorly designed to begin with;' and so on."[71]

Gallagher begins her argument by pointing out that according to information from the 2012 National Association of Home Builders Conference, builders have started to change the way they do business in light of the recent rise in building activity in the urban core.[72] In further developing her argument for the end of suburbs, she quotes Yale

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[69] Joel Kotkin, "Book Review: 'The End of the Suburbs,' by Leigh Gallagher," The Wall Street Journal, http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424127887324769704579010722573088530 (accessed September 10, 2013).

[70] Gallagher, *The End of the Suburbs*, Kindle 161-163.

[71] Kotkin, "*Book Review: 'The End of the Suburbs,' by Leigh Gallagher*".

[72] Gallagher, *The End of the Suburbs*, 135.

economist Robert Shiller, who said in an interview that, "The heyday of exurbs may well be behind us…Suburban prices may not recover in our lifetime."[73]

However, Kotkin points out that the mood of the conference was still affected by its nearness to the post-bubble low point. He writes, "But given that prices have indeed risen, and are now reaching pre-crash levels in some markets, such predictions should be viewed skeptically."[74] Gallagher insists on the resurgence of cities over suburbs, saying, "To see that cities are resurgent centers of wealth and culture, all you need to do is set foot in one. Or you can simply set foot in a bookstore. A litany of volumes have come out in the past few years praising cities and urbanism."[75] However, after quoting several census figures to the contrary, Kotkin shows that when millennials marry and have children in their thirties, they seek out single-family homes in lower density areas.[76]

Of the many references to census data Kotkin makes, it is of special interest that he highlights the fact that "barely 11% of Americans live in densities of more than 10,000 people per square mile."[77] He then summarizes his point, "Four out of five prospective home buyers in the U.S. prefer single-family houses, according to a 2011 survey conducted by the National Association of Realtors and the advocacy group Smart Growth America."[78] Gallagher does concede that the suburbs do house the majority of the

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[73] Ibid., Kindle 166-167.

[74] Kotkin, "*Book Review: 'The End of the Suburbs,' by Leigh Gallagher*".

[75] Gallagher, *The End of the Suburbs*, Kindle 2183-2185.

[76] Kotkin, "*Book Review: 'The End of the Suburbs,' by Leigh Gallagher*".

[77] Ibid.

[78] Ibid.

nation's three hundred and twelve million people, according to the 2011 US Census Bureau.[79]

Albert Hsu is the senior editor of InterVarsity Press Books and author of *The Suburban Christian.* In commenting on the size and importance of the suburbs, Hsu writes, "With the majority of the population living in suburbs, much of the focus of future mission work and ministry outreach will necessarily be in suburban areas. Indeed, in a relatively short period of a half century or so, suburbia has emerged as the dominant cultural context of North America."[80] Hsu's opinion may be correct, as Dolores Hayden, professor of urbanism at Yale, writes in her book, which is considered a standard on suburban living. Hayden notes, "By 1970, more Americans lived in suburbs than in either central cities or rural areas. By 2000, more Americans lived in suburbs than in central cities and rural areas combined. The United States had become a predominantly suburban nation."[81]

In this debate, Stephen Um, senior minister of Citylife Church in Boston and coauthor of *Why Cities Matter* stakes out a middle ground. Um concedes Kotkin's argument:

> …a significant number of the twenty-five- to thirty-four-year-olds that make up a typical urban population will move out to the suburbs by the time they become thirty-five- to forty-four-year-olds. The proposed reason for this move is that "when 20-somethings get older, they do things like marry, start businesses, settle down and maybe start having kids." Fair

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[79] Gallagher, *The End of the Suburbs*, Kindle 104.

[80] Hsu, *The Suburban Christian*, Kindle 112-114.

[81] Dolores Hayden, *Building Suburbia: Green Fields and Urban Growth, 1820-2000*, 1st ed. (New York: Pantheon Books, 2003), Kindle 248-249. (Kindle "edition" provided no pagination.)

enough. But the question is, how do we process and respond to this information?[82]

Um processes Kotkin's argument as follows:

…though they have relocated to the suburbs, these individuals likely work in the city, are fed a cultural diet delivered to their doorstep by the city, succeed in the suburbs based on skills acquired in cities, and shape their lives and the world around them with the ideologies acquired during their formative years in the city.[83]

However those who occupy the suburbs got there, Hsu argues that suburbia has now "…become the context and center of millions of people's lives, and decisions and innovations made in suburbia influence the rest of society. If Christians want to change the world, they may well do so by having a transformative Christian impact on suburbia and the people therein."[84]

Future of the Suburbs

While both sides can agree about the growing importance of the suburbs, whether through their sheer size or all the transplants from the city, the pertinent question now concerns the future of the suburbs. There are conflicting views with regard to how long these trends will continue and how long the suburbs will remain important.

Joel Kotkin frames the question like this:

For years, academics, the media, and big-city developers have been suggesting that suburbs were dying and that people were flocking back to the cities that they had fled in the 1970s. The Obama administration has taken this as gospel. "We've reached the limits of suburban development," Housing and Urban Development secretary Shaun Donovan opined in

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[82] Stephen T. Um and Justin Buzzard, *Why Cities Matter: To God, the Culture, and the Church* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), Kindle 432-435. (Kindle "edition" provided no pagination.)

[83] Ibid., Kindle 440-442.

[84] Hsu, *The Suburban Christian*, Kindle 244-246.

2010. "People are beginning to vote with their feet and come back to the central cities."[85]

However, Kotkin points out that "51 metropolitan areas that have more than 1 million residents, only three—Boston, Providence, and Oklahoma City—saw their core cities grow faster than their suburbs."[86] Hsu puts this question into a missiological framework, "While demographers and missiologists often speak of the world's urban future, it may be equally accurate in many postindustrial societies to talk about the suburban future."[87] In that same vein, but arguing for the urban focus, Um writes, "Churches are needed in the countryside, suburbs, exurbs, villages, and small towns of our world. We are not denying or minimizing that. However, with the radical shift of populations toward cities, the church would be remiss if it did not have a strategic plan to meet the world where it is heading."[88]

The trend of future stability and growth in suburbia is traced out by Hsu in broad brushstrokes:

> In America, the mid- to late-nineteenth century saw a huge demographic shift from the country to the city, and suburbs as we now think of them began to emerge. A second major shift, from city to suburbs, occurred in the mid-twentieth century. Modern mass suburbia came to the fore after World War II. Ever since, the percentage of people living in the cities has declined and the percentage of suburbanites has increased.[89]

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[85] Joel Kotkin and Wendell Cox, "Cities and the Census: Cities Neither Booming nor Withering," http://www.newgeography.com/content/002173-cities-and-census-cities-neither-booming-nor-withering (accessed September 20, 2013).

[86] Ibid.

[87] Hsu, *The Suburban Christian*, Kindle 111-112.

[88] Um and Buzzard, *Why Cities Matter: To God, the Culture, and the Church*, Kindle 1934-1936.

[89] Hsu, *The Suburban Christian*, Kindle 219-221.

This preference of the suburbs over the city is repeated by housing choice. Kotkin writes, "Surveys of housing preferences consistently show that if given the choice, most Americans, particularly families, will still opt for a place with a spot of land and a little breathing room."[90] It's not just advocates for suburbia that acknowledge this. Jamaal Green, doctoral student in Urban Studies at Portland State University, observes:

> …for my urbanist colleagues who may not see it, is that even if we take all of the celebratory commentary of the "return to the city" and the preference for urban living by millenials, that all changes when these millenials reproduce. Let's be real for a second…. people want the best for their kids. Because people want the best for their kids they will often do their utmost to provide that, including moving from cities to the 'burbs.[91]

However, on the other side of this, Gallagher responds, "The suburbs are built for life with kids, and we're not having nearly as many of them."[92] In arguing her point against future suburban development, Gallagher points to the 2006 documentary, *The End of Suburbia: Oil Depletion and the Collapse of the American Dream*.[93] Basing her argument on the concept of "peak oil," the moment after which the supply of fossil fuels begins to dwindle, Gallagher believes, "never have so many forces been working against conventional suburban development at the same time."[94] For her, the country has reached "peak suburb."[95]

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[90] Kotkin, *The Next Hundred Million*, Kindle 17.

[91] Jamaal Green, "Urban Vs Suburb: The Debate and Ignoring the Deeper Issues," Sustainable Cities Collective, http://sustainablecitiescollective.com/jamaal-green/147196/kotkin-continues-troll-and-we-ignore-deeper-issues (accessed September 26, 2013).

[92] Gallagher, *The End of the Suburbs*, Kindle 307.

[93] Gregory Greene, *The End of Suburbia: Oil Depletion and the Collapse of the American Dream* (Belleville, Ontario: Electric Wallpaper Company, 2004), Documentary, accessed via Internet Movie Database (IMDb), http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0446320/ (accessed September 26, 2013).

[94] Gallagher, *The End of the Suburbs*, Kindle 357.

[95] Ibid., Kindle 360.

Wendell Cox, demographer with Demographia, paints a different picture from Gallagher's several arguments concerning the end of suburban development. In his article appearing on the *newgeography* website, he includes this chart taken from his study of U.S. Census data from the years 2000 to 2010. He writes, "Among the 51 major metropolitan areas (those with more than 1 million population), nearly 99 percent of all population growth between 2000 and 2010 was outside the downtown areas."[96]
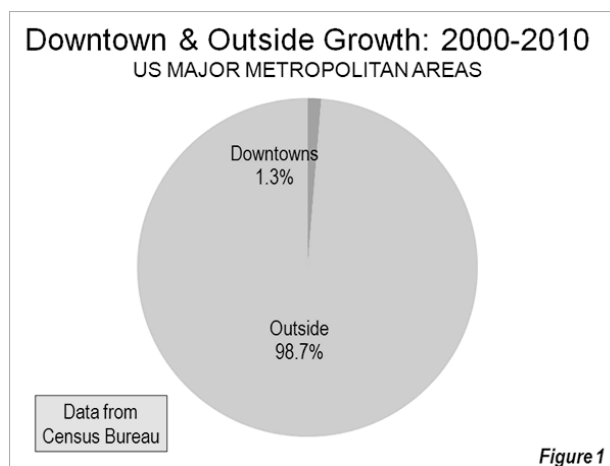
Figure 1. Cox Chart of Growth Areas in Metropolitan Areas

Summarizing, Kotkin says these results show "a marked acceleration of movement not into cities but toward suburban and exurban locations."[97] He further notes, "During the 2000s, the census shows, just 8.6 percent of the population growth in metropolitan areas with more than a million people took place in the core cities; the rest took place in the suburbs."[98]

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[96] Wendell Cox, "Flocking Elsewhere: The Downtown Growth Story," http://www.newgeography.com/content/003108-flocking-elsewhere-the-downtown-growth-story (accessed September 20, 2013).

[97] Joel Kotkin, "Why America's Young and Restless Will Abandon Cities for Suburbs," http://www.forbes.com/sites/joelkotkin/2011/07/20/why-americas-young-and-restless-will-abandon-cities-for-suburbs/ (accessed September 18, 2013).

[98] Ibid.

The Priority of Place

In his book *The Center Church*, Tim Keller points to the city, rather than the

suburbs, as a prime target for missional activity. Among several reasons, Keller points to

the marital status of those living in the city. He writes, "Urban centers have higher

percentages of single people, and it is far easier for a single Christian to get a single, non-

Christian friend to come to a church gathering than it is for a Christian family to get an

entire non-Christian family to come."[99] However, Arthur DeKruyter, church planter of

Christ Church of Oak Brook in the suburbs of Chicago, writes "Over half of all

Americans now live in suburbs, with the remainder roughly split between urban and rural

locations. Suburbs represent the fastest population growth as well as vast financial and

professional resources for Christian causes."[100] As there are advocates on each side of the

debate concerning the future and importance of the suburbs or the city, so there are

contrasting views concerning the priority of place for the starting of new churches.

Stephen Um points to the oft-made argument that the city's influence carries

greater weight than that of the suburbs. He writes, "We can be certain that, in the midst of

a global population boom with cities at its center, the world's suburbs will become

increasingly influenced by the cities to which they are connected. More than ever before,

it is now the case that 'as the city goes, so goes the culture.'"[101] He then points to the

areas of finance and culture to make his point. Concerning finances, "What happens in

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[99] Timothy J. Keller, *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 177. Kindle

[100] Arthur H. DeKruyter and Quentin J. Schultze, *The Suburban Church: Practical Advice for Authentic Christianity* (Louisville; London: Westminster John Knox Pr, 2008), Kindle 143-145. (Kindle "edition" provided no pagination.)

[101] Um and Buzzard, *Why Cities Matter: To God, the Culture, and the Church*, Kindle 442-445.

London or Hong Kong today will affect the American financial market more than what happens in the suburbs of Chicago."[102] In music, he points out, "In the Western world, popular music tends to be created, produced, and performed in cities before extending its reach into everyday life in the suburbs."[103] Finally, in regard to cultural pursuits, "The best symphony, museums, research, world-class restaurants? They are almost always in cities. Your cell phone, e-reader, computer, household appliances, and car? Again, likely designed or produced in cities."[104] In summarizing his point, Um makes the following *ad hominem* claim, "An honest evaluation of past and present human experiences indicates that they are unmatched as centers of power, culture, and worship."[105]

However, the "influence" argument and its priority of planting new churches in the urban core may be losing the power to persuade, in light of the fact that those who live in suburbia are becoming less reliant on the major cities. Kotkin notes in his book, *The Next Hundred Million* that suburbs will:

> …be less reliant on major cities and on long-distance commuting. Boasting traditional urban functions like markets, churches, museums, monuments, and culture, they will be more like traditional villages. Their primary advantage will be quality of daily life, but with a huge added difference— instantaneous communication links with the rest of the world.[106]

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[102] Ibid., Kindle 181-182.

[103] Ibid., Kindle 417-418.

[104] Ibid., Kindle 422-423.

[105] Ibid., Kindle 488-489.

[106] Kotkin, *The Next Hundred Million*, 16.

This is due to the Internet and the proliferation of technology in telephony, video

conferencing, and other communication technologies. Kotkin claims that at least "one in

four or five will work full or part time from their residence."[107]

An article written by Thomas J. Lueck, reporter for the New York Times, shows

this trend toward independence from the city.[108] Interviewing author Kenneth Jackson,

professor of history at Columbia and author of *Crab Grass Frontier: The*

Suburbanization of the United States, writes, "There is a broad national pattern around

every big city in which the urban cores have become much less important than they were

25 years ago, because jobs and people have moved out."[109] Richard Florida, author of

The Rise of the Creative Class and professor at the Rotman School of Management, says:

> …cities and suburbs are coming to look more and more alike—suburban
> shopping districts are walkable and rich with amenities like cafés and
> galleries; urban "strollervilles" are filled with young families. The most
> successful suburban and urban neighborhoods both have good transit,
> mixed uses, and green spaces; most important, they foster the interactions
> from which vital communities are built.[110]

While suburbs are becoming entities unto themselves, both cities and suburbs are

taking on characteristics common to both. In an article on the relationship between cities

and suburbs, Keith R. Ihlanfeldt, professor of economics at Georgia State University,

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[107] Ibid., Kindle 296-298.

[108] Thomas J. Lueck, "Defining the Suburban Borders of the Global Village: A Fight for the Soul of Fairfield County Turns on What's on the Cable Television Dial - New York Times," The New York Times Company, http://www.nytimes.com/1993/03/03/nyregion/defining-suburban-borders-global-village-fight-for-soul-fairfield-county-turns.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm (accessed September 21, 2013).

[109] Ibid.

[110] Richard Florida, "The Fading Differentiation between City and Suburb," Urban Land Institute, http://urbanland.uli.org/articles/2013/jan/floridasuburbs (accessed September 21, 2013).

writes, "The maturation of the suburbs, especially as manifested in edge cities, has made

these areas more competitive with central cities and less dependent and derivative."[111]

The Internet and its accompanying technologies have dramatically changed the

interplay between cities and suburbs. Thomas Friedman, author of *The World is Flat* and

columnist for The New York Times, points out how online tutoring has become available

between a high schooler in a Chicago suburb and a teacher in Cochin, India.

> Koyampurath Namitha arrives for work in a quiet suburb of this south
> Indian city. It's barely 4:30 a.m. when she grabs a cup of coffee and joins
> more than two-dozen colleagues, each settling into a cubicle with a
> computer and earphones. More than 7,000 miles away, in Glenview, Ill.,
> outside Chicago, it's the evening of the previous day and 14-year-old
> Princeton John sits at his computer, barefoot and ready for his hour-long
> geometry lesson.[112]

Friedman believes the digitization of information has caused a "flattening of the

world."[113] With the digitizing of information, suburbia has become less and less

dependent on the city. Friedman writes, "We are entering a phase where we are going to

see the digitization, virtualization, and automation of more and more everything."[114]

Though urban church planters Timothy Keller and Stephen Um have made strong

cases for focus on the city and its influence on surrounding areas and culture, other

church planters and missiologists are beginning to speak out for the importance of

suburbia and being faithful to one's call as a church planter. Ed Stetzer, president of

LifeWay Research and consultant for church planting and revitalization, speaks of the

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[111] Keith R. Ihlanfeldt, "The Importance of the Central City to the Regional and National Economy: A Review of the Arguments and Empirical Evidence," *Cityscape: A Journal of Policy Development and Research* 1, no. 2 (1995): 139.

[112] Thomas L. Friedman, *The World Is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century*, 1st further updated and expanded hardcover ed. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), 42. Kindle

[113] Ibid., 47.

[114] Ibid.

need to avoid what he calls "community lust and demographic envy."[115] Stetzer warns

against the lure of wanting to be in someone else's community instead of having a vision

for the people to whom one has been called. Stetzer writes, "Too often, we get so excited

by someone else's church that we get a vision for their church before we get a vision for

our people."[116]

Stephen McAlpine, a church planter in Perth, Australia, has engaged the biblical

arguments advanced by urban advocates for giving priority to church planting in the city.

He points out several lessons. First, Paul's work in major population centers is not

opposed to going to suburbs, since the world did not have suburbs at that time.[117]

McAlpine also warns against taking scripture verses out of context in order to show a

preference for church planting in the city. As an example, he points out Jeremiah 29:7,

where the writer seeks the welfare of the city. In the larger context, "the exiled people of

God are told to settle in the city of Babylon and await THEIR salvation, not ITS

salvation."[118] He shows the danger of taking a historical example and making precedent

from it. New York City experienced tremendous population growth after World War II

because it provided inexpensive housing. People moving to McAlpine's city of Perth

settle in the suburbs because that is where the affordable housing is found.[119] In

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[115] Ed Stetzer, "Planting / Pastoring in Your Head or Your Community?," Christianity Today, http://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2009/november/planting-pastoring-in-your-head-or-your-community.html (accessed September 21, 2013).

[116] Ibid.

[117] Stephen McAlpine, "Church Planting: Rockin' the Suburbs," http://stephenmcalpine.com/2012/08/23/church-planting-rockin-the-suburbs/ (accessed September 21, 2013).

[118] Ibid.

[119] Ibid.

summary, McAlpine writes, "Paul went to where *the people* were, and here in Perth the people are in the suburbs."[120]

<div align="center">*Summary of the Importance of Suburbs*</div>

The literature on the size and importance of suburbs draws analysis and opinion from both advocates for the city and advocates for suburbia. Regardless of their positions, both groups agree about the importance of the suburbs from the standpoint of size and growing technology. The literature reviewed in this area makes several key points. First,

Americans overwhelmingly prefer lower-density single-family houses. Couples starting families further drive this preference. Second, the suburbs are less reliant on cities, becoming more independent of them. Growing technology and shared characteristics drive this independence. Finally, focus must be evenly weighted on both cities and suburbs for church planting due to their individual and strategic importance.

<div align="center">**Effects and Religious Mindset of the Suburbs**</div>

The suburbs have been called "Prozac" for the soul.[121] The spiritually deadening effect of the suburbs has been discussed by authors Albert Hsu and David Goetz.[122] Self-sufficiency and spiritual emptiness lead the way. Considered along with these issues will be issues in the home and the highly held value of tolerance.

<div align="center">*Self-sufficiency and Independence*</div>

Suburbia and self-sufficiency are connected throughout the literature. Hsu describes it this way:

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[120] Ibid.

[121] Hsu, *The Suburban Christian*, Kindle 78.

[122] Ibid.; David L. Goetz, *Death by Suburb : How to Keep the Suburbs from Killing Your Soul*, 1st ed. (San Francisco: Harper, 2006). Kindle

Is suburbia a threat to Christian spirituality? One of the ironies of the suburban context is that even though some of the creation of suburbia is due to deeply spiritual hopes and longings, everyday life in suburbia seems to obliterate the need for God. The material realities of suburbia often blind us to invisible spiritual realities.[123]

Craig Gay, professor at Regent College in Vancouver, writes in his book, *The Way of the (Modern) World*, "'Secularization' refers to the process in which various sectors of modern social life have been emptied of theological substance and have ceased to need even the concept of God to function reasonably smoothly and 'normally.'"[124] According to Gay, secularization can be understood as "…simply indifferent, to the existence and reality of God.[125] He explains that the result for those living in this fashion "is the temptation to practical atheism."[126] Hsu points out that this mindset affects not only non-Christians but Christians as well. He writes, "Even faithful Christians are sucked into the temptation to live as if God doesn't exist…"[127]

Dave Goetz, former editor for *Leadership Journal* and writer for *Christianity Today*, describes the self-sufficiency of suburbia like this, "I think my suburb, as safe and religiously coated as it is, keeps me from Jesus. Or at least, my suburb (and the religion of the suburbs) obscures the real Jesus."[128] As an example of the obscuring or even avoidance of the real Jesus, Robert Bellah, author of *Habits of the Heart*, writes about a

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[123] Hsu, *The Suburban Christian*, Kindle 1427-1428.

[124] Craig M. Gay, *The Way of the (Modern) World, or, Why It's Tempting to Live as If God Doesn't Exist* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Paternoster Press, 1998), Kindle 207-208. (Kindle "edition" provided no pagination.)

[125] Ibid., Kindle 207.

[126] Ibid., Kindle 68-69.

[127] Hsu, *The Suburban Christian*, Kindle 1432.

[128] Goetz, *Death by Suburb*, Kindle 90-91.

young nurse named Sheila Larson who describes her faith as "Sheilaism."[129] Larson says, "It's just try to love yourself and be gentle with yourself. You know, I guess, take care of each other."[130] Bellah goes on to say that "Sheilaism" seems to be a "perfectly natural expression of current American religious life…"[131] Reflecting upon Bellah's work, David Brooks writes in his own book, *Bobos in Paradise,* that "Bellah and his colleagues were trying to point out the sorts of problems that arise when individualistic spiritual freedom is taken to the extreme. And these basic criticisms have since become the conventional wisdom in Bobo circles."[132] Bobos are David Brooks' abbreviated form of the words *bourgeois* and *bohemian*, "to take the first two letters of each word, they are Bobos."[133] They are the 1990s successors to "yuppies." He believes Bobos "…are the new establishment. Their hybrid culture is the atmosphere we all breathe."[134] Suburban thinking reflects the Bobo's individualistic spiritual freedom.

In Bellah's research for *Habits of the Heart*, he found that self-reliance was "…common as a general orientation in many of those to whom we spoke."[135] One of the

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[129] Robert N. Bellah, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life : Updated Edition with a New Introduction*, 1st Calif. pbk. ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), Kindle 3801. (Kindle "edition" provided no pagination.)

[130] Ibid., Kindle 3802-3803.

[131] Ibid., Kindle 3805.

[132] Brooks, *On Paradise Drive*, 236.

[133] David Brooks, *Bobos in Paradise: The New Upper Class and How They Got There* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), 12. Kindle

[134] Ibid.

[135] Bellah, *Habits of the Heart*, Kindle 1346.

expectations of this is that "The self-reliant American is required not only to leave home but to 'leave church' as well."[136] Bellah describes the relationship to church like this:

> For some Americans, even 150 years after Emerson wrote "Self-Reliance," tradition and a tradition-bearing community still exist. But the notion that one discovers one's deepest beliefs in, and through, tradition and community is not very congenial to Americans. Most of us imagine an autonomous self existing independently, entirely outside any tradition and community, and then perhaps choosing one.[137]

Bellah believes that Sheila Larson's "Sheilaism," mentioned earlier, is "…in part, trying to find a center in herself after liberating herself from an oppressively conformist early family life."[138] While Larsen's personal faith is not representative of all suburbia, it does provide a personal picture of the self-reliance Bellah found in his research.

In summing up, Bellah concludes, "Religious individualism is, in many ways, appropriate in our kind of society. It is no more going to go away than is secular individualism. Ours is a society that requires people to be strong and independent."[139] Along with Bellah, Alan Wolfe, professor of political science at Boston College and author of *One Nation, After All*, has also observed this individualistic spirit, "Faced with a choice between submission to a power outside (and greater than) themselves and a focus on their own particular needs, American individualism guarantees that the former will rarely triumph over the latter."[140]

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[136] Ibid., Kindle 1449.

[137] Ibid., Kindle 1489-1491.

[138] Ibid., Kindle 4020.

[139] Ibid., Kindle 4205-4207.

[140] Alan Wolfe, *One Nation, After All: What Americans Really Think About God, Country, Family, Racism, Welfare, Immigration, Homosexuality, Work, the Right, the Left and Each Other* (New York: Viking, 1998), 82.

Spiritual Emptiness and Family Turmoil

Oak Brook is a suburb in Chicago. Arthur H. DeKruyter was called as a young

man by five couples desiring to plant a new church in their suburb in the 1960s. He spent

thirty-one years planting and pastoring what became known as Christ Church of Oak

Brook. In planting the church, the early members did a lot of listening to their upper-

middle-class neighbors. In his book, *The Suburban Church: Practical Advice for*

Authentic Ministry, he writes, "By listening we discovered that external prosperity often

masked spiritual poverty. Affluence and business hid deep self-doubt, addictions, failing

relationships, and family turmoil."[141] In cataloging the spiritual challenges of those whom

DeKruyter was seeking to reach, he describes the problems of spiritual emptiness:

> Residents hear about each other's health issues. For instance, they see the
> impact of aging on each others' faces and might be discussing privately
> their attempts to look younger for as long as possible. They might wonder
> about where to discover real meaning in life and where to find trusted
> friends who live authentically in the midst of such personal messes. A
> wife who discovers that her successful husband is having an affair often
> wants to know what to do, whom to talk with, how to deal with the entire
> situation. A husband who loses his corporate job at midcareer
> contemplates downward mobility and might not want to admit his
> dilemma to his spouse and certainly not to his children or neighbors; the
> news seems too embarrassing. What should he do? Whom can he talk with
> confidentially?[142]

David Brooks describes the problem of emptiness from the perspective "Bobos," the

group he defines living in suburbs:

> The challenges they face are these: Can you still worship God even if you
> take it upon yourself to decide that many of the Bible's teachings are
> wrong? Can you still feel at home in your community even if you know
> that you'll probably move if a better job opportunity comes along? Can
> you establish ritual and order in your life if you are driven by an inner

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[141] DeKruyter and Schultze, *The Suburban Church*, Kindle 203-204.

[142] Ibid., Kindle 224-228.

imperative to experiment constantly with new things? I've talked about the mighty reconciliations the Bobos make. But these spiritual reconciliations are the most problematic. The Bobos are trying to build a house of obligation on a foundation of choice.[143]

Both DeKruyter and Brooks show the spiritual emptiness of the suburbs and its powerlessness to provide resources with which to deal with both life's pressing issues and its eternal questions.

While Brooks shows the preference for individual pluralism in the Bobo's spiritual life, he shows the outcome of such thinking:

The spiritual pluralist believes that the universe cannot be reduced to one natural order, one divine plan. Therefore, there cannot be one path to salvation. There are varieties of happiness, distinct moralities, and different ways to virtue. What's more, no one ever really arrives at a complete answer to the deepest questions or to faith. It is a voyage. We are forever incomplete, making choices, exploring, creating.[144]

However, as Brooks points out, "The ultimate problem with spiritual freedom is that it never ends."[145] The result of this unending search, endless choices, and spiritual freedom is described like this, "The generation that gave itself 'unlimited choices' recoiled and found that it was still 'searching for something.' In so many ways we seem to want to return to some lost age of (supposed) spiritual coherence and structure."[146] Dave Goetz describes the spiritual effect of this on the soul. He writes, "The environment of the suburbs weathers one's soul peculiarly. That is, there are environmental variables,

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[143] Brooks, *Bobos in Paradise*, 228.

[144] Ibid., 234.

[145] Ibid., 237.

[146] Ibid., 241.

mostly invisible, that oxidize the human spirit, like what happens to the metal of an un-

garaged car."[147]

Added to the prevailing spiritual emptiness found in suburban living is that of

family turmoil, as pointed out by Arthur DeKruyter. Dave Goetz describes this spiritual

emptiness and family turmoil in the life of one of his friends:

> A friend with a special needs child recently said to me that he thought one
> spiritual issue of our community (which has a median household income
> of $75,000) is how hard we work at appearing not to have any issues. "The
> sad thing," he says, "is that you wind up with a bunch of folks who appear
> to have it all, but are miserable."[148]

In seeking to meet the spiritual emptiness within, spiritual freedom affects the

process, producing interesting combinations of religious commitment. David Brooks

observes, "people return to religion, but often they are not content to have just one

religion; they dabble in several simultaneously."[149] "Flexidoxy" is the term given to the

combinations of multiple faiths into one.[150] Terry Mattingly, director of the Washington

Journalism Center at the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities, observes, "One

scholar found a Methodist pastor's daughter who calls herself a 'Methodist Taoist Native

American Quaker Russian Orthodox Buddhist Jew.'"[151] Thus, turmoil becomes

facilitated through a lack of spiritual groundedness. As Brooks explains:

> They divorce when their marriages become unpleasant. They leave their
> company when they get bored. They fall away from their church or
> synagogue when it becomes dull or unrewarding. And this is self-

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[147] Goetz, *Death by Suburb*, 4.

[148] Ibid., 51.

[149] Brooks, *Bobos in Paradise*, 242.

[150] Terry Mattingly, "Bobos 'R Us."

[151] Ibid.

defeating, because at the end of all this movement and freedom and self-exploration, they find they have nothing deep and lasting to hold on to.[152]

Tolerance

The suburbs are places in which tolerance is highly valued. David Brooks describes his "Bobos" as:

> Epistemologically modest, believing that no one can know the full truth and so it's best to try to communicate across disagreements and find some common ground. Be moderate in your own faith because you probably don't have the complete answers, and don't try to push your faith onto others.[153]

On the basis of this modesty, Bobos "recoil from those who try to 'impose' their views or their lifestyles on others. They prefer tolerance and civility instead."[154] This view of tolerance is the majority view of those suburbanites Alan Wolfe encountered in his research for *One Nation, After All*. He writes, "A situation in which every individual finds their own way to God is one that a large number of Americans find more comfortable than one in which highly organized institutions fight with each other both for members and for truth."[155]

While interviewing two hundred American suburbanites, Wolfe came across Judy Dropkin, who shared her own personal view of God that flows out of the value of tolerance. She shared with Wolfe, "The way I like to picture things…is that God is at the top of a mountain and there's (sic) a whole lot of sides to him and there are a whole lot of roads to the top. I think we all struggle to get there, and you got to find your own way."[156]

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[152] Brooks, *Bobos in Paradise*, 245.

[153] Ibid., 247.

[154] Ibid.

[155] Wolfe, *One Nation After All*, 83.

[156] Ibid., 86.

In an interesting turn of events, Wolfe points out that shortly after World War II, critics believed America was not religious enough. Then, when convinced that something of a religious revival was taking place, critics believed that "Americans were becoming too religious, suppressing, in turn, the rights of non-Christians and nonbelievers."[157] Perhaps as a comfort to critics, Wolfe found a common avoidance of biblical terms relative to one's personal faith in those whom he interviewed. He writes, "…very few of the two hundred people to whom we talked around the country—used words like 'sin,' 'moral rot,' 'decay,' or 'Satan,' terms that, whether fairly or unfairly, are usually identified with revivalist preachers, talk show hosts, and conservative Christians."[158]

In a final survey taken by Wolfe of his interviewees, he found that 181 out of two hundred agreed with the statement, "There are many different religious truths and we ought to be tolerant of all of them."[159] Wolfe further found that the value of tolerance was connected to learning. He observes, "Rather than emphasizing a negative—no one should interfere with anyone else's beliefs—this way of thinking seeks a positive: How can another's beliefs strengthen and broaden my own."[160]

The value of tolerance has also been extended beyond that of religious faith and practice. Wade Clark Roof, professor of religion at the University of California at Santa Barbara, conducted a landmark study on 2620 baby boomers (those born between 1946-1964). He writes, "Eighty-seven percent in our survey said there should be more acceptance of different lifestyles. Social background, level of education, and region of

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[157] Ibid., 87.

[158] Ibid., 49.

[159] Ibid., 62.

[160] Ibid., 65.

country do not matter: Boomers generally hold to the view that lifestyles should be a matter of personal choice."[161] This tolerance was extended beyond racial and sociological groupings to that of sexual orientation and lifestyle.[162] When considering choice of a church, Roof says, "In response to the question, 'Do you prefer a parish/congregation with an open attitude toward people's lifestyles, or one that is more strict?' 65% of conservative Protestant returnees (63% for loyalists) choose the first option."[163] This means that the overwhelming majority of those choosing a church in the suburbs, whether theologically liberal or conservative, prefer churches that are tolerant when it comes to lifestyle issues.

The issue of homosexuality tests the values of tolerance and individualism in the suburban context. When considering this clash, Alan Wolfe observes, "No other issue taps into such a potential conflict more than the issue of homosexuality."[164] When Wolfe interviewed their two hundred respondents, he divided them into three categories, positive tolerance, negative tolerance, and a middle category—tolerance without condoning. In regard to the middle category, Wolfe found, "tolerance without condoning—was, as is true of all bell-curve distributions, larger than those who condemned gays on the one hand and those who sought their positive acceptance on the other."[165] However, at the ends of the curve, the distribution of opinion was not balanced. Wolfe discovered "nearly three times as many respondents condemned homosexuality as

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[161] Wade Clark Roof, *A Generation of Seekers: The Spiritual Journeys of the Baby Boom Generation*, 1st ed. (San Francisco: Harper SanFrancisco, 1993), 45.

[162] Ibid.

[163] Ibid., 185.

[164] Wolfe, *One Nation After All*, 72.

[165] Ibid., 76.

accepted it."[166] Wolfe also noted the intensity of the views in regard to this specific issue

compared to most other subjects. He observes, "The intensity of opinion on this question

was quite different from discussions about most other subjects: those who opposed

teaching about homosexuality expressed their views in a very determined manner."[167]

Rosaria Butterfield is a former tenured professor of English at Syracuse

University. After becoming a Christian in 1999, she wrote about her conversion

experience and former life as a lesbian. In her book, *The Secret Thoughts of an Unlikely

Convert,*[168] she discusses her experience with tolerance from the Christian community

and the impact it had on her. She writes:

> Here is one of the deepest ways Christians scared me: the lesbian
> community was home and home felt safe and secure; the people that I
> knew the best and cared about were in that community; and finally, the
> lesbian community was accepting and welcoming while the Christian
> community appeared (and too often is) exclusive, judgmental, scornful,
> and afraid of diversity. What also scared me is that while Christianity
> seemed like just another worldview, this one for people who enjoyed
> living narrowly circumscribed lives, Christians claimed that their
> worldview and all of the attending features that I saw— Republican
> politics, homeschooling biases, refusal to inoculate children against
> childhood illnesses, etc.— had God on its side.[169]

Though tolerance is valued in the suburbs, it remains a polarizing issue.

The values of tolerance is seen as it is applied to one's personal faith and

morality. In concluding his research on baby boomers in suburbia, Roof observes, "It

appears that the blending of religious themes is spiritually rejuvenating. 'I have my own

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[166] Ibid.

[167] Ibid., 77.

[168] Rosaria Champagne Butterfield, *The Secret Thoughts of an Unlikely Convert: An English Professor's Journey into Christian Faith* (Pittsburgh: Crown & Covenant Publications, 2012). (Kindle "edition" provided no pagination.)

[169] Ibid., Kindle 197-202.

faith,' said one person. 'It includes Jesus, yes, and meditation, and helping out at

Transition House for the homeless—not a bad mix, is it?'"[170]

Finally, when it came to imposing a specific morality on others, there was a desire

to trust the individual rather than following a list of rules or injunctions. Wolfe found:

> A large number of those with whom we spoke fear that morality, if
> understood as a set of moral injunctions, can lead to intolerance, an
> outcome unacceptable to a people as nonjudgmental as middle-class
> Americans: trusting people rather than duties is the best way to insure that
> it will not.[171]

The value of tolerance is held highly in suburbia, broadly stretching across lifestyle

choices, morality, and religious faith. It is a significant factor in the life of those who call

the suburbs their home, along with the majority of Americans.

Summary of Effects and Religious Mindset of the Suburbs

The suburbs, especially those that are highly secular, have a wide impact upon the

thinking and lifestyles of those living there. The following key characteristics may be

distilled from the literature. First, self-sufficiency is a result of a life in which God or the

concept of God need not exist. Practical atheism becomes the functional approach of both

non-Christians and Christians alike. Second, spiritual emptiness is pervasive in the

suburbs. Spiritual freedom and its unlimited choices lead to emptiness and turmoil in the

home. Finally, tolerance provides the background to suburbanites' views, key of which

are religion, lifestyle issues, and morality. In addition to the effects of the suburbs upon

the religious mindset of suburban inhabitants, there is one final area of literature for

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[170] Roof, *A Generation of Seekers*, 246.

[171] Wolfe, *One Nation After All*, 266.

review in this study. This body of literature will describe the details and dynamics of public gathering places in which suburban life and discourse take place.

Public Spaces and Gathering Places

Suburbia is a growing dominant context for over fifty percent of Americans. Attending this dominant context are both social and spiritual effects upon those living there. This final area of literature will focus on the places in which those effects may be processed with others through social interaction. As Albert Hsu has noted, the suburbs act as a "Prozac" for the soul.[172] As a counter to this, the "third place,"[173] a term coined by sociologist Ray Oldenburg, is an informal place in which people gather and come alive. *The Great Good Place*, written by Oldenburg, has been and continues to be the seminal work in this field of literature. No other work supersedes this volume, and it continues to be the reference point for all other authors who address this area through journals, magazine articles, or websites. The literature in this area primarily shows the application of "third place" dynamics to various social environments: coffee shops, libraries, parks, bookstores, restaurants, work places, taverns, drugstores, and most recently churches. Literature in this area will consider the characteristics of third places, suburbia's need for them, and the association of third places with churches.

Characteristics of Third Places

Ray Oldenburg describes the "third place" as "a generic designation for a great variety of public places that host the regular, voluntary, informal, and happily anticipated

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[172] Hsu, *The Suburban Christian*, 12.

[173] Ray Oldenburg, *The Great Good Place: Cafés, Coffee Shops, Bookstores, Bars, Hair Salons, and Other Hangouts at the Heart of a Community* (New York and Berkeley, CA: Marlowe; Distributed by Publishers Group West, 1999), 16.

gatherings of individuals beyond the realms of home and work."[174] They are noted as "third" because they come after home, first, and workplace, as second.[175] Oldenburg says they are "as distinct a place as home or office."[176] Their place of importance is felt because, "Virtually all means of meeting and getting to know one's neighbors have been eliminated. An electronically-operated garage door out front and a privacy fence out back afford near-total protection from those who, in former days, would have been neighbors."[177] For a place to serve as a third place, several characteristics must be present.

Dynamics of Third Places

Third places are neutral in that there are no hosts or guests; rather everyone is at home and comfortable. Oldenburg describes, "In order for the city and its neighborhoods to offer the rich and varied association that is their promise and their potential, there must be *neutral ground* upon which people may gather."[178] The neutrality of the third place facilitates the ability for friends to come and go, to "join and depart one another's company."[179] Being neutral, third places become the ultimate drop-in place.

In addition to being neutral, third places are inclusive by virtue of being great levelers through focusing on qualities rather than one's personal social standing. In describing this characteristic, Oldenburg writes, "Worldly status claims must be checked

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[174] Ibid.

[175] Ibid., xvii.

[176] Ibid., 15.

[177] Oldenburg, "Our Vanishing Third Places."

[178] Oldenburg, *The Great Good Place*, 22.

[179] Ibid.

at the door in order that all within may be equals."[180] Leveling allows dialogue both

upward and downward in direction. Peter Steinke, church consultant and author, observes

this dynamic in the *Clergy Journal*, "The younger generations are less interested in

coming together through structured, hierarchal organization, and are more ready to build

social networks and connect in less formal ways."[181] Without status, topics of

conversation may flow freely in a context of acceptance, allowing for a sense of

vulnerability. "Leveling is a joy and relief to those of higher and lower status in the

mundane world."[182]

Conversation is the "cardinal and sustaining activity of third places

everywhere."[183] Mary Corcoran, professor of sociology at the National University of

Ireland, draws a parallel in Irish culture, "The Irish pub has historically occupied the role

of a third place: a communal place, with a convivial atmosphere, where people got to

know and like one another."[184] Since the third place is a leveler, it enables conversation

between dissimilar parties and social rank. Oldenburg observes, "Quite unlike those

corporate realms wherein status dictates who may speak, and when and how much, and

who may use levity and against which targets the third place draws in like manner from

everyone there assembled."[185] Because of the conversation built upon the leveling of a

third place, political debate as well as other topics are fostered and discovery facilitated.

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[180] Ibid., 25.

[181] Peter L. Steinke, "From Non-Place to Third Place," *The Clergy Journal* 84, no. 7 (2008): 4.

[182] Oldenburg, *The Great Good Place*, 25.

[183] Ibid., 26.

[184] Mary P. Corcoran, "Society, Space and the Public Realm: Beyond Gated Individualism," *Irish Journal of Sociology* 20, no. 1 (2012): 1.

[185] Oldenburg, *The Great Good Place*, 28.

The People of Third Places

Third places come alive because of the people who are "regulars." Oldenburg explains, "It is the regulars, whatever their number on any given occasion, who feel at home in a place and set the tone of conviviality."[186] It is because of the regulars that the third place receives its "infectious and contagious style of interaction."[187] Richard Florida, professor at Mellon University and author of *The Rise of the Creative Class*, notes the importance of the people in third places to those of the creative class. He notes that people in his focus groups and interviews said, "Third places play key roles in making a community attractive."[188] This is because their other sources of interaction, family and workplace, have become less secure and stable. Noting this, Florida writes, "Third places fill a void by providing a ready venue for acquaintance and human interactions."[189] The regulars at a third place act as an attraction to others so that those in Florida's creative class will "frequently take a break and head to the coffee shop down the street just to see people."[190]

Regulars all start as newcomers and follow through the order of stages into full acceptance. While acceptance is not automatic, neither is it difficult. There are connecting rituals such as being vouched for by a regular or by coming on a regular basis and being of a decent sort.[191] Because of the dynamics already discussed relating to third

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[186] Ibid., 34.

[187] Ibid.

[188] Richard L. Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class: And How It's Transforming Work, Leisure, Community and Everyday Life* (New York: Basic Books, 2004), 226.

[189] Ibid.

[190] Ibid.

[191] Oldenburg, *The Great Good Place*, 35.

places, acceptance is given to a variety of ranks, which is in keeping with third places. This also makes for an attractive quality to members of the creative class. Florida observes, "My focus group and interview participants consistently listed diversity as among the most important factors in their choice of locations."[192] They are drawn to "places known for diversity of thought and open-mindedness."[193] The leveling effects of third places make them naturally attractive to the creative class.

The Profile of Third Places

Third places have low profiles, while being highly accessible and moderately appointed. Oldenburg describes them as "typically plain. In some cases, it falls a bit short of plain."[194] Their low profile appearance suggests the opposite of their importance. In physical attributes, third places are opposite corporate chain stores fitted for maximum profits. Oldenburg observes, "Third places are unimpressive looking for the most part. They are not, with few exceptions, advertised; they are not elegant. In cultures where mass advertising prevails and appearance is valued over substance, the third place is all the more likely *not* to impress the uninitiated."[195]

These attributes make for an unhurried environment conducive to conversation and extended discussion, which are absent from chain establishments. As Oldenburg points out, "Maximum profits are expected and not from a group of hangers-on."[196] Newer places or chain establishments become "non-places" because of their space

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[192] Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class*, 226.

[193] Ibid.

[194] Oldenburg, *The Great Good Place*, 36.

[195] Ibid.

[196] Ibid.

"designed to be passed through without a necessary face-to-face interaction, leaving little or no trace of engagement."[197] The plainness of appointments works for third places as a "protective coloration."[198] This means that third places "do not attract a high volume of strangers or transient customers,"[199] while at the same time discouraging "pretention among those who gather there."[200] The "come as you are" mood, low profile, conversation, and leveling dynamics of third places make them places to process the needs and challenges of suburban living.

The Need for Third Places in Suburban Living

The need for third places in suburbia is underscored in an Oldenburg article written for the *Planning Commissioners Journal* in 1996.[201] In it, Oldenburg writes:

> What suburbia cries for are the means for people to gather easily, inexpensively, regularly, and pleasurably—a "place on the corner," real life alternatives to television, easy escapes from the cabin fever of marriage and family life that do not necessitate getting into an automobile.[202]

The solution was the focus of his now landmark book, *The Great Good Place.* In its introduction, Oldenburg cites the inability of the suburb to meet this need. He points out:

> Though proclaimed as offering the best of both rural and urban life, the automobile suburb had the effect of fragmenting the individual's world. As one observer wrote: "A man works in one place, sleeps in another, shops somewhere else, finds pleasure or companionship where he can, and cares about none of these places."[203]

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[197] Steinke, "From Non-Place to Third Place," 3.

[198] Oldenburg, *The Great Good Place*, 36.

[199] Ibid.

[200] Ibid., 37.

[201] Oldenburg, "Our Vanishing Third Places."

[202] Ibid., 6.

[203] Oldenburg, *The Great Good Place*, 4.

Steinke agrees with this need for third places in daily living. He observes, "In spite of the disappearance of third places and the rise of non-places in our lives, researchers indicate that the hunger to connect and commune has intensified."[204]

Oldenburg likens the need for third places to a combustion engine. He writes, "Our urban environment is like an engine that runs hot because it was designed without a cooling system."[205] The literature in this area shows how third places provide this "cooling system" through the social interaction found in such places. Third places provide the context to heal from stress, process issues, and be refreshed in the midst of the day's activities.

Healing

In the sequel to *The Great Good Place,* stories of third places and their creation are recounted in *Celebrating the Third Place*.[206] Larry Bourgeois leads the Pilgrim's Place Coffeehouse in Old St. George in Cincinnati, Ohio. In describing the thinking behind their third place, he writes:

> In response to the changing spiritual landscape in America in the 1980s, it became clear to me that hospitable gathering places where people shared their lives and spoke openly about brokenness and healing were great good places of the heart and spirit. Many twelve-step meetings embraced coffee as a secular sacrament of their lives together, at a time when coffee was still viewed in traditional church settings as the "wicked brew of infidels."[207]

Making a connection between priest and bartender, Bourgeois says, "My gut told me that our culture needed more soul friends in the form of spiritual bartenders and coffeehouse

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[204] Steinke, "From Non-Place to Third Place," 3.

[205] Oldenburg, *The Great Good Place*, 10.

[206] Ray Oldenburg, *Celebrating the Third Place: Inspiring Stories About the "Great Good Places" at the Heart of Our Communities* (New York: Marlowe & Co., 2001). Kindle

[207] Ibid., 56-57.

priests."[208] In hosting conferences with other religious bodies, St. George's purpose is "to remind the ideological marketplace that a deep and sacred reality is present for all of us in our ordinary daily experiences, and we need to make time and space for it if it's to become part of the healing process that we and society must undergo."[209]

The need for healing in the suburbs was observed by DeKruyter during the planting of a church in a Chicago suburb. He writes, "As I learned during our church development work, many suburban adults feel that no one cares about them because few of their friends, families, and neighbors take the time to listen to them."[210] Andrea Gallagher, certified senior advisor, writes "Research now shows that in addition to visiting natural surroundings, 'third place' locations— such as health clubs, coffee shops, restaurants and senior centers—may also offer some of the same restorative effects."[211] She notes for her clients, "Third places have been studied for their healing qualities. They often provide a break from our day-after-day concerns, offering an interesting change of pace, where we can enjoy each other's company and feel part of a community."[212] Gallagher observes that healing takes place in a third place because it is "a place of well-being and belonging that reduces feelings of loneliness, loss, stress or depression."[213]

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[208] Ibid., 57.

[209] Ibid., 60.

[210] DeKruyter and Schultze, *The Suburban Church*, Kindle 192-193.

[211] Andrea Gallagher, "The Third Place," Senior Concerns in Thousand Oaks, http://www.toacorn.com/news/2012-02-02/Columns/The_third_place.html (accessed October 2, 2013).

[212] Ibid.

[213] Ibid.

Processing

In noting third places as forums for political discussion, Oldenburg reveals the processing dynamic of third places. He writes, "This kind of information matters to us more when we put it to use by conversing, arguing, and debating with each other. We can better test and refine our opinions by interacting with others, not by simply listening to the pronouncements of television commentators.[214] In allowing a place where one may process one's issues, Oldenburg notes that the third place, "contributes to a healthy perspective by combining pleasure with association in a wide group and affording the collective wisdom of its members."[215]

Providing additional perspective is Lisa Waxman, professor of interior design at Florida State University. In an article entitled "The Coffee Shop: Social and Physical Factors Influencing Place Attachment," she observes this need to process. She writes, "Whether it is the opportunity for friendship formation and conversation, the ability to converse with someone in a similar situation or with a similar interest, or the opportunity to be alone in the company of others, the coffee shop can fill various needs for people."[216]

As a real life example, Vic Herman is the owner of a third place called *Horizon Books*. He recalls the third place of his youth, the barbershop:

> In the winter, the local cherry farmers, without much to do, would fill the
> dozen or so chairs that lined the walls and spend time discussing the issues
> and simply being together in a welcome, friendly environment. Often,

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[214] Oldenburg, "Our Vanishing Third Places," 8.

[215] Oldenburg, *The Great Good Place*, 50.

[216] Lisa Waxman, "The Coffee Shop: Social and Physical Factors Influencing Place Attachment," *Journal of Interior Design* 31, no. 3 (2006): 48.

there was no intention of a haircut, but— young or old— everyone was included in the conversation in a meaningful way.[217]

He describes the benefit he received, "I felt safe and at home in this expressive, male, adult environment. I learned a lot and was able to add something once in a while."[218] Third places provide a context for processing issues due to the leveling dynamic and feeling of safety.

Refreshment

Third places also provide refreshment during the day. Andrea Gallagher writes, "Research now shows that in addition to visiting natural surroundings, 'third place' locations— such as health clubs, coffee shops, restaurants and senior centers—may also offer some of the same restorative effects."[219] Oldenburg refers to this restorative effect as "spiritual tonic."[220] He writes, "The effect of the third place is to raise participants' spirits, and it is an effect that never totally fades."[221] In Killeen, Texas, a set of white papers was produced for the "Embrace The Place" campaign to reinvigorate the greater Killeen area. In the third of a series of papers written to explain the vision, third places were put forth as the organizing principle for revitalization. Speaking to the refreshing value of third places, the following scenario was offered:

> The creative class works very well independently, and members of the class know when they need to take advantage of a third place experience to refresh and enhance their capabilities. A decade ago, it would be unheard of to imagine your best employee simply walking out at 10:30 a.m., putting on his helmet and spending the next half-hour on a bicycle

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[217] Oldenburg, *Celebrating the Third Place*, 45.

[218] Ibid.

[219] Gallagher.

[220] Oldenburg, *The Great Good Place*, 55.

[221] Ibid.

ride. Today, that employee may well do exactly that, come back to the office and put the finishing touches on a product presentation that lands a $10 million advertising account.[222]

Oldenburg summarizes the refreshing dynamic with "those who start their day in a friendly coffee circle will never have a totally bad day and have already developed a degree of immunity from the mean-spirited and unhappy people that the second place [work place] often harbors."[223]

<div align="center">Third Places and the Church</div>

Peter Steinke asks the following, "Can the local church create new spaces for connecting, recognizing, and conversing? What would it look like for a church to be a third place? Is it possible that mega churches might become non-places to the rising generation?"[224] In response, consulting firms have risen up and conducted research to help churches create "third places" to serve as bridges into their communities. However, Darren Embree of Mosaic Café says, "Research says that an unchurched person is no more inclined to go into a church than a Christian is to go into a gentlemen's club. It's completely off his radar. Places are needed to provide an entry point with a community mindset."[225]

In research conducted by the Cornerstone Knowledge Network concerning places in which a non-churched person feels most comfortable interacting with a friend, three locations were indicated: first, a sit down restaurant, second, a bar or nightclub, and third,

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[222] "Third Places," Greater Killeen Chamber of Commerce, http://embracetheplace.com/learn/ (accessed October 1, 2013 2013).

[223] Oldenburg, *The Great Good Place*, 55.

[224] Steinke, "From Non-Place to Third Place," 4.

[225] Lois Swagerty, "Third Place Comes to Church," Leadership Network, http://leadnet.org//resources/download/third_place_comes_to_church (accessed October 4, 2013).

a local coffee shop.[226] Absent among these responses are churches.[227] Though the

unchurched do not come to a church because it has established a third place, nonetheless,

there is a movement underway in church design to incorporate third places as a means to

attract and retain visitors.[228] Lois Swagerty, writer for the Leadership Network, observes,

"Churches today are becoming increasingly strategic about providing a Third Place to

meet a growing need for community contact."[229]

Third Place Consulting helps churches design their own third places. When asked,

"How long will this Third Place thing last?" the owner, Michael Trent, replies, "The very

moment we no longer have a need to consume beverages or have human contact – the

need for Third Places will be over. This is not a trend, this is a necessary fabric that must

exist in every community; it is the place where lives come together in a beautiful mess of

authenticity."[230]

However, Ed Bahler, president of a church architecture and construction

company, believes churches waste money when they build "third places."[231] He recounts

one such experience:

> We were one of the first to pioneer this "Third Place" concept for
> churches 6 years ago. And we expected this place to be our flagship,
> buzzing every day with activity and nurturing an authentic covenant
> community throughout the church. But two years later you'll find the

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[226] Jim Couchenour, "What Is an Unchurched Person's 'Third Place' and Why?,"
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5AlzcWCa-iE (accessed October 4, 2013).

[227] Ibid.

[228] Swagerty.

[229] Ibid.

[230] Michael Trent, "Third Place Consulting | Archive | Blog Posts," Third Places: design for community.

[231] Ed Bahler, "Churches Waste Money Building "Third Places"," http://edbahler.com/2008/06/01/relevant-
ministry-response-2-creating-a-covenant-community-part-3-of-3/ (accessed 10/04/2013 2013).

> place is quiet most days, the lights dark, and the latte machine cold
> without a wisp of steam anywhere.[232]

The problem, Bahler observes, is that "an over emphasis on ourselves above the deeper needs of the community leads to a personal rights mentality and imitations of selfless service, like 'Third Place' hangouts, that for a time appear to be real ministry."[233] On the other hand, Michael Trent casts a different look at it financially, "When churches view cafes as an expense, they are almost never happy with them and these cafes often live a short life. However, when viewed as an investment, the life of a café has a much better chance of survival and sustainability."[234]

In addition to financial considerations, there are also theological considerations to churches incorporating third places into their building design and ministry. Brian Habig, pastor of Downtown Presbyterian Church in Greenville, South Carolina, and Les Newsom, Area Coordinator for Reformed University, address the priority of the church in their book, *The Enduring Community*. In their work, they take up the question of what properly constitutes the work of the church. Following after the thinking of theologian Louis Berkhof in his *Systematic Theology*,[235] they ask the question, "Should it be the responsibility of the courts of the Church to start and administer hospitals? Where in Paul's instructions to Timothy and Titus regarding the responsibilities of elders is hospital administration?"[236] Applied to the running of "third places," the authors' friend

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[232] Ibid.

[233] Ibid.

[234] Swagerty.

[235] Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, New ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1996), 569-570.

[236] Brian Habig, *The Enduring Community: Embracing the Priority of the Church*, 2nd ed. (Jackson, MS: Reformed University Press, 2005), 87.

asked a relevant question, "Kinda makes you wonder about a lot of things the Church does, doesn't it?"[237] While believing it is the responsibility of Christians to start and administrate hospitals, Habig holds that "it is decidedly *not* the responsibility of pastors and elders *in their corporate capacity* to take responsibility for these kinds of works."[238] Berkhof, professor of systematic theology and president at Calvin Theological Seminary, held:

> It is also a mistake to maintain, as some Reformed Christians do, in virtue of an erroneous conception of the Church as an organism, that Christian school societies, voluntary organizations of younger or older people for the study of Christian principles and their application in life, Christian labor unions, and Christian political organizations, are *manifestations of the Church as an organism,* for this again brings them under the domain of the visible Church and under the direct control of its officers.[239]

The emphasis of Habig and Newsom is for the church to focus on and carry out the work that the church is particularly equipped and commissioned to do by Christ (Matthew 28:19-20). Running third places as sustainable businesses going beyond the lobbies of churches may then call into question the church's theological focus and charter.

Summary of Public Spaces and Gathering Places

Highly secular suburbs are a growing and dominant context in which more than half of Americans make their homes. Third places provide the context in which the issues and pressures of suburbia may be relieved and processed. Several key principles are found in the literature that has been reviewed. First, third places meet the growing need for community in the suburban context in which all means for knowing one's neighbors are being eliminated. Second, third places provide healing, processing, and refreshment

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[237] Ibid.

[238] Ibid.

[239] Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 569.

for those who regularly gather there. Finally, churches desiring to host third places as opportunities of ministry must weigh the cost and wrestle with the theological question of their place in the church's mission.

Summary of Literature Review

Engaging lost people in highly secular suburban settings requires a message with the power to break through social, economic, and spiritual barriers. The scriptures of both the Old and New Testaments provide such examples in the conversions of powerful authority figures, highly successful business people, common laborers, and those under tremendous spiritual oppression. There is a boldness that comes to the speakers of this message regardless of their lack of personal status, influence, or power. Effective ministry in highly secular contexts requires perseverance connected to consistent gospel ministry.

In housing more than half of Americans, the suburbs are home to the highly secular kinds of people found in the scriptural examples reviewed. With the overwhelming preference of Americans for lower density single family housing, the context of suburban living will continue to expand, growing the need for churches to be planted there. While arguments are consistently made for the influence of cities over suburbs in multiple areas, growing technology and communication has significantly changed that conversation. Both suburbs and cities are taking on each other's characteristics, resembling each other in public systems, gathering places, and walkable districts.

Suburbs are filled with self-sufficiency on one hand and spiritual emptiness on the other. Self-sufficiency results in a lifestyle that is spiritually indifferent to God at its best

and practically atheistic at worst. Self-sufficiency, also known as self-reliance, leads away from the church, and in some cases to the choosing of one's own self-made religion. With self-sufficiency comes the absence of outside resources and the resultant powerlessness with which to deal with personal and family issues. The effects of the suburbs are then a weathering of the soul. Added to this weathering is the highly held value of tolerance. This value has been applied both socially and theologically. Tolerance creates open attitudes toward lifestyle issues while challenging the exclusive claims of any theological system, particularly Christianity.

With the effects of the suburbs being felt on multiple levels, third places provide a setting in which social interaction can take place, allowing for valuable processing of personal issues, relief of stress, and refreshment during the day. Third places are informal public gathering places, "first" places being homes and work places being "second." The importance of third places arises out of the disappearance of means for knowing one's neighbors in the design of modern suburbs. Third places have become a subject of discussion in the world of church design. There are both financial and theological repercussions for churches desiring to host them, whether they are created on or away from the church site.

This chapter examined the current literature surrounding the issues of engaging non-believers in highly secular suburban settings. However, there remains little written on the actual process by which those who have recently been converted became Christians and committed to a local church in a thoroughly secular suburban setting. In answering this question, it is essential to research the experiences of several recent

converts to Christianity and to examine why they subsequently committed to a specific

local church in a very secular suburban context.

Chapter Three

Project Methodology

The purpose of this study was to discover the process by which recent converts become Christians and connect to a local church in thoroughly secular suburban settings. The challenge for those pastors working in this suburban context is the absence of literature, seminars, or training on how this process takes place. The approaches to evangelism in this dominant and growing context have received little updating or attention in recent years, leaving ministers and church planters with outdated or non-transferrable practices for reaching the lost in suburbia. This study provides a larger understanding of the suburban context and what is needed in order to engage and reach the lost in these secular settings. To examine the process of conversion for highly secular people, a qualitative study was utilized in which the interviews were guided by the following research questions:

1. What hurdles do recent converts encounter in becoming Christians in secular suburban settings?

2. What helps recent converts to negotiate these hurdles?

   a. Contexts: What are the contexts that facilitate recent converts to negotiate these hurdles?

   b. Relationships: What are the relationships that enable recent converts to negotiate these hurdles?

3. What influenced recent converts to commit to a particular local church?

Design of the Study

This study utilized a qualitative research method for analyzing the process by which recent converts cross over into Christianity and commit to a local church. In her book *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation,* Sharan B. Merriam describes the goal of qualitative research as an interest "in understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences."[240] The qualitative approach to research particularly aids in the goal of this study, which was to gain insight into the issues surrounding the process of becoming a Christian from the vantage point of the non-believer. The rich descriptive data from qualitative research provided a deeper understanding of the research subjects' views of specific obstacles and hurdles in becoming Christians. This will be instrumental for pastors, church planters, and Christian leaders seeking to reach the lost in highly secular suburban settings.

Merriam describes four key characteristics of a qualitative study.[241] First, the study focuses on meaning and understanding. The researcher seeks an emic perspective on the material – an understanding of the issues from the participants' point of view. Second, the researcher becomes the primary instrument for collecting and analyzing data. Third, the data is analyzed inductively, allowing the data itself to lead the researcher toward a theory, rather than seeking data to confirm a hypothesis. Finally, the researcher utilizes rich description to describe the data deeply. The researcher in this study gathered data through a survey of current literature related to the purpose of the study and through

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[240] Sharan B. Merriam, *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation*, The Jossey-Bass Higher and Adult Education Series (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2009), 5.

[241] Ibid., 14-16.

semi-structured interviews. The experiences of the interview participants produced valuable data regarding the process by which recent converts navigated hurdles in becoming Christians and committed to a local church.

Participant Criteria

In order to gather the rich experiential data related to the conversion process, the researcher interviewed eight recent converts to Christianity. Each participant has been a Christian for fewer than three years, which gives them greater clarity and freshness of memory when recalling issues, emotions, and experiences related to their conversion. The researcher utilized participants who were from highly secular suburban settings at the time of their conversion. Each of the participants was required to have little to no prior church experience or religious background. Further, each participant was currently connected to a local church, giving the researcher valuable data concerning the key factors that drew the participant into a particular local church. Finally, the context for each participant's conversion was a highly secular suburban setting.

The participants in this study were chosen from a pool of candidates supplied by pastors whose churches were located in secular suburban areas in the western part of the United States. Suburbs in the southern and eastern part of the United States were purposely avoided because of the Christian heritage pertaining to those areas of the country. The participants' names and identifying information have been changed in order to protect their identities. Introductions to each of the participants will be given in the next chapter.

Design Tools

The interviews in this study were designed utilizing a semi-structured format which followed the main research questions. The primary interview questions were followed by various detailed questions based on the insights and the experiences of each participant. Thus the interview format allowed the researcher to explore more deeply the participants' experiences and reflections. Initial questions for the interview protocol were developed based on the data collected in the literature, but the interviews themselves potentially initiated further development and refinement. Merriam suggests the use of "the constant comparative method of data analysis," in which the transcribed interviews are compared during the interview process for the identification of patterns and themes in the data.[242] The interview protocol followed the three main research questions (RQ's) in the following manner:

RQ #1. What hurdles do recent converts encounter in becoming Christians in secular suburban settings?

1. Tell me about how you began to move toward Christianity.

2. Tell me about the kind of hurdles or issues you had to overcome before becoming a Christian.

RQ #2. What helps recent converts to negotiate these hurdles?

1. Contexts: What are the contexts that facilitate recent converts to negotiate these hurdles?

2. Relationships: What are the relationships that enable recent converts to negotiate these hurdles?

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[242] Ibid., 30.

3. Tell me about any people who talked to you and helped you get over hurdles you were experiencing.

4. Describe the locations where the significant aspects of your conversion process took place.

5. How did you feel about that place? Did the environment have an impact on your conversion process?

RQ #3. What influenced recent converts to commit to a particular local church?

1. Describe the types of things you like about the church you attend.

2. If you were bringing a friend to your church for the first time, what kinds of topics might you hope the speaker would be talking about that day?

The researcher conducted a pilot test of the interview protocol to ensure the clarity and usefulness of the questions in bringing out data which addressed the research questions.

The interviews were conducted over a one-month period, and each interview lasted for thirty to sixty minutes. The interviews were conducted face-to-face, either in the participant's home, a quiet location, or the researcher's church office. All of the interviews provided a safe environment for the participant to share openly about potentially sensitive and emotional experiences, allowing the researcher to write field notes with observations on both verbal and non-verbal responses. The interviews were recorded on a portable digital device, and then they were professionally transcribed by an online service. The transcribed interviews were analyzed for themes related to the participants' perspectives on their conversion experience and subsequent commitment to

a local church. Emerging themes were identified and coded for further exploration in successive interviews.[243]

Limitations of the Study

Due to limited time and resources, eight recent converts were interviewed for this study. The participants were limited to those living in the suburbs of the Denver and Colorado Springs metropolitan areas. This is the geographical context in which the researcher lives and ministers. It is also the demographic with which he identifies. Some of the study's findings may be generalized to other similar suburban settings in other parts of the United States. However, since the Western portion of the United States does not have the Christian background or heritage that the Southern and Eastern parts have, the findings of this study would need to be tested in those particular contexts by readers. Therefore, those living other areas should take caution before applying this to their own context.

The researcher focused on the perceptions of new believers in regard to their conversion experiences. As such, the conclusions and common themes are limited to their experience alone. This study did not take into account the best practices of churches in people-gathering, since the methods, programs, and practices are too numerous and too limited by each church's place of ministry. In addition, the researcher was only interested in what new believers themselves said about what happened to them and why.

Researcher Position

The interpretation of data in this study was influenced by the researcher's position, which, as Merriam describes, consists of "the biases, dispositions, and

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[243] Ibid., 181-182.

assumptions regarding the research to be undertaken."[244] The researcher is a pastor in the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA), and he is aware that his training, background, and worldview are just a few of the many factors contributing to the filter through which he values and interprets the research data.

Three areas affect the researcher's position relative to this study. First, the researcher works as a pastor and coordinator for church planting in the same highly secular suburban area in which the study was conducted. In this sense, he is an insider, having spent eighteen years relating to the kinds of participants upon whom this research is based. Second, the researcher, as coordinator of new church plants for the Rocky Mountain Presbytery of the PCA, desires that churches focus on gathering non-believers outside the church rather than believers from other congregations. He is aware that churches need believers and welcomes them and the gifts they bring in order to carry out the work of the ministry. However, if the focus is overly weighted on those inside the church, then the church loses its sense of mission and effectiveness for the spread of the gospel and God's kingdom in a suburban context.

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[244] Ibid., 219.

Chapter Four

Findings

The purpose of this study was to explore the process by which recent converts become Christians and connect to a local church in thoroughly secular suburban settings. The research consisted of interviews with eight recent converts to Christianity within three years of their conversion experience. The researcher explored three areas surrounding the interviewees' conversion experiences. First, the study looked into the obstacles and hurdles each participant encountered in becoming a Christian and how those hurdles were navigated. Second, each participant was asked about the characteristics of Christians who were instrumental in helping them overcome these hurdles. It was important for the study to also understand the nature of the places in which the conversations and help were given. Third, the researcher examined the defining characteristics of the church to which each participant committed subsequent to their conversion experience. Specifically, the research questions that guided this study were:

1. What hurdles do recent converts encounter in becoming Christians in secular suburban settings?

2. What helps recent converts to negotiate these hurdles? What are the contexts and relationships that help navigate these hurdles?

3. What influenced recent converts to commit to a particular local church?

In this chapter, the participants in the study will be introduced, along with their insights into their conversion experiences, and their commitment to local churches.

Research Participants

The names of each of the participants have been altered to protect their identities. A brief introduction to their backgrounds will provide further insight into the comparative analysis of their perspectives.[245] Each of the participants resides in the Denver metropolitan area, and each of their conversions took place within the suburbs of Denver. The researcher interviewed both men and women above the age of eighteen for this study.

Chris was reared in a non-Christian home, and in his own words, "I never intended to be a Christian. I was just going to learn about it." The church to which he is committed is the only church he has attended. Chris currently attends the Christian education program and participates in one of the church's community groups.

Jackie grew up in an Episcopalian home but later lived in a series of foster homes. In Jackie's words, "As I got old enough, I completely left the church." After experiencing a crossroads in her life, she became a Christian and committed to a local church in which she now volunteers in the children's ministry.

William grew up in the South but rarely attended church. He shared, "We were going to church a little bit, once a year type of thing, for quite some time…" After becoming a Christian, William says concerning sermons from the Bible, "Now I'm interested in hearing what they have to say and after they say it, I'm interested in going to the Bible and actually reading about it."

Jay was reared in a Catholic home with a very religious background. However, when Jay encountered Christianity in a non-denominational context, he said, "Embarking

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[245] The researcher has made necessary grammatical corrections to quotes of the participants. Care has been given not to alter the intent of their observations.

on finding a church that wasn't Catholic had some baggage for me. Just the decision-making process of 'I'm going to go to a different church;' I still wrestle with that." After an introductory Bible study with the church's pastor, Jay sees Christianity as "having an actual intimate relationship with Jesus."

Denise grew up in the eastern part of the United States near a major metropolitan area. While being raised with a church background, she left the church at age eighteen to return nearly twenty years later. Her long absence from church is described in her own words, "I didn't know why I was doing it. It didn't really connect." Now she says the church "feels like a family."

Jennifer was at one point a doctoral student in child development in a major metropolitan area in the eastern United States. During a research project, she had such a strong reaction to the Christian-related responses of their participants that she left the room, saying over and over, "It's all lies…It's not true. It is lies." Jennifer went on to struggle with the concept of faith as she and her husband experienced a tragically ending pregnancy.

Gerald, married to Jennifer, began life being reared as an atheist, saying, "The end and the short of it all was, I was raised atheist, no belief in God." He described his approach to life as "personal satisfaction that you're the master of the universe, and there's no creator involved." Gerald went from atheism to Christianity because, "I had a personal encounter with God."

Jordan has been married five times. Having multiple marriages put him in a position of not being able to receive communion from the church in which he was reared. Jordan shared, "My biggest problem was communion, for example, because I was in a

divorce and because I got remarried, it made it to where I could no longer take the body and blood of Christ." The struggle of being forgiven made it particularly difficult for him to grasp the concept of grace.

Of the eight participants interviewed, two are currently from Presbyterian churches in different denominations, one is from a Seventh Day Adventist church, and five are from non-denominational churches.

Hurdles for Non-Christians

In order to understand the hurdles encountered by non-Christians before conversion, the first research question was intended to catalogue the specific challenges facing non-believers in highly secular suburban settings. The literature reviewed, though not targeting hurdles specific to Christianity, did show the recurrence of common themes in suburban living that would directly bear on individuals becoming Christians. The researcher asked participants to describe how they began moving toward Christianity and then to reflect on the hurdles they encountered during this journey. There were common themes that ran through their answers, going from personal crisis to preconceived notions of Christians. In each case, there was a trigger that urged the participant to move toward and beyond their hurdles to Christianity

Triggers

The triggers serving to move each participant toward and past their hurdles were described in terms of how they began. Each participant experienced a personal crisis for which they had no personal resources to meet the challenge. The literature reviewed in chapter two confirmed this lack of personal resources to face turmoil in the lives of

suburbanites. The participants shared two primary triggers: personal and professional crisis.

Chris experienced a personal failure, which resulted in the inability to find and experience any kind of forgiveness. Chris said, "I couldn't forgive myself, and it just came from there. I did not know how to forgive myself. I wasn't suicidal or anything, I just didn't want to be me." This resulted in not being able to like himself. Chris shared, "How do you live with not liking yourself?"

Personal failure in marriage brought depression and worse into Jackie's life. Jackie says, "I felt I had two choices, and it was either take my life or go to church. I felt like that was my last option." Jackie was living in an abusive relationship in which she said, "I was very alone, and I just didn't want to do it anymore." Denise also experienced abuse in a trusted relationship. She shared a childhood experience, which led to serious trust issues later on with the church. Denise says that as a child, "I was molested by my grandfather, my mother's father. So there were a lot of trust issues on both sides of the family."

After dealing with personal infertility, Jennifer became pregnant with her first child before receiving devastating news. Her husband Gerald explained, "We got the crushing news that there were some serious problems. Half the heart didn't form…" Gerald described the personal crisis trigger like this, "Even as an atheist, I did not agree with abortion…That's when I fell to my knees and prayed. For the first time, I prayed to God and I said, 'I can't make this choice. I can't do this. This isn't going to work.'"

For Jordan, multiple marriages had led to a sense of guilt and inadequacy. As a result of the church in which he was reared, Jordan was not allowed to receive communion. He explained:

> My biggest problem was communion; for example, because I was in a divorce and because I got remarried it made it to where I could no longer take the body and blood of Christ. That always hit me as, wait a minute, wasn't it supposed to be all based on love and forgiveness and all these things that are in the Bible that are now total ... I can't do.

The participants also mentioned professionally related triggers. William experienced a lay-off that radically altered his ability to provide for his family and led to great loss. William said, "I was laid off from the golf course, and we ran into some other struggles with financial problems, losing our house, losing our cars." The result, William said, was "I was kind of lost a little bit."

Along with William, career issues affected Jennifer. After withdrawing from a doctoral program, she shared, "It's like what am I doing with my life? Where am I supposed to be? What am I supposed to do? Job-wise, I love research. I didn't want to go back to school. Just feeling very career and job-wise, why am I here? What is my purpose?" Jay also felt great stress in his professional life. He described himself as "a guy under thirty years old with three very little kids, a wife that's staying at home, and just the stress of supporting a family."

Just as the participants experienced triggers both personally and professionally, they also faced hurdles that were spread over several challenging areas. The participants identified four categories of hurdles: fear of the unknown, personal vulnerability, self-sufficiency, and skepticism.

Fear of the Unknown

Two of the participants used the word "cult" to describe their feelings toward the church or Christianity. William explained, "You're a little worried also about when you go in there, is it a type of cult." Describing his fear, William said, "I didn't know if they would bring me in and then alter either my thoughts or my movements of what I did in my life." The fear of being controlled was a concern for Denise as well. Relating to William, she shared, "I hear horrible stories about different things. I don't even know. You know that you see on the news, with the way you treat your children, and just the control over it, and more of a cult." Her fears continued several weeks into her regular attendance of the church. She shared, "I said, 'Okay. So when are you going to bring us into the mountains and give me the Kool-Aid?'" Her fear also extended to those teaching the Bible. She feared "the different interpretations of the Bible, and how it can be brainwashing to a certain extent."

Fear of the unknown was expressed not only toward the church but also toward God and what would come next in a relationship with him. Denise struggled with the validity of a faith that required a person "to put your trust and your faith in someone that you'll never meet as a human." Gerald struggled because he did not know what should happen next. He wondered, "What do we do next? Having absolutely no religious background, I knew we had to go to church, but I didn't know where or why." Even after coming to a belief in God, Gerald confessed, "There's still this thing of, 'Oh, now what are things we have to do?'"

Personal Vulnerability

Three of the participants spoke about the personal vulnerability they experienced when moving toward Christianity. While Jackie experienced crisis in her domestic and personal life, she visited a couple of the local churches in her suburb. Her personal history became the point of her vulnerability. She shared, "They would judge me pretty harshly because I have a really rough background." At one point, she considered going through the process of becoming a member. However, during one of the class discussions she realized, "Everything that was said in there was everything I had done, and I thought, 'Oh, I don't fit here.'" Her sense of being judged led her to conclude, "Okay, I'm not good enough for this church."

Jackie's experience of being judged only furthered her sense of personal inadequacy. Since the topic of family was frequently part of the class discussion, Jackie felt looked down upon for not having children. She shared, "I think my whole thing was I was never stable enough to bring a child into the world, and I just didn't want to repeat that cycle…I'm looked down upon for not having children." Jackie characterized her feeling of personal vulnerability when visiting churches as "very intimidating." She described her experience like this:

> Just me being a woman going to church by myself, no one ever would reach out to me. I tried going to other churches in this community, but no one ever reached out to me, no one ever talked to me, no one ever said anything to me, and so I felt very lonely when I went to church, and I just didn't want to feel that. I was already feeling bad enough.

Jordan, like Jackie, shared a similar experience of personal inadequacy. Because of his multiple marriages and issues with personal immorality, Jordan believed his life was forfeit. He shared, "I didn't feel worthy. I didn't feel like I deserved, I feel like I was condemned already. There was no way on this planet that I was ever going to be good

enough for God to forgive to me… I felt like all I'd done was screw up. I'd done drugs, I'd done sex, I'd done ... I could list."

Another participant felt personally vulnerable when considering Christianity because she feared how it might impact her marriage. Jennifer opened up by sharing, "I didn't want to be on a different page from Gerald, so separate and different. He was atheist. If I really did this and got into it, we would just be so different and I don't know if I could that, if I would want to, or how would it change our relationship and our marriage." Gerald confirmed her fears by saying, "I was concerned that I saw Jennifer moving into Christianity." From the opposite side, Gerald shared the same fear. He revealed, "I thought, 'Okay, well, you know, this could potentially become a wedge in our marriage, like, you know, we're starting to diverge paths,' and I really got a bit concerned about that."

Partners in marriage were both affected when issues related to Christianity were being considered. When being pressed by in-laws for the baptism of her son, Denise recalled a conversation with her husband, in which she queried, "'Why are we going to do this?' And he was like, 'Well, I had to.' I said, 'Well, for me, that's not enough. I don't want him to just do something because we're telling him.'" Jackie's desire for her husband to be part of her journey toward Christianity has put further strain on a marriage already at risk. She revealed, "Keith shares nothing of this with me. I do this all on my own." When seeking to include her husband, Jackie stated her disappointment, "Keith won't acknowledge it. Keith doesn't want to go to church. Keith doesn't want to meet with Pastor Doug."

The literature review examined the way in which suburbia attracts married couples and families seeking safe places in which to raise their children. In light of this, the hurdle of personal vulnerability relating to a spouse's marriage took on a significant role when that spouse began to move toward Christianity.

Self-Sufficiency

The literature revealed that the suburbs are a place of dominant self-sufficiency. As previously discussed by Wolfe, "Faced with a choice between submission to a power outside (and greater than) themselves and a focus on their own particular needs, American individualism guarantees that the former will rarely triumph over the latter."[246] Six of the eight participants shared responses revealing facets of this self-sufficiency.

William never thought that knowing God was important. Gerald went as far as proclaiming himself "the master of the universe and there's no creator involved." Gerald's upbringing played a key role in the development of his belief system. He explained, "I was an atheist. My dad turned away from Christianity before I was born and pretty much just renounced God…I was raised atheist, no belief in God." While not as adamant as Gerald, William acknowledged the existence of God but did not attach any significance to knowing him. William shared, "I've always believed that there's a God, but I didn't think I had to get to know God or figure out how God got to know me or however that worked, what the relationship was there." This resulted in William never placing the church "high on my priority list." The church simply never mattered to him. William admitted, "I think there was nothing really wrong with going to church. We just

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[246] Wolfe, *One Nation After All*, 82.

never took the time to do it…I didn't put forth the effort to believe the Lord, pray every night, and do things the right way."

Chris expressed self-sufficiency in a more negative fashion. He believed Christianity was a "crutch" for not taking responsibility for your actions. He explained, "The biggest thing: I thought it was a crutch. You never had to take responsibility because it was the way it was supposed to be or whatever. That's what I thought." Chris held that those believing in God were incapable of making themselves happy, relying on something outside of them to do so.

For Jennifer, self-sufficiency was born out of a reaction toward God during a time in which her mother was inflicted with cancer. She shared this:

> My mom got cancer and got really ill and at that point I was like,
> obviously God can't love her because I love her so much and I would
> never let this happen, like I wouldn't …That's really when I went, "I'll
> just do it on my own. I'll do it better anyway because I love her more. It's
> not a mistake."

Jennifer's self-sufficiency reached its height when, while she was during her research as a doctoral student, her mother got cancer again. This time the self-sufficiency was seen against the simple faith of Christian children. Jennifer shared:

> She got cancer again when I was in college. I remember doing research,
> and we worked with a Christian school because it was a lot easier to get in
> there to work with kids for research. They would say their prayers or their
> scriptures, and I just had such a negative reaction at one point. I was like,
> "It's all lies. It's not true. It is lies." I had to leave the room because I just
> had such a strong reaction to it.

Jennifer's self-sufficiency could not give her resources to deal with the infertility that she experienced with her husband Gerald. She claimed, "going through the stuff that we did, I didn't have any faith for us over like...It was all up to me." She also added, "I just decided that it was really more up to me to make things work."

Skepticism

Four out of the eight participants identified the hurdle of skepticism while moving toward Christianity. Their skepticism ranged from doubting the existence and character of God to the meaning of the Bible as taught by Christians in a church. Of the eight participants, Gerald was most pronounced in his skepticism. He explained, "As an atheist, there was doubt. There was always this thing in the back of my mind of, this isn't real. The worldly view of this supernatural thing, especially in the scientific realm is, 'This is not possible.'" Gerald further explained the effect his atheism had on his worldview, saying, "I got heavily into the sciences, so again, there's that personal satisfaction that you're the master of the universe, and there's no creator involved." In responding to his wife's exploration of Christianity, Gerald said to Jennifer, "You know I don't believe in a God, and if you want to that's fine. I'm not going to criticize you. When you want to go chasing ghosts, that's your thing. Have fun." Like Gerald, Chris could not hold to the possibility of the existence of God. He confessed, "I didn't think it was possible at all that there could be a God, and I thought it was like a silly thing to make stupid people feel better."

Denise's skepticism presented the issue of trust. When asked about specific hurdles to belief, she explained, "Here's this person that's interpreting the Bible, and you're there, you're listening, and you want to be able to implement that in your every day. I think it's hard in our society, you hear all these crazy things that do go on in different churches." Denise's skeptical attitude led her to a point of uncertainty regarding whether a person could know what the Bible taught. She observed, "Again, it's like the different interpretations of the Bible, and how it can be brainwashing to a certain extent."

Even though each of the participants had differing hurdles over which to navigate, there was an omission that was common to all of them. None of the participants spoke about having a true understanding of Christianity to which they might object. None of the participants claimed to have the gospel explained to them. The next research question pursued the ways in which each of the participants made their way past the hurdles, came to understand Christianity, and became Christians.

Places and People

The second research question focused on how the participants were specifically helped in navigating the hurdles they encountered while becoming Christians. The research question was broken into two parts. First, the interviewer asked the participants about the kinds of relationships that enabled them to get past hurdles they experienced while becoming Christians. Second, each of the participants was asked about the places and environments in which these relationships took place.

Relational Characteristics

The participants spoke about several key characteristics of the relationships in which they received help with navigating hurdles. The participants shared four characteristics of these relationships: non-coercive, accepting and gentle, pursuit, and generosity.

Non-coercive

Four of the eight participants discussed the non-coercive nature of those helping them. William, who had experienced a job loss, spoke about the listening ability of the person helping him. When asked about their talks, William shared, "Yes, very good listener, and then when it was time for him to talk, I listened and his wording was really, really good." William shared how proud he was, and noted that it would have been hard

for him and his family to accept help from the church. However, this person had a non-coercive way with words. William shared:

> The way he worded things was not, "Hey you gotta start coming to church." It wasn't that he was trying to pull me into the church; it was the fact that I needed help. My family needed help, and he knew that we were pretty proud people, and we may not take the help, but he figured out a way to see if the church was willing to help us even though we weren't members. I thought that was rather unique.

Jordan shared the same experience as William, yet at another church. For Jordan, the senior pastor was sensitive to the fact that Jordan came from a different religious background. Jordan explained:

> As I was saying with Pastor John, he didn't keep coming at me going, "Are you ready, are you ready, are you ready?" I mean, he did talk to me that one time, when I sat and wanted to talk to him about asking me more. Really, past that, he asked me on occasion, "How are things going? Any questions you have?" Or, I'd sit down and talk to him.

Chris spoke about the same non-coercive nature of the key relationships helping him. He had two experiences. After dismissing Christianity and entering into a dark emotional time, one friend reached out to him, offering to get together weekly and read a book together. Chris explained:

> He called me later and invited me to get together to talk. I knew it was going to be about God. He had tried throughout my knowing him, to discuss that with me and I was always resistant. He said in the message he left me that he did not think that I looked very ... like I was doing very well. If I was willing, he would really like to talk to me about you know.

Chris shared that "My plan, I never intended to be a Christian. I was just going to learn about it." After visiting a church recommended to him by his friend, he was invited to lunch with a couple. Chris shared how again nothing was being pushed upon him:

> I went to a lunch and talked to them quite a bit about their faith and their background and stuff…nobody tried to push anything on me. They would make suggestions and things I could read and if I had a questions we

would discuss it but they didn't tell me, "Oh, you need to do this," or "You have to do this."

Jennifer also related the same characteristic in the key relationships that helped her. Jennifer shared how she was helped with her questions, saying, "Like, when I talk to her about something, she'll be like, "Am I just listening or do you want feedback? Do you want some perspective?" Having questions, she was just very gentle." The non-coercive nature of these relationships was connected to the second characteristic, accepting and gentle.

Accepting and Gentle

Jennifer noted the gentle and accepting nature of the person who helped her when she was processing Christianity. Concerning objections or questions, Jennifer recalled, "She was just accepting. There wasn't any judgment whatsoever. In fact, she was like, 'Yes, I'm walking through that myself' or 'I'm still there' or … she could give me gentle insight and she would ask, 'Do you want…' and she still does."

Jennifer had a sense that this accepting, gentle nature flowed out of "…love. It all came out of love." This love was important for Jennifer as she thought through Christianity and her inability to believe for herself. She explained, "She was just so gentle and tender and very accepting and just loved me right where I was. There was no judgment or condemnation or 'Oh, you shouldn't, that's wrong, or you should be doing this.'" Because Jennifer was agnostic, she appreciated not have scripture forced onto her. She shared, "There wasn't any scripture thrown at me or there wasn't … if anybody would have been like the Bible says this, I'd be like well somebody just wrote the Bible. It wouldn't have helped any for me. In fact, it would have turned me away, at that point, of really coming into it."

Gerald processed Christianity with the executive pastor of a church he began to visit with his wife. Gerald shared his impression of how the executive pastor helped him, saying:

> We started talking there. He was just friendly, kind, he listened. He has such a knowledge base. Biblically, he's just very full…there's a lot of truth in Dave. He has a way of simplifying things...he was describing the picture that he has in his office that he keeps of this little trail turns into this black bend and you can't see. He was like, "That's faith. Like, you don't know what's back there, but you know that God's leading you there and it will be fine."

Gerald summed up the gentle and accepting manner of people when he was nearing his conversion, saying, "It's people who helped me to tell me that I wasn't crazy, I guess. 'No, you're not crazy. This really is.'"

Pursuit

While those helping the participants were gentle, accepting, and non-coercive, there was nonetheless a relentless pursuit that five of participants noted on behalf of those who helped them. Chris was entering a dark time emotionally, which was noticed by David, who invited Chris to get together and talk. Chris explained:

> He called me later and invited me to get together to talk. I knew it was going to be about God. He had tried throughout my knowing him, to discuss that with me, and I was always resistant. He said in the message he left me that he did not think that I looked very…like I was doing very well. If I was willing, he would really like to talk to me about, you know.

When they got together, David took Chris through a weekly study of D.A. Carson's book, *The God Who is There*.[247] Chris benefitted from David's pursuit and the weekly study of Carson's book. This interaction gave Chris a grasp of the Bible, which up to that point he

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[247] D. A. Carson, *The God Who Is There: Finding Your Place in God's Story* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2010).

never had. Chris shared, "He does such a good job of telling you what...like the overall arc of the story in the Bible was about."

Jackie was subject to many fears, and flight was her pattern. Jackie shared, "I guess my routine is to run away. If it gets too hard, I'll run away." But when Jackie began to explore Christianity at a local church near her home, she was patiently pursued week after week. Knowing about her tendency to run, Jackie shared about their relentless pursuit:

> Suzanne and David knew that, and they wouldn't let me run away. They cared enough not to let me go. If they hadn't heard from me in a week or two, they were coming to me. "Where are you? What's going on?" It was the first time somebody really cared, I guess, which I hated. I totally hated it because I wanted to run away and be done with it, but they invested in me.

This same pursuit was seen in the persistent invitations to church that Jackie received from one of her friends. Noting the persistence, Jackie recalled:

> She just kept saying, "I really wish you would come to church. I just think you'll be safe. I just really wish you would come." She didn't let me go. It as another one of those … some people are like me where you just got it, let him know you're there. I may not acknowledge that I know it and I may seem like, "I don't care about you," but that's a trust issue.

After Jackie became part of her new church, the leadership still continued to pursue her. Jackie noted how "Pastor David and Suzanne have taken me under their wing per se and are not going to let me go away, but they continue to push me to grow."

Jordan's movement toward Christianity began with an invitation from a fellow employee at work. Jordan recounted, "He wanted to see if I wanted to just go check it out. He couldn't ask me, so what he did is, he asked my wife, 'Hey they're having a meeting up there, and if you'd like to come up on Sunday and see what's like, why don't you see if Jordan would like to?'"

A friend invited Jennifer to a Bible study. The pastor of the church Jay began

attending invited him to a weekly study, saying, "If you want, we can do a one-on-one

walk through Christianity. Come to my office on Tuesdays." Concerning the same pastor,

Gerald was impressed with how well the minister remembered him and sought him out in

the lobby. After attending one week, Gerald shared:

> Okay, we're going to come back again. We'll give it a few more weeks.
> We came back and James sought us out and said, "Hi Gerald, hi Jennifer."
> He made a point to remember us. The scripture says that he knows us by
> our name and John makes an effort to do that. I just felt like, "Wow, this is
> a really neat place."

In addition to being non-coercive, accepting and gentle, and pursuing, those

helping also displayed a spirit of generosity toward the participants.

Generosity

One of the characteristics that stood out for William was the generosity expressed

by those helping him when he started moving toward Christianity. William described the

situation in which he found his family, saying, "Things started going a little tricky in our

lives. I was laid off from the golf course, and we ran into some other struggles with

financial problems, losing our house, losing our cars." Speaking about one of the

Christians who brought him to the church he began to visit, William said, "He was one of

the ones that brought me to the church to see how generous they were at the beginning."

William's situation plus the generosity of the Christians he was beginning to know

helped him navigate through his hurdles. William shared:

> Jerry didn't know me at the beginning. He would talk to me and he said,
> "You know the church has some things that they can do to help you." I
> thought that was pretty interesting, because they didn't know who I was. I
> was not a member of the church, but they were still willing to pay a couple
> of my bills, offer me some food. They brought dinners to our residence for
> eight weeks once a week.

William also used the expression "generous" in describing what he liked about the manner of the person helping him.

> He was a generous guy, and the way he worded things was not, "Hey you gotta start coming to church." It wasn't that he was trying to pull me into the church; it was the fact that I needed help. My family needed help and he knew that we were pretty proud people, and we may not take the help, but he figured out a way to see if the church was willing to help us even though we weren't members. I thought that was rather unique.

William and his family connected to that specific church without ever visiting another one because of the generosity of those Christians directly helping him.

Place and Environmental Characteristics

The participants discussed key characteristics of the places and environments in which they received help with navigating hurdles. Participants related three main places and two key characteristics of the environments in which they processed hurdles in their conversion experiences.

Places

The participants mentioned three places in which they explored Christianity: coffee shops, someone's office, and their homes. Three of the eight participants pointed to coffee shops or "third places" discussed in the literature review as places in which they could process issues. Chris expressed why he enjoyed talking through issues at coffee shops, saying, "Coffee can be a five minute thing or it can be a two hour thing…it takes as long as you want it to." William identified the office at church as his place to process his journey toward Christianity. Jackie identified both the church office and someone's home, recalling, "With Pastor David, it was always in his office. With Suzanne, it was usually at her house. Jamie, we'd either talk at church or we would go to each other's houses." James also processed Christianity in the pastor's office, while Denise was able

to process with another believer in her home. In relating why processing Christianity was easier outside the church, Chris said, "In the church you feel like you need to, there is pressure to know what you are talking about and be careful what you say, but a coffee shop you're just hanging out."

Environmental Characteristics

The participants shared three characteristics common to all three locations: safe, relaxed, and comfortable. The response receiving the most emphasis was the safe feeling that the interviewees encountered in these environments. Concerning the pastor's office, William shared, "For some reason, his office felt safer for me than it would have been maybe in the chapel." Jackie felt the same as William, noting this key characteristic of safety. She said, "There was a calmness. Maybe it was just because they had the calmness and presence about them that just made me feel safe in that environment. It was always one on one, so I didn't have to worry about anybody else hearing or judging me." Gerald agreed with William and Jackie, saying, "Again, I guess, safety. I guess that it's just really safe." In commenting on the importance of feeling safe while in the coffee shop, William observed, "Sitting around there it didn't feel like people are going to butt into your conversation. They may be hearing you, but it didn't matter. They had their own thing going on. It wasn't busy. It wasn't hustle, bustle." Jennifer needed the sense of safety in order to have deeply personal conversations. She shared, "It was very personal. It was just us…and her kids, but they were babies. It was just, we were able to be close and really open up and have heart-to-heart talks."

In addition to the sense of safety, the participants added that there was a relaxed and comfortable feeling that existed in the places which helped them process their movement toward Christianity. Concerning the office, William shared, "It was very

comforting really to go in there, because I needed him at that time." William also processed Christianity in the coffee shop, a familiar "third place" in his local community. When asked what made this a desirable place in which to have conversations about Christianity, he shared, "I think it was the seating, very comfortable, the mood of the place. There were just people in there relaxing. It wasn't a busy place. It was a very relaxing type of place." While Denise mainly processed Christianity in her own home, she also commented on why it was inviting to discuss Christianity in safe places such as her local coffee shop. She observed:

> I think you feel comfortable because there's not that pressure of ... it's kind of like how we are right now. I'm not in a crowd. I feel comfortable like in small groups, but that's still kind of pushing it a little bit. It's like public speaking…I'm not comfortable in those settings, so it's definitely easier to be on more of a one-on-one, or in my own home, because I definitely feel comfortable in my home, at the coffee shop. So locations that I'm comfortable with.

The people and places involved during this "helping" process played key roles in each participant's journey toward Christianity and navigation through hurdles. Being non-coercive, accepting and gentle, continually pursuing, and demonstrating a spirit of generosity were essential for the ongoing movement toward becoming a Christian. Meeting in places where the participants felt safe, comfortable, and relaxed was essential for navigating those hurdles. The next research question explored the key factors in each participant's decision-making process for committing to a particular local church.

Committing to a Local Church

The third research question focused on the characteristics as well as the message content of churches to which the participants were drawn subsequent to their conversion experience. First, participants were asked to identify the key characteristics of the church that specifically connected to them. Second, the researcher asked each of the participants

to name a topic or theme they would want addressed on the Sunday in which they were to bring a non-believing friend.

<div align="center">Key Characteristics of Churches</div>

The participants in the study shared three key characteristics. The first characteristic, welcoming, was shared by all eight of the participants.

Welcoming

Upon initially visiting the church to which he ultimately committed, after the worship service, William observed, "and then afterwards people came up to you and talked to you, introduced themselves ... extremely, extremely friendly." The welcoming aspect was further accentuated by the ministers' accessibility to people following the service. William noted, "Another thing that I've never seen before is Doug and Gary came out after the service and mingled with the guests. Usually the other ministers would go back to their rooms or whatever they did. They were not as friendly with the congregation."

Chris had the same experience upon visiting the church to which he ultimately committed. Chris shared, "First person I talked to was Todd, and he was just very welcoming. I think he could tell that I was uncomfortable. It was probably hard to talk to me, but he did it, and then he set me up after the service with Linda…We went to the coffee shop across the street." The welcoming experience Chris had culminated in being taken out to lunch on a following Sunday. He shared his experience:

> Even the people I met further in, I didn't ... they all knew. I'd tell them all
> I was very new to it. They didn't push me or anything, and then I went to a
> lunch and talked to, I don't remember their names…Yeah. I went to a
> lunch and talked to them quite a bit about their faith and their background
> and stuff.

Jackie shared earlier about the intimidating nature of visiting a church for the first time, so the characteristic of welcoming was very important to her. Struggling with a sense of inadequacy and feeling out of place in a place where she believed that people were supposed to have their lives together, Jackie was amazed at the reception she received upon visiting the church that she now attends, and where she serves in the children's ministry. She recounted:

> I felt the first time I walked through those doors, I was by myself and people approach me and ask who I was, and welcome me, and show me where the coffee was. I was like, "Wow, I'm actually being acknowledged here." People weren't just like, "Hi, you're new," and walk away. It was like, "Why are you here?" and I was meeting Jamie. When they saw Jamie come in, "Oh, there's Jamie your friend. Jamie, look who I found. I found Jackie." It was very welcoming.

During her interview, Jackie used the word "welcome" or "welcoming" six times to describe her experience of visiting the church to which she committed.

Jordan also came from a background over which he felt deeply self-conscious. With his multiple marriages, Jordan needed a place that he felt accepted and welcomed. He described his first experience and subsequent baptism at the church to which he committed:

> It's one of the things I think I really love about that place, is, I'm not afraid of, I'm not embarrassed. I'm not ... I have nothing that makes me feel unworthy of being there right now. I could say anything that I've done, which I did a lot during my baptism in front of everyone. It doesn't faze me in the least.

Jay, who is employed in a field that values customer relations, was drawn to how welcoming a church could be. He described his experience, "It was a very welcoming place, both just from...on the surface. When we'd walk into the church, from the greeters, to being at the church, John's personality. It was a very welcoming place was my first

impression." Jay's first impression also included an observation of the dress code, which

seemed to speak to the church's welcoming nature. He shared:

> For me, to have people coming in whatever it was that they wanted to
> come and worship in, that, to me, was the approachable, welcoming. The
> more important thing about church and about worship is coming and being
> there, being present, not how you look or the perception that you're there.
> It's come one, come all, we're here to worship.

Denise had struggled with the area of trust, an issue stemming back to her

childhood. A welcoming experience was crucial to help her want to return. She described

the welcoming nature of the church to which she committed by relating her first visits:

> There's a handful of people that you feel comfortable with. But it's very
> welcoming. I love all the little things that they did to make me feel
> comfortable, and my family...Such as the first time that I attended, leaving
> the church they had given me a card with my name and just thanking me
> for being there...As I was leaving. And I just thought, "Wow." And the
> thing was is that it was then every time I returned they knew my name and
> they welcomed me. I mean I'd walk in and it was as if I had been going
> time and time. And there was a little, "Yes," like, "Why?"..."Why do they
> remember me?"

The characteristic of welcoming was significant for each of the participants for

personal reasons specific to each person. William was self-conscious about his current

financial status. Chris had never experienced a church before and found Christians odd

and uninformed. Jackie struggled with never fitting in. Jay came from a totally different

religious background. As mentioned, Denise carried trust issues from her childhood. For

Jennifer, a welcoming environment was significant for both herself and her husband

Gerald. She was concerned about what would happen with him if she became a Christian.

He came from an atheistic and skeptical background. Jennifer described her first

impression, "It seems very open and accepting, embracing community. You feel

welcome. There isn't judgment…You can go however you want." Jennifer was

particularly impressed by the welcoming and embracing nature of the church's senior

pastor. She shared:

> Pastor John, the senior pastor. Just his heart and his soul for people. He
> has a compassion and a caring. He knows everyone by name. He asks your
> story and he remembers your story. It's just a very personal, intimate
> world that just flows through him…He's just an example of, I feel like, he
> very much was the way that Jesus…The first time we went to lunch and
> just how he interacted with everyone, the waitress and everything. That's
> how Jesus walked when He was here. It was very inspiring. That's a big
> one.

Jennifer's husband, Gerald, shared the same view concerning the church's senior

pastor. As an atheist, his impression of the pastor as welcoming and embracing was

significant from someone who was outside the church and new to Christianity. Gerald

shared, "I just love Pastor John's heart. He just has such a heart for people, he has a love

for the masses. I just really see Jesus shining through that. He had such a love for the

masses and the throng of humanity." The pastor seemed to set the tone for the

congregation as Gerald observed:

> They're very embracing. I mean they really are. They truly, truly live by
> their mission statement there. They are in embracing community of
> believers that are dedicated to having a life-changing love relationship
> with God and they really hold of that. The senior people there, like Percey
> and Robin and John, Kathy and all these people have just such a love and
> they have a genuine concern for your well-being.

All the participants shared that this characteristic, welcoming, was pivotal in their

commitment to a local church. Each participant connected through welcoming for reasons

stemming back to their childhood experience, professional background, pre-conceived

notions of Christians, or personal vulnerability. Welcoming was the leading

characteristic, but not the only characteristic.

Embracing Family

While Gerald and Jennifer noted the embracing nature of their church, Denise

referred to her church as a "family." When asked what she liked about her church, Denise

said:

> It feels like a family. And I think that's one of the things that I've always
> wanted. I don't have a very close family, and so I think that there's that
> aspect of it. I feel the trust and the community, and I'm not really tight
> with everybody. That's not it. But there's a handful of people that you feel
> comfortable. But it's very welcoming. I love all the little things that they
> did to make me feel comfortable, and my family.

The feel of family was important to Denise because of a very troubled childhood

experience. Finding this in a church was crucial to her decision to commit to a specific

church subsequent to her conversion experience.

Jay wanted "alone time to have a spiritual outlet" even before becoming a

Christian. He struggled with being in a church and having to occupy his children at the

same time. He found that he could receive help in both of these areas from the church he

began to visit as a result of an invitation. He described his experience, "It was a very safe

place, where I felt like I could bring my kids, and I felt like they would learn really good

things about Jesus, but also be physically safe while I was having time to have some

reflection and spirituality."

The importance of an embracing family was part of Jackie's experience as well.

She shared about how she visited churches by herself and struggled to understand why

she was being ignored or overlooked:

> I don't know if I look approachable or not, or maybe that I was ... I don't
> want to say younger but lumped into the younger people...Not younger
> because I'm not young, but not an older person where they might be like,
> "Oh, she lost her husband. Let's comfort her."… I would literally sit in the
> front...not in the front front but in the front area and no one would ever

even sit close to me. There were times that I would be in a row and
someone would be at the very end and I felt stupid. I just felt stupid.

The characteristics of an embracing family and a welcoming environment were added to

a third characteristic identified by participants of the study.

Comprehensible

Three of the participants spoke about their church's ability to explain the Bible

and Christianity. Chris, having come from a totally unchurched atheistic background,

valued his church's desire for each person to understand what was being taught. Chris

explained, "They really want you to have an understanding of what they're saying and

why they're saying it. They want you to go home, they want you to read the verses and

they want you to research on your own. It's not, it's not 'This is what we are doing,' it's

an understanding."

The importance of this stood out in comparison to a prior visit to another church

of the same denomination. Chris shared, "They read the verse, and they didn't really

explain it very well…I did not understand it at the end what they were talking about… I

didn't understand the message at all. I was totally confused, I thought they were calling

me a bad tree."

Jackie shared the same value as Chris in pointing out her pastor's ability to

explain the Bible to people at various stages of their Christian experience. Jackie

observed, "David is so good about explaining things to all levels of people, whether

you've gone for years or you're new." Along with Jackie, William pointed to the

importance of the message being understood by visitors who are from outside the church.

He said, "If you haven't been doing a lot of church and all that kind of stuff, the Bible's

tough. The Bible's tough to understand and all the different words and all that. You can have somebody to be the translator for you."

Being comprehensible was key for Jordan. Having been raised in a different religious background, Jordan experienced something completely new for him. He shared, "That was a completely different concept than what I'm accustomed to, because I actually felt I learned something. I learned what he was trying to explain as far as the word."

Because of the highly secular nature of the suburbs where each of the participants resided, the characteristic of comprehensibility became a highly valued factor in their decisions to commit to a specific church.

Message Content

In addition to the central factors leading each of the participants to commit to a specific church, they were also asked about the choice of topic for a particular Sunday on which they would bring a non-believing friend to church. The responses revealed a desire for content that focused on the character and work of God and how to connect to him in a relationship.

The Character and Work of God

When asked what topic she would want her non-believing friends to hear about if visiting her church, Jennifer responded, "Just the acceptance. Just the beauty of it, the amazingness…within…it's also the grace. Just the amazing love of Christ. It doesn't matter where you're at or what you've done or what you're doing. God just loves you." Jennifer's husband, Gerald, agreed, "One of the things I like to hear and I think John does a really good job of is like, 'Jesus really does love you. You know, you have a place with

him in his kingdom, and you will spend eternity in a place that is phenomenal. Like, he

loves you more than you could possibly ever imagine.'"

However, Gerald also felt that it was not so much the topic as much as the spirit

or manner in which it was being addressed. He explained:

> I don't think the topic, really, for me, is that big of a deal. I mean, topics
> are always nice to have, but I think, what comes through that topic is much
> more important than how that topic is being approached. I think John is a
> very dynamic speaker. I think he walks that line of truth and grace very
> well. He speaks the truth, but he follows up with grace. Or he starts with
> grace and he follows up with truth. He walks that very well.

William focused on the work of God, that is, the resurrection of Christ, with the

caveat that it be comprehensible to his friends. He said, "I think one of them, the

resurrection, that might be a good topic unless it was over his head." Chris took another

approach in focusing on God-centered content. He shared a topic that particularly helped

him when he was moving toward Christianity, idolatry. Chris said, "Idolatry, putting

yourself above God…were things that were really helpful for me. Like I said, I thought

the Bible was trying to control me, but really it was trying to keep me healthy." In

speaking about the work of God, Chris believed Genesis would be helpful for those

exploring Christianity. He observed:

> I guess Genesis was a huge thing for me to go over, just to understand it.
> The Old Testament stuff we are doing now is good…there was a sermon
> about how it's okay to want things, but there is a healthy way to want
> things and stuff like that. That's good, I thought that would be pretty
> relatable and just kind of the, I guess if I was bringing a friend who didn't
> understand, the fundamentals of what being a Christian really is.

Chris's desire for a visiting friend was a message that was God-centered and focused on

his work on behalf of others. Having visited another church the week before coming to

the church to which he later committed, Chris observed the absence of a biblically

grounded message that focused on God. He observed, "It was 'Don't make excuses,' and

that was all it was, which is a good message, but they [were] careful not to tie it back to

faith or anything like that too much."

Relationship to God

In addition to messages on the character of God, participants desired messages on

being in relationship with God. Denise felt it would be appealing for non-believers to

understand why prayer is important. She explained:

> I want to invite a friend to the series that we're doing right now, which is
> praying, and Dave has just kind of talked about setting nine minutes every
> day to prayer, because he was saying that a lot of people hit snooze on
> your alarm in the morning, and the snooze is basically nine minutes before
> the alarm goes off again. So I think it's really important, and it's very
> impactful, but for a non-Christian it would be a great step forward.

Chris was similar to Denise, desiring talks on the fundamentals of the faith. He

also believed it was needful for non-believers to understand what exactly a Christian is.

When asked about why the fundamentals of the faith would be especially helpful for non-

believers, Chris pointed to how much a true understanding of the Bible was helpful to

him. Chris shared:

> I thought the Bible was written to control me, it goes against all the things
> I like doing, but then through this whole thing I realize that I didn't really
> like those things. They weren't making me happy at all; they were hurting
> me. They were affecting my relationships, and they were affecting my
> work. They affected everything.

Four of the participants cautioned against topics that were too "overwhelming," or

that might "scare" visitors. When asked about what these topics were, Jay responded,

"talking about money or tithing, or sexual immorality. I would hope those wouldn't be on

the docket." Instead, Jay looked for messages that would speak to his friends of "…ways

of enacting your life in a positive way, ways of integrating Jesus into your life." Jay was

particularly helped by a message that spoke to the need for encouragement in life and

how people can do that for each other. In the same manner, Denise believed that messages on connecting to the church would be helpful for those exploring Christianity.

Summary of Findings

This chapter examined how eight recent converts navigated the hurdles they encountered in becoming Christians and subsequently committing to a local church. Through comparative analysis, the researcher identified themes that were common to all or a significant portion of the participants sampled. Each of the participants began their movement toward Christianity from a context of personal crisis for which they had no personal resources upon which to draw. The participants navigated their hurdles to Christianity through personal relationships with Christians. Those relationships were characterized by acceptance, patience, persistence, and generosity. Subsequent to their conversion experiences, each of the participants committed to local churches whose leading characteristic provided a welcoming environment. Each of the local churches shared a strong, content-based teaching component to which the participants were drawn. Absent from the findings was a program-based ministry for which the participants committed to a specific church. In other words, the participants did not commit to a specific church because of the church's ministry to children or students, the music program or style, or even for a denominationally-based reason. The reason these participants chose the churches where they now attend grew out of the context of a personal relationship with a Christian who cared. The next chapter will synthesize research from the literature review and participants' interviews to identify common themes in order to make concluding recommendations.

Chapter Five

Discussion and Recommendations

Engaging the lost in highly secular suburban settings is a vital issue for churches being planted and for those seeking to be effective for the kingdom of God. In light of suburbia's growth and its trend of future stability, it is essential for current church leaders and future church planters to understand these dynamics.

Summary of the Study

This study has shown the process by which recent converts became Christians and connected to local churches in highly secular suburban settings. Three research questions guided the researcher in this study. One of the questions had two parts. The questions were:

1. What hurdles do recent converts encounter in becoming Christians in secular suburban settings?

2. What helps recent converts to negotiate these hurdles?

   a. Contexts: What are the contexts that facilitate recent converts to negotiate these hurdles?

   b. Relationships: What are the relationships that enable recent converts to negotiate these hurdles?

3. What influenced recent converts to commit to a particular local church?

The available literature was reviewed in chapter two, which focused on four major areas: biblical literature relating to the power of the gospel in highly secular contexts, literature pertaining to the importance of suburbia in major metropolitan areas,

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literature about the effects and religious mindset found in suburbs, and the dynamics surrounding public spaces and gathering places. The literature was reviewed to fill a gap in background material relating to evangelistic approaches for highly secular people in suburban contexts. Chapter three defined the methodology used in selecting the participants, explained how data was collected and how the interviews were conducted, as well as how the researcher analyzed the data. Chapter four presented the findings from the interviews. This chapter will draw together data from the literature review with the findings of chapter four to draw out conclusions and make recommendations.

Discussion of Findings

The data from the literature review and the interviews will be brought together in this section, allowing the researcher to interact with the material. The findings will be organized according to the research questions and their underlying themes.

Planting Churches Where the People Are

In the literature review, Stephen McAlpine pointed out an important principle, "Paul went to where the people were, and here in Perth the people are in the suburbs."[248] With America growing by another one hundred million people in the coming decades, and more than fifty percent of those people opting for suburban living, the principle highlighted by McAlpine looms large. The literature traced out the factors leading to this overwhelming choice, resulting in the suburbs housing the majority of America's three hundred and twelve million people according to the 2011 U.S. Census. Since Paul went to where the people were in ancient times, which was the city, shouldn't we go where people are during our time, the suburbs?

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[248] McAlpine.

Stephen Um, urban church planter in Boston, concedes the movement away from the city to the suburbs by those between twenty-five and thirty-four years old. However, he does so with the caveat that transplants in the suburbs still work in the city, acquire their skills in the city, and are shaped by the culture of the city. In this study, all of the participants both lived in the suburbs and worked in the suburbs. Their occupations included that of hospital worker, service provider, realtor, media technologist, chemist, information analyst, and homemaker. They were not living under the shadow of the city's lifestyle-shaping or ideology-forming influence. Kotkin pointed out that the suburbs would be "less reliant on major cities and on long-distance commuting. Boasting traditional urban functions like markets, churches, museums, monuments, and culture, they will be more like traditional villages."[249]

Because of the emphasis on the city and the "return to the city" commentary, church planters may neglect this huge mission field on their drive downtown. As the researcher in this study, I serve as the chairperson for the church-planting arm of my denomination in a major metropolitan area in the western region of the United States. I have noted the smaller level of interest and enthusiasm over targeting specific suburban contexts in our metropolitan area, despite the fact that the suburbs comprise seventy-nine percent of the total population. While Paul's journeys to major population centers is often used as basis for an urban focus to church-planting, the same principle should also send us out into the suburbs where more than half of the people in this country are making their homes, with millions more to come.

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[249] Kotkin, *The Next Hundred Million*, 16.

The Power of Relationships

Each of the participants had a personal crisis of varying magnitude that served as a trigger in starting their movement toward Christianity. Because of the spiritual and social effects of suburban living, it is my conviction they lacked the personal resources with which to face these challenges as they arose. Craig Gay called this a "practical atheism."[250] Albert Hsu pointed out the same effect on Christians living in the suburbs, saying, "Everyday life in suburbia seems to obliterate the need for God. The material realities of suburbia often blind us to invisible spiritual realities."[251] Thus, when personal crisis arise, individuals are at a loss to meet these demanding events.

The literature revealed a theme of spiritual emptiness and family turmoil, which corroborated what the participants shared in their interviews. DeKruyter noted this in the people he encountered in his suburban church plant in Chicago going back to the 1960's. After cataloguing several scenarios of personal crisis, DeKruyter says of those whom he was seeking to reach, "What should he do? Whom can he talk with confidentially?"[252] The absence of resources can be traced back to the independent and self-sufficient approach so prevalent in suburban living. Alan Wolfe pointed this out when he said, "Faced with a choice between submission to a power outside (and greater than) themselves and a focus on their own particular needs, American individualism guarantees that the former will rarely triumph over the latter."[253] William exemplified this attitude in

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[250] Gay, *The Way of the (Modern) World, or, Why It's Tempting to Live as If God Doesn't Exist*, Kindle 68-69.

[251] Hsu, *The Suburban Christian*, Kindle 1428.

[252] DeKruyter and Schultze, *The Suburban Church*, Kindle 228.

[253] Wolfe, *One Nation After All*, 82.

his pre-conversion experience when he said, "I've always believed that there's a God, but I didn't think I had to get to know God or figure out how God got to know me or however that worked, what the relationship was there." When faced with her own personal crisis, Jennifer boldly stated, "I just decided that it was really more up to me to make things work." Jennifer's statement goes beyond the attitude Craig Gay described as "simply indifferent to the existence and reality of God."[254]

How does a movement toward Christianity begin in such a vacuum of spiritual connection and resources? As the interviews showed, movement toward Christianity began as a result of prior existing relationships with Christian friends or colleagues. The interview with William revealed how open his heart had become as a result of the crisis dynamic. William said the Christian minister was a "…very good listener, and then when it was time for him to talk, I listened and his wording was really, really good." When Chris was at a loss to deal with the feeling of not wanting "to be me," it was a prior existing relationship with a Christian that served as the catalyst in his movement toward Christianity. Key for Jackie was having a Christian friend who consistently cared and pursued her. Jackie described her relationship with this friend, "She just kept saying, 'I really wish you would come to church. I just think you'll be safe. I just really wish you would come.'"

Relationships proved to be the key factor for those outside the church, living in highly secular suburban settings when they were moving toward Christianity. It is also important to note which things were not mentioned as factors leading any of the participants toward Christianity or commitment to a particular local church. Music, the

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[254] Gay, *The Way of the (Modern) World, or, Why It's Tempting to Live as If God Doesn't Exist*, Kindle 207.

style of music, and the type of worship were not mentioned as factors. Non-believers do not know to have a preference in this area, since they will not have attended church enough to know the difference. The participants also did not mention a children's or student ministry as a factor leading to their conversion or commitment to a local church. Again, they do not share an awareness of these ministries, being completely outside the church. Further, they did not mention the location of the church, its building, style of church government, or denominational affiliation.

Perhaps most telling of the effectiveness of relationships in helping move highly secular non-believers toward Christianity is what the pre-conversion atheistic participants did not say. None of the atheistic participants pointed to a discussion of Christian apologetics as a factor leading to their conversion experience. The most pronounced atheistic participant interviewed did not even recognize or understand the word "apologetics" when asked. He had never heard of the word until it was explained to him. His absolute void of resources with which to deal with his wife's ill-fated pregnancy served as the trigger in driving him to his knees and praying the first prayer of his life.

For relationships with non-believers to be effective, it is not required that Christians be highly educated in theological matters or biblical studies. As seen from the biblical foundations section of the literature review, the gospel has the power to save the most secular of non-believers, regardless of the theological training of its messenger. The young servant girl of Namaan's wife delivered God's redemptive message out of a relationship of complete powerlessness with respect to her master. She is a young girl of ten to twelve years of age, however, she has been placed in relationship with a man of immense power, who is totally devoid of resources to handle his leprosy. Namaan did not

require an apologetic; he needed a relationship with a believing young girl. In perhaps the most powerless state in which a person might be helped, the pythoness in the book of Acts was in complete bondage, spiritually enslaved, and commercially exploited. The power of the gospel broke through bondage in an exchange with the Apostle Paul, lasting but a few words. As the literature review reported, "The words had scarcely left his lips when she was released from its power."[255]

Equipped with the gospel, believers in relationships are particularly well-positioned to address the needs of non-believers, no matter how secular the setting. Simply, non-believers in personal crisis are in need of and open to relationships in which they can be helped. Christians can gain access through these open doors, provided they have invested in building prior relationships with non-believers.

Understanding the Hurdles Faced by Non-Believers

It would be normal to assume that non-believers in highly secular contexts would struggle with questions concerning the existence of God or the plurality of choices available for one's spiritual interest. However, the hurdles identified by the participants bypassed those struggles and could be organized under two categories: control over one's life and one's view of oneself. Specifically, fear of the unknown and self-sufficiency are connected to maintaining control over one's life. Personal vulnerability and skepticism relate to one's view of oneself.

Control Over One's Life

Participants expressed their fear of the unknown, which was captured by their use of the term "cult." William shared his fear, saying, "I didn't know if they would bring me

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[255] Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, Kindle 5384.

in and then alter either my thoughts or my movements of what I did in my life." Denise

was nervous about being taken to the mountains and drinking the "Kool-Aid." The

literature review revealed this need for control, which emerged through the topic of

housing locations. The literature showed that couples just starting their families

consistently preferred the controlled, stable environment found in the suburbs. Jamal

Green, a doctoral student at Portland State University, conceded, "Even if we take all of

the celebratory commentary of the 'return to the city' and the preference for urban living

by millenials, that all changes when these millenials reproduce."[256]

The literature demonstrated that people chose suburbs for safety, comfort, and

control. Further, safety was a recurring theme found throughout the participants'

interviews. Jay used the word to describe his first visit to the church to which he was

invited, saying, "It was a very safe place, where I felt like I could bring my kids." Jackie

sensed the feeling of safety she had and being in control while processing Christianity in

the minister's office. She explained, "There was calmness. Maybe it was just because

they had the calmness and presence about them that just made me feel safe in that

environment. It was always one on one, so I didn't have to worry about anybody else

hearing or judging me."

It is essential then, for believers to be sensitive to this need for control and a sense

of safety on the part of their non-believing friends if they are to be effective in helping

them process Christianity. Key among the relational characteristics that the participants

valued in those helping them through their non-belief was the attribute of being non-

coercive. Pressuring someone removes their ability to feel that they are in control of their

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[256] Green.

thoughts and able to process them at their own speed. Jordan needed time to process and was impressed with how the minister allowed for this. He recalled, "John, he didn't keep coming at me going, 'Are you ready, are you ready, are you ready?'" Chris also appreciated his friend's patient offer to get together with him to talk over Christianity.

Self-sufficiency is another characteristic of being in control over one's life. However, it also has the ability to keep one from seeing the need for God. Dave Goetz observed, "I think my suburb, as safe and religiously coated as it is, keeps me from Jesus. Or at least, my suburb (and the religion of the suburbs) obscures the real Jesus."[257] Chris used the term "crutch" to describe Christianity for those people who don't wish to take responsibility for their own actions. He believed Christians "…didn't know how to make themselves happy."

Christians will have greater patience and be able to avoid pressuring when they understand their non-believing friends' fear of the unknown and self-sufficiency as ways to maintain control over their lives. Christians will offer much greater support to their non-believing friends by remembering they do not share with them the same knowledge base in theological matters or church practices.

One's View of Self

Personal vulnerability impacts one's view of self. When moving toward Christianity, non-believers are acutely aware of being personally vulnerable. They are concerned with how they will be perceived by Christians and the church. They are uneasy as to what changes may occur in their lifestyles. Jackie carried the weight of her past into a new member's meeting at a particular church. In the midst of the meeting, she

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[257] Goetz, *Death by Suburb*, Kindle 90-91.

concluded, "I don't fit here…I'm not good enough for this church." When she visited

churches, her personal vulnerability became more than she was able to bear. She

lamented, "No one would ever even sit close to me. There were times that I would be in

a row and someone would be at the very end, and I felt stupid. I just felt stupid."

Longstanding Christians or those growing up in the church may fail to realize how

intimidating it is for a non-believer to walk into a church for the first time. Jackie shared,

"It was the scariest thing to ever do, is to walk in to a church by yourself because all eyes

are on you."

Since churches can pose such personal threats to non-believers, it becomes

understandable how a personal faith such as "Sheilaism" can take place as described in

the reviewed literature. Sheila Larson defined her newly created faith to Robert Bellah in

Habits of the Heart, saying, "It's just try to love yourself and be gentle with yourself.

You know, I guess, take care of each other."[258] Personal vulnerability, then, may express

itself in unusual ways. Someone's stylized, made-up religion or finicky patterns of church

attendance, it may indicate that they are a non-believer coming to terms with their own

personal vulnerability.

Christians can become more effective and patient in helping their non-believing

friends process Christianity by understanding that what looks like rejection of

Christianity or the church may actually be their friend struggling with their own

vulnerability. For Jennifer, becoming a Christian touched upon the most vulnerable part

of her life, her marriage. In her interview, she described what it was like to consider

becoming a Christian despite her atheistic husband, "I didn't want to be on a different

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[258] Bellah, *Habits of the Heart*, 221.

page from Gerald, so separate and different. He was atheist. If I really did this and got into it, we would just be so different and I don't know if I could that, if I would want to, or how would it change our relationship and our marriage." Her vulnerability in this area was confirmed by her husband, who admitted, "I was concerned that I saw Jennifer moving into Christianity."

Christians must be aware that beyond the accustomed rational and theological arguments, the non-believer will be faced with navigating the emotional side to becoming a Christian. The possibilities may include being rejected by one's spouse, acceptance by a group of Christians, response from extended family, and even coming to grips with one's past. For Rosaria Butterfield, personal vulnerability in moving toward Christianity was a wide-ranging emotional experience. She uses a catalogue of emotions to describe her experience with the Christian community before becoming a believer:

> Christians scared me: the lesbian community was home and home felt safe and secure; the people that I knew the best and cared about were in that community; and finally, the lesbian community was accepting and welcoming while the Christian community appeared (and too often is) exclusive, judgmental, scornful, and afraid of diversity.[259]

From inside the church, Christians stand outside this experience of fearfulness, with which non-believers must contend in their movement toward Christianity. Patient listening in the context of a relationship will help non-believers move past their fearfulness.

Being skeptical is part of one's view of self. Four of the eight participants responded with statements of skepticism that touched upon how they viewed themselves. For Chris, to believe in God was to become "stupid." He stated, "I didn't think it was

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[259] Champagne Butterfield, *The Secret Thoughts of an Unlikely Convert*, Kindle 197-200.

possible at all that there could be a God, and I thought it was like a silly thing to make stupid people feel better." Denise connected being a Christian to being "brainwashed." Being thought of as stupid or brainwashed impacts one's view of self and gives pause to the non-believer who is becoming a Christian.

It should become increasingly clear to church planters and Christian leaders that time must be allowed for non-believers to work through their fearfulness as they process Christianity. Church leaders must recognize the essential power of relationships in helping non-believers navigate the hurdles they will encounter. Churches can take steps to help their people learn how to build healthy relationships with non-believers in order to effectively minister in highly secular suburban contexts.

Helping People and Safe Places

This study has shown the essential place of relationships in the conversion experience for each of the participants. Such relationships must take place in the context of physical space, be it a home, office, or some other "third place" as defined in the literature review. There is something about these physical spaces and third places, which helps to facilitate these relationships. This section will look at which dynamics are most helpful to people, as well as the creation of safe places.

Helping People

The participants shared what characteristics aided the effectiveness of those helping them. The characteristics identified here may be summarized into an overall expression of respect and grace. Respect is seen when a non-coercing and accepting spirit is demonstrated toward the non-believer. Grace is present as relationships are pursued and generosity is displayed.

<u>Respect</u>

During the interviews, the participants gave examples of the non-coercing spirit of their Christian friends. The most compelling example came from Jennifer, who struggled with the impact that Christianity might have on her marriage to an atheistic husband. Speaking of the respect she received, she described the Christian helping her:

> She was just accepting. There wasn't any judgment whatsoever. In fact, she was like, "Yes, I'm walking through that myself," or "I'm still there." She could give me gentle insight and she would ask, "Am I just listening or do you want feedback? Do you want some perspective?" Having questions, she was just very gentle. It all came from love. It all came out of love.

The Christian helping Jennifer clearly respected the time and space she needed to process the claims of Christianity and its potential impact upon her marriage. She was able to identify with Jennifer, walking alongside her during the process. Gerald, Jennifer's husband, experienced the same respect as the minister walked him through the claims of Christianity and gave Gerald some metaphors to affirm the doubts with which he struggled. Gerald recalled the assurance he received when the minister told him, "…that I wasn't crazy, I guess. 'No, you're not crazy. This really is.'"

Rosaria Butterfield described her fears concerning the Christian community. Her conversion experience was keyed by the respect she received from the Christian couple that spent two years in friendship, conversation, dinners, and visits prior to her becoming a Christian. She described the respect:

> Before I ever set foot in a church, I spent two years meeting with Ken and Floy and on and off "studying" scripture and my heart. If Ken and Floy had invited me to church at that first meal I would have careened like a skateboard on a cliff, and would have never come back. Ken, of course, knows the power of the word preached but it seemed to me he also knew at that time that I couldn't come to church— it would have been too threatening, too weird, too much. So, Ken was willing to bring the church

to me. This gave me the room and the safety that I needed to match Ken and Floy's vulnerability and transparency.[260]

Time is required in order for respect to be shown through acceptance and grace. Evangelistic training and programs often short-circuit the time element, leaving the non-believer to question whether they are being respected. In many of the program-driven, results-oriented churches found in suburbia, it will be difficult to discover an approach that can allow for relationships to be built and respect to be shown over a period of time. Instead, a culture of evangelism must be created in which the time element can be removed while relationship building can be cultivated.

From a biblical standpoint, the young little slave-girl in the household of Namaan demonstrated great respect to her master. Having been kidnapped during one of Namaan's numerous raids, she maintained a love and respect for her master, exclaiming, "Would that my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy."[261] Desiring her master's healing and pointing him to where it could be found showed respect and honor, when she could have secretly wished for her master's demise. Because she had experienced God's redemptive power in her own life, she had the humility required to serve someone responsible for so much suffering in her own country and personal life. Having respect for broken and hurting people is the function of grace working upon the heart. Due to time constraints, programmed approaches to evangelism are limited in allowing for the dynamics of respect and grace to actively engage the heart over the course of time.

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[260] Ibid., Kindle 308-312.

[261] 2 Kgs 5:3

Acceptance was an issue that was a strong component in the conversion experiences of the participants. Acceptance is a powerful dynamic in the suburbs, however acceptance is different from tolerance. Acceptance that flows out of an understanding of the gospel is quite different from the tolerance driven by religious pluralism. As David Brooks noted, "Be moderate in your own faith because you probably don't have the complete answers, and don't try to push your faith onto others."[262] Only the gospel allows a Christian to accept a non-believer without abandoning their own faith commitment. There is a difference between a Christian demonstrating acceptance and respect toward a non-believing homosexual and a non-Christian showing tolerance to a homosexual. Acceptance and tolerance flow out of two completely different sets of commitments.

In the case of Jennifer, who was an agnostic bordering on atheism, those helping her showed great acceptance. While not abandoning her faith commitment, Jennifer's helper did not feel compelled to convince her of the wrongness of her atheism. Rather, she was able to treat Jennifer "out of love." Jennifer shared that if the Bible had been introduced prematurely, "It wouldn't have helped any for me. In fact, it would have turned me away, at that point, of really coming into it." Rosaria Butterfield shared the same experience, saying:

> During our meal, they did not share the gospel with me. After our meal, they did not invite me to church. Because of these glaring omissions to the Christian script as I had come to know it, when the evening ended and Pastor Ken said he wanted to stay in touch, I knew that it was truly safe to accept his open hand.[263]

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[262] Brooks, *Bobos in Paradise*, 247.

[263] Champagne Butterfield, *The Secret Thoughts of an Unlikely Convert*, Kindle 299-303.

While not abandoning their faith commitments or simply tolerating non-Christian beliefs, these "helpers" were able to show acceptance and respect to their non-believing friends, allowing for the needed time needed to process Christianity at one's own speed.

Grace

Pursuit is crucial to those helping non-believers in their journey toward Christianity. The participants spoke of the power of this in their conversion experiences. From the story of Namaan's healing, pursuit is seen throughout the narrative. First, the servant girl yearns that her master would know about the prophet who could cure him of his leprosy. Then Elisha sends a message to the king of Israel, directing that Namaan be sent to him. Finally, the servants of Namaan reason with him to go back and wash in the Jordan River. The theme of pursuit runs throughout the narrative.

Jackie was lovingly pursued through the recurring invitations she received to her friend's church and the subsequent checking in with her following her visits. The pursuit was important to Jackie because of her tendency to run away when things became too difficult. She said, "It was the first time somebody really cared, I guess, which I hated. I totally hated it because I wanted to run away and be done with it, but they invested in me." Pursuit is a function of grace on the heart because God pursues broken sinners. Pursuit flows out of an understanding that people matter, even if those people have been the cause of great sorrow and loss, as in the conversion of Namaan.

Christians can pursue their non-Christian friends in several ways. First, pursuit may take place over courteous, repeated invitations to one's church. In the case of Jackie, her believing friend kept pursuing her until she finally came. In addition to church, Christians can invite friends to their homes or out to coffee in order to build their

relationships. Second, pursuit can take place by creating a list of non-believers for whom prayer is regularly offered. The prayers offered up in the Philippian jailor's prison surely included the jailer as one for whom Paul and Silas were praying. Given the challenge of highly secular suburban contexts, prayerful pursuit such as this must be part of those churches seeking to reach their communities. Finally, by following up, whether at church or a simple get-together, pursuit takes yet another form. Invitations, prayer support, and follow-up will enable a church to create its own evangelistic culture in the midst of secular suburban communities.

Safe Places

A key aspect for non-believers in their conversion experiences is the places in which they have conversations, think through, and relate to other Christians helping them. These places included the home, a minister's office, and what is called the "third place." What are the characteristics that made these places so effective? The dominant theme from the data gathered in the interviews pointed to the safety that the participants felt in each of these environments. The literature on third places further corroborated data taken from the interviews concerning the helpfulness of a relaxed and comfortable setting for having meaningful conversation.

Feeling safe is key during the process of opening up and having a conversation about spiritual issues. When Jackie was asked about the places in which she was exploring Christianity with a believing friend, she said she felt "safe." The safe feeling allowed her to "…say what I was really feeling, what I really wanted to talk about…I didn't have to worry about anybody else hearing or judging me." William attached the safety of the office to the Christian with whom he was talking about his personal crisis. He said, "It was very comforting really to go in there, because I needed him at that

time…I needed somebody at that time to talk to, and he was the one." In addition, William shared, "For some reason his office felt safer for me than it would have been maybe in the chapel." For Denise, it was her home where "I definitely feel comfortable in my home." Each week she explored Christianity with a believing friend in a one-on-one setting.

Environments that provided a feeling of safety allowed participants to move at their own speed while processing their understanding of Christianity. Identifying places in which safe conversation can take place is key for the conversion process. Evangelistic functions and attractional events are limited in providing environments in which such conversations can take place. Churches in highly secular, suburban contexts will need to rethink the purposes behind their large group functions and seasonal events. Each of the participants came to the church in which they are now committed because of a relationship, not because of an event or ministry program. Churches might be more effective in reaching non-believers in their context if they trained their people in conversational skills and how to build relationships with non-believers.

Because of the effectiveness of safe environments for conversation, Christians and their churches should identify their local third places for use in building relationships with non-believers. As noted in the literature review, third places provide a context where it is possible to process issues, heal from stress, and be refreshed during the day. These places provide ideal locations for meeting new people, building relationships, and having meaningful conversation. As Chris noted during his interview, "Coffee can be a five minute thing or it can be a two hour thing…it takes as long as you want it to." In addition, third places such as coffee shops may provide the context for group discussions

that address issues of interest for families and individuals living in the suburban context. These discussions can then provide Christians opportunities to identify with their non-believing friends and grow their relationships to them.

In light of the importance of safe environments for conversation, should a church create its own third place on site in order to reach its own highly secular suburban context? Is this similar to churches creating lifestyle alternatives, such as church softball leagues, coffee shops, bowling allies, and health centers? How effective are these alternatives in drawing non-believers into a Christian community? Does this work against a church seeking to integrate into their social context? These are questions raised by Brian Habig and Les Newsom in the reviewed literature. These issues should be addressed before a church considers creating its own third place in hopes of reaching its community.

As another approach, churches may consider creating a third place off-site through a group of believers from a local church. There could be an advantage to the ownership group sharing the church's vision for providing a context in which believers and non-believers can engage in meaningful discussion. The church could be protected from fiscal liability while also being able to contribute financially to the ongoing vision.

Being an Attractive Church to New Believers

Each of the participants in this study committed to a local church subsequent to their conversion experience. While ministry programs, worship style, building location, or denominational affiliation were not mentioned as factors in the commitment process, two recurring characteristics were identified by the participants: welcoming and content-

based. This section will look at these two characteristics, examining how churches may become more attractive to new believers from highly secular backgrounds.

Welcoming: Being a Church of Lasting Impressions

Welcoming was the overall first and lasting impression of each participant interviewed concerning the churches to which they committed subsequent to their conversion experiences. Expressions such as, "extremely, extremely friendly," "Wow, I'm actually being acknowledged here," and "I just thought, Wow" described the welcoming experience for several of the participants. The welcoming aspect to these churches effectively addressed various issues with which the participants struggled as a result of their backgrounds. Lack of acceptance, inadequacy, and childhood experiences melted away through the warm, gracious, welcome they felt upon their initial visits to their churches. For churches to leave lasting impressions on new believers, they must think through their approach when welcoming new people to their church.

First, welcoming must flow out of an understanding of the gospel. The literature review showed several examples of the impact of the gospel upon those who served as messengers. Boldness, perseverance, and effectiveness came to those working with secular, highly self-sufficient non-believers. These characteristics, along with the gospel traits of acceptance and humility, can create a warm and effective welcoming experience for a church's guests. The church must then show believers how to apply the gospel to their hearts in order to see a cluster of these traits become manifest toward others. Through the humility of his servants, Namaan learned where his leprosy and the deeper issues of his heart could be healed. By the perseverance of Paul and his coworkers, a highly secular city saw the establishment of a spiritually gifted church. Because of his

boldness, Paul led an important businesswoman to the Lord, creating a base of operations for gospel ministry. Effective welcoming takes place when these traits are in place.

Second, a trained group of believers that are equipped with gospel traits can work as a team specifically dedicated to welcoming. Two of the participants recalled being given something as a result of their visit to the church. Denise said, "Leaving the church, they had given me a card with my name and just thanking me for being there." Jennifer had recently experienced a failed pregnancy and was debating and crying about whether she should receive the gift being given out by the church on Mother's Day. The minister went right over and listened at length to their heartbreaking story, laying hands on her and praying with them. Welcoming by a trained group of believers can bring the gospel's cluster of fruit into contact with a variety of needs for a powerful result in the life of the new believer or visitor to the church. While there are a variety of materials and techniques a church may use for training a group of believers in welcoming, it is essential that they understand that welcoming must flow out of a heart transformed by the gospel.

Content-based: Tell Me Something About God

The participants in this study showed a desire for content and commended the churches to which they committed for their emphasis upon that area. The participants' responses pointed to the character and work of God. In other words, their desire was for theocentric teaching, which is centered upon God and connected to the needs and struggles experienced by the participants.

God-centered teaching and preaching meets head on the self-sufficiency that is so prevalent in highly secular suburban contexts. What would make this sort of teaching popular or attractive to those becoming new Christians? With self-sufficiency comes the absence of resources and an overall powerlessness with which to deal with personal and

family issues. Churches in the secular suburban context should be aware of this weathering of the soul caused by self-sufficiency. As Albert Hsu reminds us, "Everyday life in suburbia seems to obliterate the need for God."[264] For new believers dealing with the effects of their self-sufficient backgrounds, God-centered teaching will be as a much-needed rain on a parched land. As Dave Goetz points out, "my suburb, as safe and religiously coated as it is, keeps me from Jesus."[265] Theocentric teaching then serves as a biblical corrective for the soul.

In asking for content based upon understanding the character of God and living in relationship to him, participants specifically mentioned teaching on the love and acceptance of Christ, God's grace, prayer, the resurrection, and idolatry. When addressing these themes, preachers and teachers in the church may want to incorporate the following sets of pairs into their preaching calendar and curricula. The first pair of contrasts is depending on God versus self-reliance. It is important for new believers to see the contrast of a Christian's dependence upon God versus their former reliance on self to solve personal and family issues. A Christian is someone who no longer lives as if God does not exist. The second pair of contrasts is absolute truth versus unending choice driven by the value of the religious pluralism which is so prevalent in the suburbs. The new believer can leave behind the uncertainty of unending choices and enter into an assurance based upon the certainty of God's written revelation. God's truth may be confidently applied to any area of the new believer's life. The final pair of contrasts is adopting an attitude of respect toward non-believers versus the mindset of tolerance that

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[264] Hsu, *The Suburban Christian*, Kindle 1428.

[265] Goetz, *Death by Suburb*, 4.

is widely applied in suburban living. This will give the new believer a proper understanding when applying the love and acceptance of Christ to those outside the church or those living in alternative lifestyles.

Summary of Findings

This study focused on the process by which recent converts became Christians and connected to a local church in highly secular suburban communities. The findings have revealed that the conversion process for each participant began with a personal crisis or life transition which served as a trigger in the participant's movement toward Christianity. In almost every case, the process of becoming a Christian was facilitated through the power of a prior existing relationship to a believing friend. These relationships proved crucial to helping the non-believer negotiate the hurdles they encountered when becoming a Christian. Hurdles involved either control over one's life or one's view of self. Respect and grace were the key factors in the highly effective nature of the relationships that helped the non-believer negotiate hurdles during this process. Each of the participants committed to a local church subsequent to his or her conversion, being attracted to the welcoming nature and content-based teaching of the community of believers.

Recommendations for Practice

Churches seeking to engage the lost in highly secular suburban settings are faced with a large and exciting challenge. It's large because more than half of the population of America lives in a suburban context. It's exciting because the church can be fully confident, drawing upon the gospel for boldness to engage a highly secular and self-sufficient people. Confidence based upon the gospel leads to a patient and sustained

ministry presence in the suburbs. The effectiveness of the church is not tied to its resources, whether they are programming, structures, or location, but rather to the spiritual resources provided by God through the gospel. With this in mind, I will now make some recommendations for ministry practice.

Go Where the People Are

With over fifty percent of America's three hundred and twelve million people making their homes in suburbia, the church must go where the people are. First, those in places of decision-making responsibility must create strategic plans that take into account where the majority of Americans live. This means engaging in long-range planning which considers the population growth centers in major metropolitan areas and creates a plan to address those areas. For those in leadership positions among church leaders and church-planting churches, it means providing education that gives an overview of the demographic data along with an overall vision for reaching these centers of suburban growth. Second, future church-planters must be given a vision that captures the importance and critical nature of kingdom expansion in the suburbs. When churches or regional associations of churches look for future church-planters, they must do so with their eye on both the urban center and the outlying suburbs. Finally, those in positions of leadership must see the importance of both the city and the suburb. This will guard against playing one off the other as being more strategically important and therefore more attractive. As Ed Stetzer warns, we need to avoid "community lust and demographic envy."[266]

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[266] Stetzer.

Build Relationships

Relationships are crucial for non-believers who are moving toward Christianity. Building relationships should be an intentional activity for believers living in highly secular suburban settings. Therefore, churches can increase their ministry effectiveness by training their believers in relational skills. First, churches can provide contexts in which relationships can be built. This can take place through in-home discussion groups based on a dinner and conversation topic. Believers and non-believers can come together for an enjoyable evening of dining and good conversation on a topic of personal interest. Discussion groups may also be provided in more public settings, such as in local third places. Second, churches can train their members in specific skills such as hospitality, effective listening, empathizing with others, and praying for their network of relationships. Finally, churches can teach the enjoyable nature of building relationships with those outside the church by providing examples on a recurring basis. These can be given during sermons, class times, and through mentoring relationships. The goal is for believers to catch this vision and gain a sense of confidence that they too can effectively build relationships with those outside the church.

Cultivate Respect and Grace

While relationships are crucial to non-believers as they encounter hurdles in becoming Christians, respect and grace are key characteristics in those relationships. Respect is an overflow of gospel understanding on the part of the believer toward the non-believer. In other words, because Jesus meets us with respect and grace in our sinfulness, so too can we meet others with respect and grace in the midst of their own sinfulness. Churches must ensure that this gospel understanding is communicated

throughout their ministry. First, it must be a recurring theme from the pulpit, as well as in the Christian education classroom and curricula. This means that believers always hear non-believers discussed with the utmost respect and grace, whether it is in a sermon or in a classroom. Next, respect and grace must be evident to those non-believers who are first visiting the church. They must feel welcomed and accepted regardless of their appearance or background. Finally, for respect and grace to be worked into the whole congregation, the church's leadership must first model it. It must be evident in those leaders' personal lives and public interactions with others inside and outside the church. Believers must see respect and grace as an outworking of the gospel in bringing broken and sinful people to Jesus.

Find the Hangouts

Knowing where the people are is the initial step in building relationships. In each community, there are locations that should be identified as gathering places or third places. When identified, believers should be encouraged to become "regulars," visiting several times each week. Third places are the ultimate drop in place and provide the key sources for interaction within the community. Because acceptance is a built-in dynamic, these locations are ideal for Christians seeking opportunities to create friendships with non-believers. After a period of time, when they become "regulars," believers may take further steps to extend their friendships. Having learned relationship-building skills such as hospitality, believers can create opportunities for inviting new friends into their homes. Supper clubs, wine-tasting, musical jam sessions, and topical discussions may all serve to create an evening of social interaction with newfound friends. The possibilities are only limited by the creativity of the one providing the hospitality. Churches may encourage

this activity by providing a line item in their budget to help members in their creative hospitality.

Become a Church of Lasting Impressions

When engaging broken people in the context of highly secular suburban settings, churches create lasting impressions through a warm, welcoming experience. In order for this to take place, churches may consider creating a team of trained greeters. The church will next begin thinking through what creates a lasting impression in their particular context. They must decide how much personal space guests may desire for their own community context. The decision will vary from anonymity all the way to a warm, welcoming connection. Deciding the appropriate approach is crucial for the lasting impression the church seeks to make. The church must be intentional in creating a welcoming experience that extends past a guest's initial arrival. By placing volunteers near stairs, doors, and refreshment tables, the welcoming environment may be extended throughout the visit, saying, "We've been expecting you and are glad you are with us today." As one of the participants of this study responded, "Wow, I'm actually being acknowledged here." By extending grace and respect through the welcoming process, the deeply broken person who made that statement not only became a Christian, she also became the church's interim children's minister. Lasting impressions created through this type of welcoming experience provide opportunities for personal connection and further relationship building.

Recommendations for Further Research

The purpose of this study was to discover the process by which recent converts became Christians and connected to a local church in highly secular suburban settings. The following three areas are recommended for further study.

The first area focuses on the post-conversion experiences of new believers in the churches to which they committed. It would be beneficial to discover how new believers handle their personal crises and life transitions subsequent to their conversion experiences, since crises and transitions initially served as triggers that caused them to move toward Christianity. The objective would be to learn about the nature of their commitment to the Christian faith. In other words, is their commitment based upon the truthfulness of Christianity or is it based on Christianity's practicality to resolve personal issues and achieve life goals? Understanding the answer to this question will help churches evaluate their preaching for its Christ-centered focus and emphasis upon the character of God.

The second area of needed research is to discover a variety of third places that can serve as alternatives to coffee shops within suburban communities. Not every coffee shop, especially those that are corporately owned, can serve as a third place. Since third places are crucial for building relationships within the community and serving as places for meaningful conversation, it will be important to find other types of gathering places that can function in the same vein. Athletic fields, community-planning groups, town functions, bookstores, restaurants, and parks should be evaluated for their effectiveness as third places. Each of these venues should be studied for its ability to provide an environment in which relationships can be started and conversations engaged.

The third area for further research applies to translating these findings to other suburban areas in the country. Though this research has been conducted in the secular suburbs of the western part of the United States, it would be extremely helpful to learn how effective these findings would be when applied to other parts of the country. One of the goals would be to understand how far-reaching are the religious effects of suburban living in those parts of the country, which have a historical Christian base. The question involves learning how the suburbs across America are changing in their relation to Christianity. If the suburbs of major metropolitan cities across the country are taking on the same secular makeup, then this study will have a far wider range for the application of its principles.

Final Words

Planting churches and engaging lost people in a highly secular suburban context is a challenging task, giving church planters, pastors, and leaders cause for discouragement, sending them looking for other calls, and even causing them to doubt their gifts for ministry. However, this study has shown that God is at work in the secular suburban context. It has also shown the power of the gospel to reach powerful and self-sufficient non-believers. The church needs leaders who are encouraged through the power of the gospel for creating persevering ministries with people that believe God is able to do exceeding, abundantly, and above all that we ask or think. It is my hope that this research will be an instrument for the bringing about that glorious end.

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